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JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina





WANDERING
WITCH
The Journey of Elaina



©Azure

It's me, same as ever.

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A young woman who has attained the title of "witch," the highest rank among mages. As she continues her long journey, she is ever on the hunt for moneymaking opportunities in order to cover her travel expenses.

LIELLA

A mage with a sword. Headed for a certain ruined city.



RENOIR

The proprietor of a moving hotel which sits atop the back of an enormous dragon.

The Stonecrusher Witch
LILITIA

A witch hailing from the Peaceful Country of Robetta. She is acquainted with Elaina.



The Eternal Summer Witch
URSULA

A witch from a resort town called "The Land of Eternal Summer." She has enough power to control the weather.



“Come
on, kill me.
Smash me to
bits. If you
don’t, you’re
the one who’ll
end up dead.”

Over and over again, she thrust her blade at
me. I dodged it every time, and occasionally
retaliated with a spell.



WANDERING WITCH 13

The Journey of Elaina

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The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

13


NEW YORK

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Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Translation by Nicole Wilder

Cover art by Azure

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CHAPTER 1

A Day in the Life of a Traveler

I had been waiting for about an hour near the main avenue of the Great City-State of Recolta.

The traveler Mia (not her real name) appeared. She was wearing a smile and waving her hand back and forth. She was clad in a black robe, the thing which primarily identified her as a mage and a traveler. She appeared to be in her late teens or early twenties, and she had the countenance and elegance of a living doll.

Mia bowed her head with a laugh.

“I’m so sorry for making you wait!”

I greeted her with a simple bow as I checked my watch.

—*Did something happen on your way here...?*

She was one hour late.

“I fell behind schedule because I stopped to buy some bread.”

She answered my question calmly, without seeming particularly ashamed.

I see.

“Ah, but don’t worry. As an apology for being late, I bought some for you, too. Here you go.”

—*Thank—*

“Wait, hang on just a second. It feels a little wasteful to give you a whole piece, so let’s split it in half.”

As she said that, she tore off a piece.

“Here you go.”

What she handed me was just a scrap of bread.

It clearly wasn’t half.

“Now we’re even for my being late, right?”

It clearly wasn’t half.

—*Th-Thanks...*

“Heh-heh-heh. Don’t mention it!”

She smiled innocently. Arriving one hour later than promised was a trivial matter to her.

The word *traveler* describes someone who wanders from place to place as their whims dictate. Unfettered by obligation to any one location, travelers are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Equally unfettered by time, travelers live their lives with firsthand experience of freedom itself. One could say they embody the very concept of freedom.

So being late for an appointment didn’t mean much to a traveler.

Really, a person ought to be grateful if a traveler ever actually arrived at the place where they’d promised to be.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. A traveler’s day begins the moment she opens her eyes in the morning.”

Essentially, this is what she was trying to tell me.

In all the time that I had spent waiting idly around at our meeting spot, claiming I was doing research on a day in the life of a traveler, I actually hadn’t gathered any material at all, had I? If I wanted to gather material, I had better do it from the moment she opened her eyes, right?

I was at a loss for words.

I’d never expected that I would encounter a completely new way of looking at the world in the first few seconds of my research.

—*Incidentally, what time did you wake up this morning?*

“Huh? Oh, just a little while ago.”

I was at a loss for words.

The Traveler’s Unique Concept of Freedom

In contrast with people who settle permanently in one place, there is one issue that travelers who wander from place to place tend to have.

As a matter of course, to maintain a lifestyle of wandering from country to country, travelers must deal with the problem of raising funds. Unless they happen upon an inexhaustible supply of money somewhere, they will constantly need to earn cash in order to continue traveling.

Consequently, whenever I was out gathering material, the first question I asked was always about this fundamental issue.

—*What do you usually do to earn a living?*

She kept walking as she answered me.

“Heh-heh-heh. I’ll show you right now.”

She flashed me a daring smile, then tilted her head questioningly. “By the way, Miss Reporter, what do you think is the most essential element of financial success?”

—*The most essential element?*

I wracked my brain over her vague question. I wondered just what kind of answer she expected. I didn’t think that I would be able to come up with the sort of answer that would live up to her values, which had surely been cultivated and refined as she passed through all sorts of lands on her travels.

Maybe she got tired of waiting, because after several seconds, she told me, “Let me give you the answer. It’s courage.”

—*Courage, is it?*

“Right. It’s courage. In order to acquire a lot of money, as you would expect, you have to be willing to take risks. The art of earning money is not entirely unlike gambling, though perhaps it’s on a different scale. If you only stick to what’s safe, then naturally, you’ll only be able to gain a middling amount. But if you accept greater risks, you can win greater rewards in turn.”

—*I see.*

I had been expecting an answer that would reflect the unique value system of a traveler, so her all-too-ordinary comment surprised me. I had already given

this section of my report the title *The Traveler's Unique Concept of Freedom*, so I'd been hoping for a comment that was a little less conventional.

"Speaking of which," she said, "today, allow me to show you the courage that I regularly employ in order to make my money."

With a chuckle and a smile, the next place that the traveler visited was a large enterprise along the main avenue of the Great City-State of Recolta.

It was a jewelry store. The place was so famous that there was no one in the entire city who did not know of it. On the other side of the window we could see a dazzling world. It was so splendid that ordinary people would hesitate to enter it, or even look too long in the direction of the store.

—Do you have some sort of business here?

"Yes, of course."

She nodded and entered the shop.

I hesitated, but for the sake of my research, I couldn't part from the traveler. A beat later, I, too, entered the store, attempting to hide myself in her shadow.

The employees didn't seem particularly fazed by the somewhat unlikely pair of us entering the store. They bowed and welcomed us in.

"Now then, behold my courage."

Then the traveler Mia (not her real name) walked straight up to an employee, and said, "I'd like every jewel you have in here."

"All of them?!" The employee's eyes went wide. It was an understandable reaction.

"Yes. Specifically, everything from here to over there."

"Well...!" Still wide-eyed, the employee said, "Um, I'll just go calculate the cost..." and disappeared into the back in a panic.

—Don't you think that's going to be pretty pricey?

"Oh, Miss Reporter, are there any jewels here that you want? Since we made a special trip, I'll give you one."

—Sorry, um, I'm delighted by the offer, but do you have enough money for all

this? I think it's going to cost quite a lot...

"It's fine."

—Seriously?

"Yeah! Heh-heh-heh."

With a mischievous look on her face, Mia (not her real name) gave me an answer that was full of puzzling confidence.

She'd declared that she was going to buy everything in the jewelry store.

I wondered if this was the courage that she had spoken of—the courage she needed for effective moneymaking. I didn't think there was any way she would be able to afford all those gems, but Mia seemed extremely calm.

When I asked her if she was able to pay, she just chuckled. "Heh-heh-heh."

Then the employee returned.

"Okay, that's all going to come out to—"

As expected, the employee named a price that would have made most anyone's head spin.

Then, immediately afterward...

"Could I ask you to take a look at this?"

Mia pointed her wand at the employee. Then, as she chanted, "Make it free, make it free, hey, hey," and so on, she swished her wand around, waving it at the employee's face. Even though she seemed to be concentrating hard, she wasn't really doing anything except waving her wand around. It was so pathetic and uncool that it was almost comical.

—Just what kind of ritual is that?

What on earth is this grown woman doing in this luxury store?

"Can't you tell by looking? I'm attempting to get her to give me the jewels for free. Hey, hey!"

In the Great City-State of Recolta, in a high-class jewelry store situated on a corner of the main avenue, echoed the voice of a mage waving her wand

around with intense concentration. A full-grown woman, old enough to know better, shouted, “Hey, hey!” in a flirtatious voice.

All I could do was watch. I was at a complete loss.

“Yes... Please allow me to make it all free for you...”

Before long, the employee, blushing like a schoolgirl in love, stuffed every jewel in the store into a bag.

—*What on earth is happening here?*

“As you can see, it works.”

—*I’m not really sure what I just witnessed, though...*

“Oh? Must I explain it to you? How annoying.”

She puffed out her cheeks in frustration, and elaborated. “Well, to put it simply, I suggested, with a spell, that she ought to make the jewels free.”

She smiled boldly, cradling the jingling bag that was stuffed with jewels.

—*I’m sorry, I thought you were telling me about how you needed courage in order to make money.*

“I was talking about how you need to have the courage to break the rules.”

—*I don’t need that sort of courage.*

Over to the Other Side of Morality

After leaving the jewelry store, the first place that Mia headed was a boutique situated nearby.

Of course, it was a luxury boutique.

“Hey, hey!”

And of course, she cast a spell on the employees.

—*Is this okay, ethically speaking? Are you sure they won’t get angry with you?*

“Miss Reporter. You were curious about how travelers earn a living, were you not? The answer is simple. As long as a traveler is always on the lookout for opportunities to make money, she will be able to earn a living somehow. People gather in places where money is, and anywhere people gather, travelers will

appear...”

—*No, but I feel like we’re not talking about opportunities to earn money here.*

“Sometimes you also need the courage to disregard morals if you’re going to pull something off, Miss Reporter.”

—*Isn’t that the same as theft?*

“Hey, hey!”

—*Um, you’re not listening.*

After that, she walked around to several other stores, and in every one of those stores, she blasted the employees with the same kind of, “Hey, hey!”

—*What’s with the “hey, hey!” chant? What kind of spell is that? And aren’t you the least bit embarrassed? You’re old enough to know better, aren’t you?*

In response to my questions, she said:

“I’ve heard of cases where hostages spent time with robbers, and gradually developed feelings of fellowship, and then even became allies of the very people who were threatening them. It’s a sort of psychological phenomenon that happens rarely in hostage incidents, but, well, the rough explanation is, this is sort of like that. In short, I’m casting a spell that fills them with feelings of fellowship. Hey, hey!”

—*But don’t you feel shame?*

“Not even a little bit. Hey, hey!”

—*But isn’t it theft?*

“Not at all. Me and them, we’re friends. Hey, hey!”

—*By the way, you seem to have no qualms about misusing your magic. Are you sure that’s okay?*

“It’s fine. Hey, hey!”

—*What I’m saying is, are you all right doing things like this when I’m writing a report on you?*

“No problem. Because I plan to make you my friend in the end, too.”

—*Eh?*

“Just wait until we get to the wallet store. Hey, hey!”

We were already on our fifth store of the day. She was moving at an astonishingly quick pace.

“By the way, all the stuff that I got today will sell for a high price when I take it to other countries. By doing this, it’s possible to earn money on a semiregular basis.”

According to what she told me, travelers like her routinely earned their living this way. In other words, the daily life of a traveler involved visiting new lands, charming the shopkeepers there, and stealing their merchandise.

—*How many more stores do you plan to visit today?*

“Probably about five more.”

—*And just how much money will you make by doing that?*

“About...hmmm...let’s see... It depends on the day, but on average, I guess about fifty gold pieces? Well, that’s about the haul from one round of theft.”

—*Did you just say “theft”?*

“Not at all. Hey, hey!”

—*By the way, how many places have you done this same thing in?*

“Let me think... I don’t remember all the specifics, but as far as I do remember...”

Then she listed off all the places she had visited so far. The neighboring country, and the one neighboring it. And then the country neighboring that one. She kept the actual names of the places a secret, but over the preceding six months, she had apparently visited one country after another, traveling here all the way from her homeland. And all the while, she had been forcing her way into luxury stores and using spells to brainwash the employees, repeatedly committing theft after theft.

Most of the countries on her list had published damage reports.

—*And you’re not doing anything else particularly criminal?*

“What do you mean, ‘criminal’?”

—*Well, given the circumstances, perhaps there’s something else you’d care to confess?*

“Let me see here... Ah, now that you mention it, today before we met up for your research, I said that I bought some bread, didn’t I?”

—*You did say that...*

“I actually stole it.”

—*I see... Well... That’s a capital offense.*

“Is bread theft really that serious of a crime?”

—*It is to me, at the very least. It merits the death penalty.*

I said that, and then with a “Hey!” I used a spell to tie up both of her hands.

—*Thank you very much for cooperating with my investigation.*

“What’s going on here?”

—*It would be a bother if you escaped, so I’ve taken the liberty of restraining you.*

Then I raised my wand into the air and cast a spell. Small beads of light went whooshing up into the air and exploded above our heads.

At that signal, people gathered in droves around me and Mia. There were all sorts of folks among them, including the employees of the classy jewelry stores and boutiques, and even members of the government.

“Is this the thief you mentioned?”

—*She sure is. She readily confessed to committing all sorts of crimes across many different countries.*

“Um, excuse me? What’s going on here?”

“We’re taking her away.”

—*Be my guest.*

Mia was slowly dragged away. I watched her go, waving goodbye, while at the same time returning all the many stolen goods to the assembled proprietors of

the city's luxury shops.

By the way, just who do you think this reporter could be?

That's right, it's me.

A Day in the Life of a Traveler

"Oh, thank you so much, Miss Witch. We never thought this would be resolved so quickly," said the government official as she handed me my reward.

I had accepted the commission from this official several days earlier. There had been word that a mage who had been up to no good in several neighboring lands had recently appeared in this city. And I had accepted their request to capture her before any serious damage was done.

Fortunately, they had already established that someone was going around committing thefts, so all that was left to do was catch them, but, well, the culprit was a mage, after all. And the officials here were apparently being cautious, just like all the others. If the mage resisted, they wouldn't stand a fighting chance, so it sounded like they had decided to enlist the help of another traveling mage.

"But that all went extremely smoothly... We thought it would take a little more time."

"Well, I was up against one of my own kind."

Piece of cake.

"Is that how it is?"

"That's how it is."

As a traveler and a witch, I occasionally receive these kinds of requests from the governments of the various places I visit. On this occasion, I had completed a job for the Great City-State of Recolta.

"I just can't believe that there are travelers out there doing such selfish things," the government official said with a sigh. "It makes you wonder whether every traveler uses such underhanded tricks to earn money."

"My goodness, what a thought. Quite a predicament."

“Speaking of which, Miss Witch, how *do* travelers make their money?”

How do travelers earn money, you ask?

“Here, take this.”

I pushed a stack of paper into the official’s hands.

“Hm? What’s this?”

“The report that I made while collecting material on Mia. Please make use of it the next time a suspicious traveling mage shows up.”

“Oh...! I’m very grateful...!” The official accepted the report from me, but immediately after she did, her expression became slightly puzzled.

“Um, exactly what is that hand for...?”

She didn’t seem to understand why I was still holding my hand out.

“Heh-heh-heh.”

—I wouldn’t mind an additional reward, you know?

I stood there playfully indicating that I wanted more, and at last, the official seemed to realize what I was asking for. She handed over the equivalent of pocket change to go along with the reward I had gotten earlier, and smiled.

“I see; so this is how you make your money?”

In the official’s hand was a report on the shady moneymaking scheme being carried out by a certain traveling mage.

I nodded, wearing a slightly devious expression.

“Yes. That’s how I make my money.”

And so go the days of a traveler, always moving forward. Some parts make it into my reports, and some don’t, but my journey continues.

By Elaina

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CHAPTER 2

A Blizzard during Eternal Summer, and an Easygoing, Lovable Girl

Outside the window, the world was shrouded in pale gray.

The landscape was so blanketed in white that the view hardly changed even if you fogged up the glass with a puff of your breath.

However...

Contrary to the dour exterior, the interior of the room where I was staying was extremely cheerful. The bed, the curtains, and the duvet all had a lively color scheme, and in the untitled painting hanging on the wall, the townsfolk were depicted frolicking under the midsummer sun.

On the table was an arrangement of fruit and a welcome drink. Despite the fact that I had paid a high price to stay there, the beverage was an ordinary glass of ice-cold juice. To make matters worse, the glass was festively decorated with a hibiscus flower. It was an undeniably poor match for the climate outside.

“...It’s chilly.”

I mean, I couldn’t possibly drink an iced beverage when snow was on the ground.

Is setting out a cold drink in this kind of weather some kind of hazing ritual for newcomers?

I considered it for a moment, but according to the inn’s staff, the snow outside my window was the result of an entirely unexpected situation.

Right beside the drink that didn’t seem to be welcoming me at all, there sat a limp pamphlet about the place, which I picked up and opened with numb hands.

It was filled with the following sorts of things:

“WELCOME TO URSULA, THE LAND OF ETERNAL SUMMER!”

“THANKS TO THE ETERNAL SUMMER WITCH, URSULA, EVERY DAY HERE IS THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER! IF YOU WANT SUMMER WEATHER, YOU CAN’T GO WRONG BY VISITING OUR LAND!”

“ONE OF THE LEADING RESORT AREAS IN THE WORLD, WHERE CELEBRITIES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD HAVE VACATION HOMES!”

“ANYONE LOOKING FOR AN EASY WAY TO EXPERIENCE THAT RESORT FEELING IS WELCOME HERE!”

And so on.

There were pictures of celebrities I couldn’t name, who supposedly had vacation homes here, flashing their white teeth proudly and announcing in speech bubbles, *“Summer really is the best!”* and *“I always dreamed of having a vacation home here!”*

But I wondered if that was really true.

Outside, it was snowing, and ridiculously cold.

Summer...? What summer? I wondered.

“Grr...”

I had come from afar seeking the summery vibes of this land, and yet...

Why on earth were things like this?

The whole place was already blanketed in snow when I arrived, and at that time, I had even cocked my head in confusion and asked, “Huh? Is it possible I actually came to the land of eternal winter?”

But the place was clearly, unmistakably the land that went by the name of Ursula. The name was written on the sign, and even the guide standing in front of the gate dressed in short sleeves had announced, “Welcome! This is Ursula, the Land of Eternal Summer!”

I walked around town a little bit and spotted a number of girls dressed as mages.

Apparently, every year around this time, swarms of girls from neighboring lands who were aiming to become witches gathered in this town, which was known as a first-class resort.

A huge number of girls came to take their advancement exams to become

apprentice witches and do some sightseeing while they were here.

Incidentally, compared to other locations, the test takers here had an extremely low passing rate. I'm sure the reason for that goes without saying.

The girls were all horribly outraged to find the Land of Eternal Summer locked in a state of eternal winter.

"Eternal Summer, psh... How is this eternal summer?!"

"This is snow, isn't it? Does snow fall in the summertime here?"

"Whaa—?! Now we can't have fun after our exams! This sucks!"

And so on.

I walked around town observing the girls.

Then, before long...

"Hm? Oh, hey! Would you happen to be Elaina?"

Hmmm?

Out of nowhere, a voice called my name.

I spun around abruptly and saw a young woman wearing a star-shaped brooch—the symbol that she was a witch—on her breast, walking toward me as she waved her hand back and forth.

"Ah! So it is you, Elaina."

".....!"

She wore a light pink robe and pointed hat. The front of her robe was unfastened. Her unruly brown hair fell in loose waves, and she had a mole under one of her green eyes. She looked the same as ever. Her face hadn't aged a day, even though several years had passed.

She might have gotten a little bit taller. Maybe she looked a little more grown-up than before.

But she was still the same girl.

I knew this person.

"Um, who are you again...?"

I had forgotten her name, though.

Who is she? Uh...

“Really?! How cruel! It’s me, Lilitia.”

“Ah, Lilitia, was it? That’s right, that’s right. Hey.”

“Seriously, it’s been so long! Eh-heh-heh!”

As she greeted me in a sticky-sweet voice, she slapped my shoulder.

Ow...

She and I had met once before, on the day when I’d taken my written exams in order to become an apprentice witch. If I remembered correctly, her seat was next to mine. She had seemed flighty and aloof the whole time we were there, and I still hadn’t forgotten how extreme her influence had been on me, just because I was young.

It was a surprise to meet someone from the same town in a place like this.

“What are you doing here? Could it be that you’ve also taken a gig as a proctor for the written exams, Elaina? That’s great! It’s reassuring to have someone I know here administering the exams with me!”

I shook my head.

“No, I’m not planning to pick up any part-time work.”

“Oh? Then what did you come here for?”

“I just stopped by on a whim.”

“Oh, okay.” Her voice was just the slightest bit subdued. She seemed disappointed, but a moment later, she broke into a smile again. “Ah, but if you like, why don’t you give it a try with me? Be a proctor. At this very moment, it’s snowing everywhere, right? Even though it’s supposed to be the Land of Eternal Summer. So apparently, they’re short-staffed.”

Lilitia gave me a piece of paper. On it was an exhortation to COME PROCTOR TESTS IN A POPULAR RESORT AREA! Beneath that was a picture of a celebrity whose name I didn’t know, flashing her white teeth and proclaiming with a smile that “*Working part-time at a resort sure is the best!*”

This lady again?

“Why are they short-staffed just because it’s snowing?”

“Um, well, because half the proctors went home with complaints like, ‘I only applied to proctor the advancement exams so I could relax and enjoy the resort atmosphere, not put up with this snow,’ and, ‘This isn’t what I was promised. I’m going home,’ and, ‘I came here because I heard a rumor that there was an ashen-haired witch in the area, but I don’t see her anywhere? That’s it, I’m going back!’ and so on.”

“So every one of them was a lazy, whiny baby about it?”

Actually, one of those comments was sort of interesting...

“But from what I can see, you didn’t come here with any such wicked motivations, did you?” I asked, tilting my head.

Lilitia threw out her chest proudly. “Of course not! I’m just here because I wanted to see Ursula, the Eternal Summer Witch!”

“That’s a wicked motivation, isn’t it?”

“Eh-heh-heh!” Lilitia slapped my shoulder sharply.

Owww...

“So, what will you do? Elaina, from what I can see, you appear to have become a witch, so the people administering the exam will probably be happy to have you!”

Nevertheless, I shook my head.

“It’s not my style, I’ve got to decline.”

“Oh... Too bad.”

Lilitia puffed her cheeks out, sulking. After I chatted with her a little while longer, we parted ways.

“Well, if you change your mind, come take a part-time job as a proctor, okay?!” she shouted from a distance. I waved goodbye and walked away.

As for what happened after that—

I trudged around the snowy landscape that was a far cry from a land of eternal summer, searching for proper lodgings. Eventually, I found my way to an inn that was styled in a way that completely mismatched the scenery outside. Not to mention, the prices were quite high.

Thinking it over, it was probably the moneymaking season for all the hotels in the area, what with the hordes of girls streaming in from all across the land at the same time every year.

I could just imagine the faces of the innkeepers as they counted their money, saying things like, “Heh-heh-heh, they’re gonna stay no matter what, even if I jack the price up a little. Easy money!”

Anyway—

Through a series of events more or less like that, I found myself sitting by the window of an inn, gazing vacantly out at the city below.

But why was the city blanketed in snow?

...I don't really care, but I do have time to kill, and I guess it wouldn't be so bad to ask around while I'm out for a walk.

I looked over the pamphlet again.

“THANKS TO THE ETERNAL SUMMER WITCH, URSULA, EVERY DAY HERE IS THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER!”

It wasn't difficult to imagine that something might have happened to this witch Ursula.



I pulled on some tights, wrapped a scarf around my neck, and walked around town.

The city was still covered in snow. It had piled up so much that my feet crunched through it as I walked.

The streets were quiet, and all the stores were closed. It seemed like most of the commerce here was built on the premise that it was always summer, and under a blanket of snow, nothing they had was selling. Since all the stores were closed, people had no reason to be out, and the city was shrouded in silence.

I probably don't have to tell you where the people of the Land of Eternal

Summer directed their anger, once they were unable to shop or do business.

“...Hm.”

After walking down the main avenue for a little while, I spotted a crowd.

I could tell that those people, their whole bodies wrapped up in blankets, were gathered in front of the gate of a certain residence.

The gate, large enough that I had to look up to see it, was shut tight, as if to deny the people access, and written on it were the words HOME OF THE ETERNAL SUMMER WITCH, LADY URSULA. In other words, this was the residence of the very witch who controlled the weather here.

By the way, what kind of person adds a noble title to her own name?

I tugged at the blanket of a woman in the middle of the crowd.

“Is something the matter?”

The woman turned around, and I could see that her nose was bright red.

“Miss Witch! Listen, please! This Ursula woman hasn’t taken a single step outside her house, even though she’s the one who’s thrown our fair city into this state! At this point, the only thing to do is burn her at the stake!”

For some reason, the man beside her also turned toward us.

“She needs to quit messin’ around, seriously... The reason this place is so good is because it’s the Land of Eternal Summer...! Who asked her to make it snow?!”

In short, they were just as angry as the girls who had come here to take their exams.

I asked them what had happened, and they said that this unusual phenomenon had started just a few days earlier.

Apparently some of the witches from other lands who were going to proctor the apprentice witch exams had arrived to prepare the venue, and Ursula, as the city’s representative, had also gone over to the test site to help.

However, when she returned, Ursula had seemed very unhappy, and after that, summer had slipped away, and winter had quickly settled over the land.

Then, every one of the girls who had arrived that day looking to do some

vacationing after their exams had thrown a fit. The proctors had been livid, too. And of course, the city's residents were enraged as well. And I was mad, too. It was like walking into a portrait of hell.

It was obvious to anyone that something must have happened while the witches were setting up the testing site.

After I'd listened for a while, someone said, "Say, you're young, but you're a witch, right? Listen, if you don't mind, would you go to Ursula, and ask her what happened?"

Someone else agreed. "Oh yeah. If we go in there, there's no telling what she might do to us with her magic!"

The crowd banging on the gate seemed to settle on me being the one to speak with Ursula.

"That's a great idea!"

"I bet it'll be easy for a witch to talk to another witch! Please help us, Miss Witch!"

Even though they had yet to hear any kind of answer from me, they seemed to have already decided it was a done deal.

I'd rather you didn't joke around like that.

Why should I have to take a hand in something that seems like such a bother?

I'll just go ahead and turn you down—

"I'm terribly sorry, but—"

"By the way, we've got a fair amount set aside."

"This is a resort town, you know."

"You can expect a decent reward."

"I'll do everything in my power to settle this issue for you." Elaina finished.

All right, I'll just go ahead and get in there, shall I? They say it's best to strike when the iron is hot, and that time is money.

Oh? A closed gate? Huh? I can just smash that, can't I? Hey!



I broke through the gate.

The front door wouldn't budge, like an unyielding block of ice, so I smashed through that, too. If she wasn't going to come out, there was nothing to do but break in. Since doors and gates are designed to open in the first place, the ones that won't open are basically not fulfilling their original purpose. After I'd passed through, I magically mended them to appear exactly as they had been, so I figured there was no problem.

The inside of the estate was even more frozen than the outside, which was blanketed with snow. It was so frigid that it was less like a winter wonderland and more like the house had been imprisoned in a block of ice.

It seemed like if I stayed too long in such a place, I might freeze to death.

“.....”

It made me wonder if maybe Ursula the Eternal Summer Witch, or whatever her name was, had died before I had even arrived.

I was feeling way more than a little uneasy.

But she did seem to be alive. The sound of faint sobbing was coming from a room at the end of a hallway in the back of the house.

I slowly walked down the hall, and finally came to a stop in front of the door.

I knocked on the door with my fist.

Knock, knock.

“Hello?”

There was no answer.

I kicked the door.

Bam, bam.

“Hello...?”

Still, there was no answer.

“...I'll break down this door, too!”

“Eeek! Stop, please!” Finally, there came an answer. “Wait, who are you?! This is my house!”

“My name is Elaina. The Ashen Witch, Elaina.”

“...What does a witch want with me? Why are you here? Is it because I made it snow? Is that why you’ve come to kill me?”

“No, that’s not—”

“Ohhhhhh... Life is so cruel... Why am I the only one who has to feel these feelings...?!”

“.....”

“Sometimes when I feel like it, I make it rain, and then they say, ‘Hey, all our plans for the day got canceled, can’t you do something about it?’ But on the other hand, if I make it sunny all the time, they say things like, ‘How much longer before you make it rain? Are you trying to dry us out, Miss Witch?’...”

“.....”

She started complaining immediately...

“Since everyone knows that I control the weather here, people come up to me whenever they feel like it to tell me to ‘Make it sunny,’ or ‘Make it rain,’ or that ‘I think it would be nice to have clouds once in a while,’ but no one takes responsibility for what they say! If I make it cloudy for the people who requested clouds, I get complaints from other folks, and the cloud people don’t back me up!”

“Sigh... You have my sympathies...”

But that means—

“Is it possible that you’ve gotten so fed up with the rude treatment that you’ve decided to make it snow?”

“Huh? No, you’ve got it all wrong.”

That’s not it?

“Actually, the rude way they treat me is...well...rather exciting...”

“Right...”

It was a mistake to offer you my sympathies.

“So...hey? Hey, Miss Witch, Elaina, will you hear me out? Will you listen to my very sad tale?”

“The abridged version, please.”

“Well, it’s about the incident from yesterday—”

“.....”

No matter how you looked at it, that was not the introduction to a story that was going to wrap up clearly and concisely.

She began telling me her story bit by bit.

Her very sad tale—

“Um...*hah, hah*...so yesterday, right, yesterday morning...*hah, hah*...sorry. Just remembering it gets me a little...”

“Are you alright?”

“It’s just, I get a bit...worked up...”

“Seriously, are you okay?”

“Stop it! Don’t show any concern for me! Treat me more carelessly!”

“What I’m concerned about is your mental state.”

“I’m fine, of course!”

“Are you really?”

“Well, if you must know, I’m a total masochist.”

“You don’t say...”

“Yeah... And on the other side of that door, your eyes are all full of scorn, aren’t they...? Oh, I just know it...”

“Never mind that, would you hurry up and tell me your story, please?”

“*Hah, hah*...”

“Quickly.”

After all that, her story began at last.



If I were to summarize the things she told me, the tale would go something like this.

The previous morning, she'd left her house ridiculously worked up, excited to give it her all and help set up the testing venue. Almost dancing down the street, she had arrived at the city assembly hall that was hosting the exams.

What I need to tell you before I go any further is that the weather is controlled by her emotional state.

Here in Ursula, the Land of Eternal Summer, the name *Ursula* is like a title that is granted to the mage who represents the land. In other words, even the woman known as the Eternal Summer Witch Ursula really had a different name.

Come to think of it, I'm certain she hasn't called herself Ursula even once since I got here.

"So, what is your real name?"

"Oh, no, Elaina. I plan to tell my true name only to the partner whom I marry for life."

"Is that so?"

"So...do you want to hear it...?"

"No, not really..."

Let's get back on track.

In the Land of Eternal Summer, a mage with extraordinary powers was born every few decades. It was said that among the many powers this mage would possess was the power to control the weather. If her mood was cheerful, the weather would be sunny. If she was feeling down, it would rain. If she was gloomy, it would be cloudy.

And if she was feeling hopeless, it would snow.

Apparently, the witch controlled the temperature and the weather, so this land did not have the usual four seasons. Instead, it could be spring, summer, autumn, or winter depending on the witch's mood. If she was feeling well, it was summer. If she was feeling poorly, winter. And if she was somewhere in

between, it would turn to spring or autumn.

But the townspeople wanted her to make it summer every single day.

That was why Ursula, the Eternal Summer Witch, had left her home and headed to the testing venue in such high spirits.

“In other words, every day you force yourself to put up a good front and act happy?”

“Well, even if I don’t force it, I’m more or less a naturally cheerful person. I’m pretty much always excited, you know.”

“Ah, is that how it is?”

“Ahh...! I can feel your ice gaze through the door...!”

“.....”

So—

A number of witches who had come from distant lands had gathered in the meeting hall.

When Ursula arrived, the person who seemed to be in charge of setting up the venue had already begun their explanation, meaning Ursula had probably been the last to arrive. When she got to the meeting hall, she told me, the looks she got from the other witches had been sublime.

So I take it you arrived late on purpose?

“Uh, all right then, everyone, let’s get hyped up and get this venue ready. That said, what we need to do is simple. First, we clean, then we take the answer sheets to each room—”

The supervisor laid out the process carefully with a professional attitude, then at the end, said, “All right then, please begin the preparations,” and released everyone from their boredom. After all, the witches there had gone through these sorts of routine duties many times before. Most of them paid no attention to the formal explanation.

Even Ursula was no different.

“Yawn...”

She was overcome by boredom, and when she started working, she cut many corners.

But then, something happened.

“.....!”

A shock ran through her like a flash of lightning.

Standing there before her eyes was the most beautiful witch she had ever seen in her life.

She was lovely and sweet, and just Ursula’s type.

Ah, if I got rejected by a girl like her, I think that might be the end of me.

She was practically salivating.

It was gross.

By the way, they say that human beings are sensitive to looks from others. When a person looks at someone, the one they’re looking at notices the gaze on them.

And so, when Ursula looked at that witch—the witch also looked back at Ursula.

And then—

Immediately after that—

The incident occurred.

“Oh...! By any chance are you the Eternal Summer Witch, Lady Ursula?”

The witch trotted over, calling out to Ursula in a voice as sweet as a blooming flower. Everything about her exuded a kind of flighty, easygoing air.

“Y-yes...I am,” Ursula responded coolly. But on the inside she was melting into a degenerate mess because of her special inclinations. Apparently that was Ursula’s way of doing things. Not that I cared.

“I’ve been a fan for a long time! If you don’t mind, would you give me your signature?”

The witch’s starstruck attitude immediately seized Ursula’s heart.

Ursula was assailed by feelings she had never experienced before.

“.....”

In this momentary silence, she was apparently having all kinds of thoughts.

Ah, this girl is so beautiful! Really, really beautiful, and amazing! She's so pretty that if this girl got red in the face and yelled and screamed at me, I wouldn't be able to control myself—ah, but no, there's no way. This girl couldn't do that...because she's just too kind! I can see how kind she is just by looking at her! This girl is definitely too nice, she could never get angry at someone. And besides, she has total trust in me! Even though we've just met and have only exchanged a few words, I can tell! Suppose, for argument's sake, that I were to date this sweet little witch. She would never treat me badly, not even once, for the rest of our lives. In fact, this total trust of hers would never break down for all eternity. I can tell! Undoubtedly, this is a girl whose life has been nothing but beautiful fields of flowers! She can't possibly be with a filthy human being like me—

After many more thoughts that would take about fifty more pages to summarize, Ursula finally spit out a reply.

“No, thank you. I make a point of not signing things for dumb girls like you.”

Apparently, Ursula wanted to pick a fight.

However, the young witch seemed to have a pure heart, just as Ursula had assumed.

“Oh right, of course...I'm sorry. Sorry to bother you.”

With a few tears welling up in her eyes, she went back to work.

At that point, Ursula couldn't help but feel a terrible heartache. She loved being resented and despised by other people, but she hated making others sad.

Ursula had rudely handled the most beautiful girl she might ever meet in her whole life, who was just her type, and had only ended up making her sad. She went about her work feeling like an empty husk, then went back to her house and shut herself up in her room.

“Now is the age of winter... The summer of my life is over...”

Then snow fell over the city.

The end.

“.....”

After enduring to the end and listening to her whole story, I had just one question.

“Do you know that witch’s name?”

The witch that had featured in Ursula’s story, there was something about the way that Ursula had described her— I had a feeling I might know that witch.

I waited there in front of the door as Ursula searched through her memory. Finally, she answered. “Umm, she said it was Lilitia.”



Well now, let’s try and sort this situation out.

The reason winter had descended on the Land of Eternal Summer was because the Eternal Summer Witch Ursula had fallen in love at first sight with Lilitia, an acquaintance of mine. My acquaintance Lilitia had come to this land in order to take a part-time job supervising the advancement exams for witch apprentices, so she would be leaving after just a few days. If Lilitia’s time here passed without things moving forward between Ursula and herself, summer might never return to this land, meaning there was a possibility that this famous resort would be gone for good.

Hmm...

I see, that is a problem.

And so—

“Elaina, I had faith that you would show up... Ohh... Thank you...”

The next morning, I headed over to help Lilitia with her work, wearing a totally innocent look on my face.

The job of test proctor consisted of three main duties, the first of which was reception for the exams. Next was explaining the exams, and then finally came supervising them.

Lilitia had already started the reception work by the time I got there, and she was openly delighted by my unexpected arrival. She seemed flustered, and blabbered out a bunch of words I didn't really understand. Then she grabbed my hand, and with a puff of white breath, said, "Oh... Elaina, your hands are so warm."

The reception was at the front door of the test venue. The doors were propped open, and the heater wasn't working very well, so it was cold—in fact, it wasn't much warmer inside than it was outside.

"Well, I understand that you're short-handed, and I felt bad just abandoning you."

As I answered, I handed her a cup of hot tea which I had brought as provisions. Lilitia took the cup in both hands, and mumbled awkwardly, "I love you..."

She said something I didn't really understand.

"You love this tea? Glad to hear it."

Let's go ahead and revise that statement so that there are no misunderstandings. I'm sure you meant the tea, right? Not me, right?

"I love you, Elaina..."

"You really went out of your way to clarify..."

But I was supposed to be the one correcting her...

"It's a little problematic if you turn your affections on me"—I muttered to myself as I gazed out beyond the entryway at the outside world, where it was snowing hard.

Out in the silvery white world, the test takers, who were headed into an important stage of their education, were walking our way. They were trembling as they staggered forward on clumsy legs. I wondered what on earth could be the matter with them. Was it the extreme cold, or maybe their nerves were making them tremble?

"....."

Or maybe they were trembling in fear of the suspicious person who was

spying on the test takers from behind a tree.

“Lilitia, look there.”

I tugged a little at Lilitia’s robe, who was standing beside me, and pointed to the suspicious person lurking behind the tree.

It was a lone woman with long blue hair. Her robe was also a refreshing sky-blue color. And her eyes, the same color as her hair, were glaring at the test takers—and also right past them, at us.

“That’s a suspicious person over there, isn’t it? Don’t you think you’d better go tell her off?”

I’m sure that protecting test takers from suspicious characters must be one of our duties.

“Oh no, Elaina, there’s no need for that! Oh-hoh-hoh,” Lilitia said with a smile. “That’s Lady Ursula, the Eternal Summer Witch!”

“Oh, it is?”

Now that she’d mentioned it, since I had only talked to Ursula through her door the previous day, I hadn’t been able to tell what she looked like. She was younger than I expected. She looked like she was still in her early twenties.

“.....”

I couldn’t help but feel like Ursula’s gaze had been locked on me and Lilitia the whole time.

“Isn’t she kind of glaring at us?” I queried.

“I’m sure her eyes are just bad!” chirped Lilitia.

“You think so?”

“Ah...lovely today as always...”

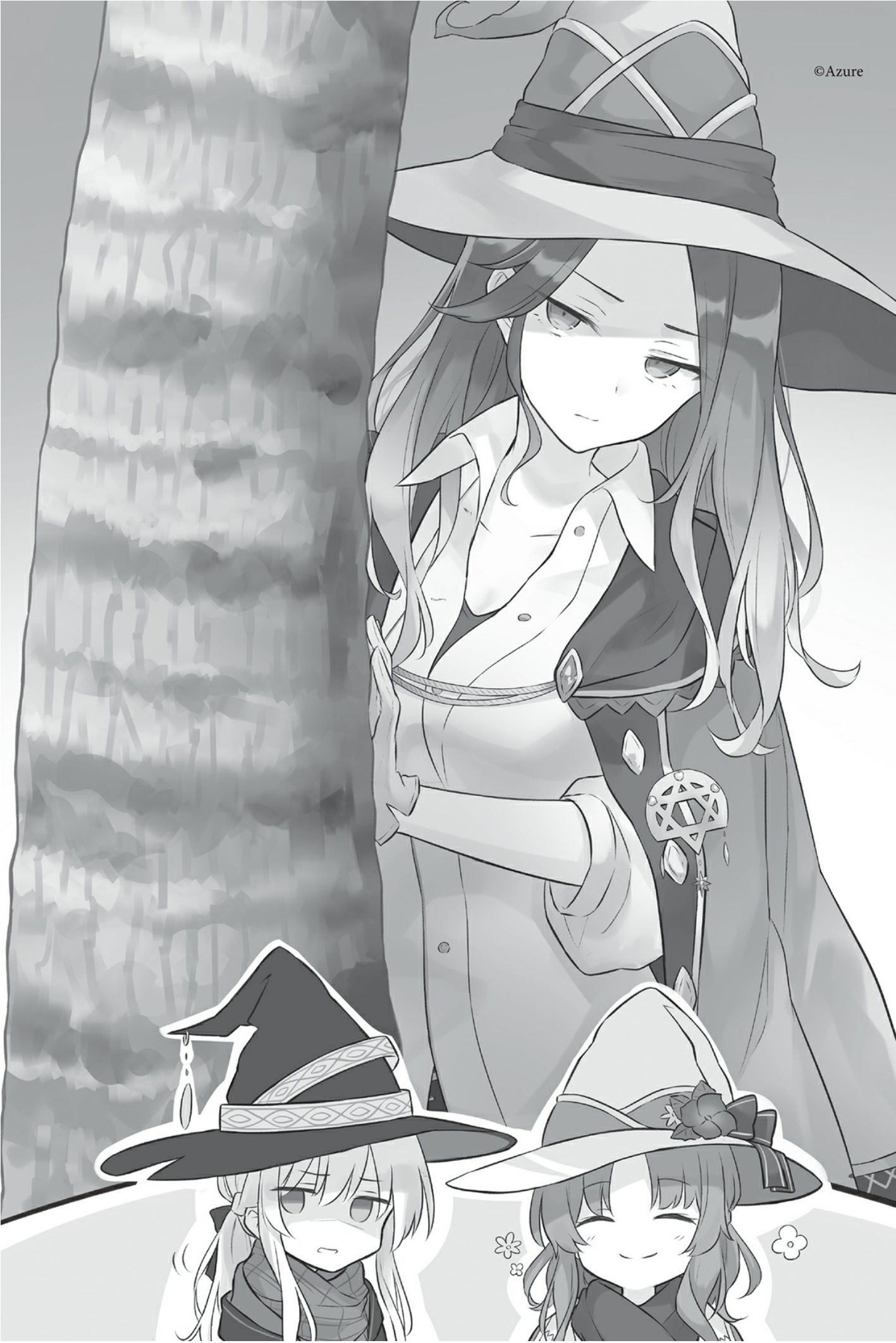
“Seems like you might be the one with bad eyes.”

Could it be that your vision is blurred by adoration?

Finally, Ursula, still lurking behind the tree, slowly held up a sketchbook for us to see.

HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

That was all that was written on it.



Those were the words written on the paper.

To be perfectly frank, the only thing the question made me think was, *Huh?* I almost wondered out loud what she was going on about in this frigid cold.

But that silly question gave Lilitia a shock like a bolt of lightning.

“Wh-wh-whaaaaaat do we do, Elaina?! Lady Ursula is asking us a question! What do we do?! Surely she’s concerned for us, about whether we’re able to do our jobs properly in this cold weather!”

“Calm down, please.”

As if she had forgotten how coldly she had been treated the day before, Lilitia seemed deeply moved. She was on the verge of tears.

“Wh-what am I supposed to do, Elaina?! Am I okay? Do I look cute right now?”

“You’re plenty cute.”

“Eh-heh-heh. Oh, I’m so embarrassed!”

Lilitia gave my shoulder a whack.

Ow...

It’s almost like she develops some sort of weird nervous condition when she’s in front of someone she looks up to—well, whatever. Anyway, Lilitia doesn’t seem to harbor any distrust of Ursula based on what happened yesterday.

In such a way that Lilitia couldn’t see what I was doing, I stealthily made a ring with my thumb and forefinger, and sent Ursula an “okay” signal.

As soon as she spotted my gesture through her binoculars, Ursula broke into a wide grin.

The snow stopped, and it felt like it got just a little bit warmer.

To get straight to the point, I had figured that if I could go ahead and sort out the whole situation, if I could bring Ursula and Lilitia together, the two of them would be happy, the townspeople would be overjoyed, the land would warm up again, and my wallet might get heavier as well. Actually, I had no doubt about it.

No one would be unhappy with the result.

It would be an incredibly joyful thing.

With that in mind, the day before—

I had said something to Ursula, when she was shut up on the other side of her door.

“Why don’t I take on the role of Cupid, and help you and Lilitia get together?”



In order to get the two of them together, I had asked Ursula to come to the meeting hall that day. Since she had been involved in the work of proctoring the exam from the beginning, she didn’t show any reluctance about doing so.

“Got it. And then just how am I going to be able to get involved with Lilitia?”

“Leave that to me. I’ve got a good idea.” On the other side of the door, I was wearing a self-satisfied expression.

“Oh? What kind of idea, I wonder?”

“So, about that...I’ll use some kind of...strategy, of some sort, to help you two get closer.”

“Specifically?”

“Kind of like...skillfully closing the distance between you and Lilitia.”

“Without thinking it through, you mean?”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll all work out.”

Anyway, just show up tomorrow—after that rough explanation, we parted ways. That was why the day after that, which was today, Ursula had appeared behind the tree.

It must not be forgotten, however, that Lilitia was, at that moment, doing her ordinary job as a receptionist.

“I’m here to check in.”

A young novice with an airy, flippant demeanor handed me her admission ticket for the exam. I felt like the novices I had seen in my hometown who were

hoping for advancement had been a little stiffer, more nervous perhaps, but here, there were very few girls like that.

In fact, there were so few, they were basically nonexistent.

“Checking in.”

They said, and—

“Check in.”

They all sounded so casual about it.

Kids these days... I thought to myself, like some old lady, but then I reasoned that since this was an exam being held in a resort town, there might be a lot of girls taking it without any actual regard for their chances of passing.

“Yes, here.”

I accepted exam tickets from the girls, signed them, and handed them back with basic instructions. “All right, from here, go into the room on your right—”

But lackadaisical girls just kept appearing one after another.

“Chekkin.”

With some of them, I could hardly even tell what they were saying to me.

Still, I chalked it up to being in a resort area.

One girl tossed her exam ticket at me like she was throwing away a piece of garbage. Even in the cold, she had a lot of skin exposed, and it was tanned golden-brown. She stood before us munching on a piece of bread. With a yawn, she said, “Jeez, it’s seriously so cold, like give me a break! This Eternal Summer Witch or whatever totally sucks!” There wasn’t the slightest hint of dignity in the way she spoke these words.

Her rudeness was unparalleled.

That said, I didn’t really care, so I took her exam ticket and told her, just like I had the girls before her, “All right, from here, go into the room on your right—”

That’s what I did, but—

“Oh no, you don’t.”

The woman sitting next to me, who was still maintaining a frivolous demeanor, nevertheless spoke plainly. “You can’t go in if you’re going to have such a flippant attitude at the time of an important exam. Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh!”

Lilitia had a smile on her face.

She was smiling, but I could see a little anger behind her eyes.

“.....”

But the girl ignored her.

“Are you listening to me?”

“.....”

“Hm? Are you listening?”

“.....*Tch.*”

The girl clicked her tongue dismissively and hung her head as she took her exam ticket back and then left. I could see that she was dejected as she slunk away.

“No matter the motivation, we must do whatever we’re doing in earnest, right? Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh!”

Lilitia watched the girl go with a soft smile.

“You’re quite earnest.”

“Eh-heh-heh-heh, oh no, I’m nothing special!”

Lilitia smiled bashfully. She didn’t seem entirely displeased with the praise.

In the distance, behind her tree, Ursula held up her sketchbook, with words written on it.

JUST NOW, I LIKED THE LOOK IN HER EYE.

Oh really?

I’M SURE SHE’LL MAKE A FINE SADIST.

Oh really?

In that fashion, with Ursula watching—or rather, with Ursula spying on us—

we continued our reception work.

“...Great. Okay. So just go into the hall and wait, all right? ...Huh? You’re anxious? You’ll be fine! Do your best! Oh, and if you get hungry, just eat this!”

I looked over and saw that when Lilitia gave the test takers back their tickets, she was also handing them some sort of small package.

“...What are you giving them?”

“I baked these to get them to give it their all.”

She was handing out homemade cookies.

“Oh no! I didn’t give any to the girl I scolded earlier! Wait right here, Elaina! I’ll go give her some!”

Lilitia made a panicked commotion as she remembered, then ran off into the hall holding one of the little packages.

I glanced over at the tree.

I THINK I MIGHT DIE IF A NICE GIRL LIKE HER SCOLDED ME.

Lurking there in her hiding space was Ursula, scrawling her nonsense with an extremely serious look on her face.

Before I realized it, the snow had stopped outside the test venue.

HEH-HEH-HEH... JUST IMAGINING IT WARMED MY HEART...

Thinking about how I was ready to go home, I responded with a simple, *Oh really?*



Not long after that, with too much time on my hands in the spare moments between reception work, I was thinking things over, and eventually my mind came to the extremely reasonable conclusion that if Ursula was so interested in Lilitia, she ought to talk to her in person. But trying to implement that approach went so poorly it was exasperating.

Even though it was obvious that both of them were into each other, they were on such different wavelengths that it was like they were missing each other on purpose.

For example, around the time that Lilitia and I were wrapping up our receptionist duties— Ursula came over to where the two of us were sitting. She intended to say hello to Lilitia. The plan was for them to hit it off a little right there, but...

“Ah... Lady Ursula...!” Lilitia couldn’t hide her panic and agitation when Ursula, the object of her adoration, suddenly appeared before her eyes. “Ah, ahh... What do I do, Elaina?! Lady Ursula is here!”

She asked me for help, so I suggested, “For now, why don’t you go ahead and greet her?”

“H-hello, Lady Ursula! You look lovely today, as always...!”

Ursula, on the other hand, played it extremely cool, standing there in front of Lilitia. She was acting just as cool as the temperature outside. The way she dramatically flipped her hair was like she was someone totally out of Lilitia’s league.

“My name is Helen. It’s not Ursula.”

“...Huh? But you are the Eternal Summer Witch, aren’t you...?” Lilitia was perplexed.

“Yes. I am the Eternal Summer Witch Ursula. But my real name is Helen.”

“Oh, um, all right...?”

“I can give you special permission to call me Helen.”

“No, that’s— It’s really all right...”

“.....”

She looks like she’s gonna cry...

“Ah, um, rather than something like that, would you consider working with me as an exam proctor today, Lady Ursula...?”

“Pfft. What a stupid question.” Ursula took the opportunity to laugh at her mockingly. “Tell me, why should I have to work alongside peons like you two?”

As a devoted masochist, Ursula had an extremely rude attitude. She acted and spoke rudely in hopes of being abused in return.

She forced her way in close to people, or pushed them away. From an outsider's perspective, her speech and actions seemed terribly frenetic.

"Ah... R-right, of course... I'm sorry...for making such a strange request..." And Lilitia, who was just Ursula's type of girl, was simply a good person. "I'm sorry..." she continued. "Of course someone grand like Lady Ursula wouldn't want to work alongside little old me! Eh-heh-heh...!"

Lilitia smiled courageously.

"....."

And, looking at Lilitia's sad face, the grand Lady Ursula despaired, even though she was the one who had hurt Lilitia.

As I watched, the area outside the test venue was enveloped in a total blizzard.

Ursula seemed heartbroken that she had hurt her intended sweetheart with her thoughtless words and actions. Feeling that she shouldn't have acted that way, I stomped on Ursula's foot.

"Hyah!"

Like that.

We had already talked about this the previous day, when I'd spoken with Ursula through the door. Although it didn't make any sense to me, Ursula was a total masochist. When she was upset, a painful shock would make her forget what was bothering her. So she had a request: whenever she fell into despair, she wanted me to give her a shock somehow, either mentally or physically.

I see. Like a kind of shock therapy, huh?

Oh dear. I'm not enjoying this one bit, but this is what she requested, so there's no avoiding it.

And so, I stealthily ground my foot down on hers.

"...!" Ursula stood up straight, and at the same time, the blizzard outside stopped. "*Hah, hah...* What a great idea!"

Her spirits seem to have risen.

All I could think was, *Yikes*.

Lilitia, on the other hand, who was genuinely just a good person, saw that the person she adored was suddenly acting strangely, and naturally offered her concern.

“Um, Lady Ursula...? Is something the matter...?”

Grind, grind, grind, grind.

“*Hah...hah...* No, nothing at all...!”

“...? Oh, but—”

“Nothing is wrong!”

“Ah, a-are you sure...?”

As I was watching their exchange, I nearly came to my senses for a moment and wondered what on earth I was doing. But in this type of situation, I knew that coming to my senses would mean certain defeat.

“By the way, Lilitia, it sounds like Ursula is going to work alongside us for the rest of the day. Isn’t that great?”

And so, I made this thoughtless remark.

“Oh, but—”

Lilitia was baffled by my sudden announcement.

“No, I wouldn’t deign to work alongside commoners like—”

“Hyah!”

Grind, grind.

“.....! Work, working together...*hah...hah...*”

“You *will* do it, right? Ursula?”

Grind, grind, grind, grind.

“Wait, but—”

“Hm?”

Grind, grind, grind, grind.

“.....! I-I will... I’ll do it...! *Hah...hah...*”

“Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Sounds like she will!”

I patted Lilitia on the shoulder.

“.....?”

Tilting her head to the side sweetly, Lilitia asked me, “Um...is Lady Ursula all right...? She seems to have been having a hard time for the last few minutes...”

Lilitia was a good person and was naturally concerned about Ursula. I was certain that she must have been an angel or something in her previous life.

I looked behind Ursula’s back, at the scenery outside.

The blizzard had long since stopped, and in fact the sun was shining brilliantly down on the snow that blanketed the ground.

I see, I see.

“She’s actually feeling just fine, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Huh...?”

Ultimately, we finished our receptionist duties without having made the slightest bit of progress in bringing the two of them together.

After handling the reception of students, our next task was explaining the exams.

Rows of desks were lined up in the main hall, which was filled with test takers as far as the eye could see. In the center of it all was a platform where Lilitia and I stood beside each other. Hardly any of the girls were paying attention to us, and even though there were mere moments before the test, the room was filled with a very relaxed atmosphere, so much so that I wondered whether they had all forgotten their nerves at home.

From my position, I could see all varieties of girls.

There was a girl who had started studying in a panic just before the exam commenced.

There was a girl who was casually chatting with her neighbors.

There was a kind girl handing out sweets to the strangers beside her, saying, “Let’s all do our best!”

There was a girl looking out the window at the suddenly-sunny scenery, and abruptly gushing, “Maybe we can enjoy the resort this afternoon?!”

There was a girl who had never even taken her seat to begin with.

There was a girl with a know-it-all look on her face leaning against the wall beside us, staring at Lilitia— Oh wait, that was Ursula.

.....

Well, I kind of understood, and maybe it was inevitable for an exam being held in a resort town, but there was no tension in the air at all.

“Oh my... This isn’t good...”

Beside me, Lilitia was wearing a smile, but I could tell she was suddenly seething with anger, so I scolded the test takers to behave and made them sit down quickly, then launched into my explanation of the contents of the exam.

“Good morning, everyone. My name is Elaina, the Ashen Witch. I’ll be observing you during the test today, so while we’re here, you can call me Miss Elaina.”

When I said that, one of the test takers raised her hand and asked, “Why do we have to address you like a teacher?”

Allow me to answer that.

“Because I like it when people address me that way.”

An air of disbelief spread across the exam hall.

The next moment, Lilitia tugged at my sleeve, and, with an adorable tilt of her head, asked, “Should I also call you Miss Elaina?”

“Good question. Yes, please do, Miss Lilitia.”

“Okay, got it. By the way, Miss Elaina?”

“Yes?”

“Take this seriously, okay?”

“Oh, certainly.”

“You mustn’t joke around too much, all right? Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh!” Cheerfully, Lilitia brought her fist down on my head with a *thunk*. It didn’t hurt at all.

From an outside perspective, it probably just looked like we were fooling around. But I did not misunderstand her. It was her way of saying, “*I could kill you at any moment, you know?*” It was terrifying. The force of the blow was totally unlike all the times she had hit me before.

I coughed and cleared my throat, then launched into the explanation of the exam.

“Just like every year, the time limit for the exam is two hours. It’s okay for those who finish early to leave. In fact, it stopped snowing earlier, so I’d think that once you’re done with your exam, you could go let your hair down at this top-class resort—”

“Miss, miss.” One of the test takers suddenly interrupted me.

“Yes, what is it?” I asked.

Miss Test Taker pointed out the window and said, “It started snowing.”

“Whoa, it’s a blizzard.”

Before I knew it, the world outside was covered in silvery white.

And when I looked toward the back of the hall, there, with her cheeks puffed out angrily, was Ursula. She was obviously quite upset.

I paused in my explanation and walked over to Ursula, then asked her quietly, in a low voice that no one else could hear, “What’s the matter? Did something bad happen?”

The snow outside meant that Ursula’s mood had sunk. Something must have happened.

“...I want to...do it, too.”

“Hmm?”

Do what?

“I want to flirt with Lilitia, too—”

“You’re not by any chance telling me that you’re upset because you want to flirt with Lilitia, and that such nonsense is why you’re making it snow, are you?”

She had been about to say something weird, so I immediately put my arm around Ursula’s shoulders, brought my face close to her ear, and whispered my question.

My actions looked just like those of a shady debt collector.

“How many times did I warn you earlier not to make it snow for no reason? Why can’t you keep your promise? You dullard. You incompetent, walking trash heap.”

“Ah, um, well...s-sorry... Eh-heh, eh-heh-heh...”

Oh no.

“If you feel bad enough to apologize, I’d rather you just didn’t make it snow in the first place... You understand me?”

“Yes, yes... I’m sorry, Miss Elaina... Eh-heh, heh-heh-heh...”

“All of the test takers here are looking forward to enjoying the resort this afternoon. So, as for what you need to do now...you understand, don’t you?”

“S-Sorry...eh-heh, I’ll make it sunny right away...heh-heh.”

The plan’s a bust...

And so, after that somewhat suspicious exchange, I returned to the platform with an innocent look on my face.

“Take a look, please. The sun has come out.”

It had completely cleared up outside the window. The sun shone brilliantly, lighting up the snow that remained on the ground as if it had never gone away. The students seemed delighted by this state of affairs. Lilitia, on the other hand, who had watched the whole thing from afar, was wearing a puzzled expression.

“...Are you friends with Lady Ursula?”

I wouldn’t say we’re friends, exactly.

“Well, we talked a little bit yesterday, anyway.”

“Oh, did you now? How nice. I’d like to have a nice long conversation with Lady Ursula sometime, too.”

Lilitia adored Ursula, so seeing the two of us talking and interacting probably inspired a little bit of jealousy.

I ignored Lilitia as she carried on in an ever so slightly dejected voice about how nice it was and continued with my explanation of the examination.

After that and a ten-minute rest break, the exam began.

As test takers so often did, the girls used those ten minutes to do some final studying, or to go to the bathroom, or to distract each other with complaints like, “I seriously did not study at all!” and so on. Even though the exam was being held in a resort town, the same little scenes that we might have seen anywhere else unfolded before us.

“Elaina, it feels like old times, doesn’t it?”

Lilitia seemed to find something nostalgic about the atmosphere of the test hall. Standing beside me, her expression softened.

“It sure does.”

I nodded lightly.

It had been quite a long time since I had taken my exams. Most of the content that I had crammed into my head for the exams had long ago disappeared from my memories, but the atmosphere before the test and what had happened in the days leading up to it were seared into my mind even now.

Funny how that happens, isn’t it?

I looked at the clock and saw that it had been almost ten minutes already.

The scattered test takers each returned to their own seats, and gradually the exam hall fell silent.

“.....?”

In the middle of it all, something unusual suddenly caught my eye. Just before the start of the exam, among other test takers who were whispering to their friends, or studying, or spending their last few minutes before the exam in their

own way, I spotted one strange girl.

She was sitting in her chair, hanging her head.

Her mouth was moving restlessly, and she looked like she was mumbling something to herself. She might have been cold, because both of her shoulders were trembling, and she was not holding a pen in her hand, but a wand.

I wonder why.

After all, there's absolutely nothing to use a wand for on a written exam—

"All of you, everyone, don't move!"

The moment after I sensed something was slightly amiss—

That one test taker pointed her wand at the ceiling and shouted those words. With bloodshot eyes, she glared at me and Lilitia up on the platform.

"I've taken control of this meeting hall!" The girl raised her voice as she stood on top of her desk. "Okay now, nobody move!" she shouted. "If anyone tries anything funny, I'll destroy this whole hall!"

I really don't understand what's going on here.

It seems we've been dragged into some sort of weird situation just before the exams were going to start.

Lilitia, who had been about to hand out the exam papers, was in shock at being dragged into this kind of sudden incident, but she managed to whisper to me, "...Well, this isn't like old times at all."

My, my, you've got that right.



I recognized the test taker who had suddenly raised her voice.

It was the girl who had clicked her tongue when Lilitia had cautioned her about her tone earlier—from her bizarre actions, I figured that she must have some demands of her own.

Glaring up at the three of us on the platform, the girl laid her anger bare.

"Just what in the heck is going on with the weather in this country?! Quit jerkin' us around! Bring out the Eternal Summer Witch!"

She was demanding that we bring her out, but Ursula was already standing right there. She was behind Lilitia, with a know-it-all look on her face and her arms crossed in front of her chest.

“My life... This stupid town ruined my life!” the test taker shouted. “So I’m going to ruin this year’s exams!”

The girl was clearly not in her right mind—there were three witches up on the platform, so we could have easily taken her down right away. It was only the possibility that the other test takers might get hurt if she decided to put up a struggle that kept us from acting. Surely this was the safer choice to avoid pouring more fuel on the fire.

“C-calm down now, okay? What’s going on? What happened...?”

Feeling the heat, Lilitia turned both of her palms toward the student, showing her that she was unarmed.

The student said, “Last year, I came to this town from far away. I came a long way to take the exam to become an apprentice witch! It was my dream, so...so in order to take the test, I came here one week before the exam date, and rented a room so that I could study!”

“Yes, okay. And then?”

In a gentle tone of voice, Lilitia prompted her for more of her story.

I, on the other hand, standing where I was behind Lilitia, clicked my tongue and tutted to Ursula. “All of a sudden, I’m getting a whiff of something fishy.”

Ursula responded, “I’ve heard this before—she spent all her time playing around.”

“Even though I stayed here for a week before the exam date, I didn’t get any studying done! Why do you think that is? It’s because this town is a resort! I hardly got any studying done all week!”

Well, that does sound tough.

“The day of the exam, as I stared at my answer sheet, the only things that came to my mind were the events of that week. Listening closely, I could hear the sound of the waves. I remembered a bar with great drinks that I found

walking around town, and the seafood dishes made with fresh-caught fish, and the town locals dressed in gorgeous fashions. And going down to the shore, the beach at the height of summer, with a refreshing breeze blowing across it...”

It sounds like you really enjoyed yourself, didn't you? You never had any intention of studying for your test, am I right?

“Eventually I realized that I had no chance of getting a good result on the exam, and I got up from my seat thirty minutes after it started.”

But testers have two hours to complete the exam, don't they? You gave up awfully quickly, didn't you?

“And then I went to the beach.”

Well, they do say people should gaze out at the ocean when they're feeling sad.

“Then, before I knew it, I was shouting at the ocean.”

Also something that sad people often do.

“Then, before I knew it, my friend and I were splashing each other with water.”

Okay, that's different—you're just playing in the water at that point.

“On my last night in town, I ate lobster at a seaside restaurant...”

It sounds like you just had a nice vacation.

“The exam results were sent out later. I don't think I have to tell you how mine turned out—I bear a bitter grudge against this town, against Ursula, the Land of Eternal Summer. Do you know why?”

Because you're an idiot?

“It's because this place is a resort!”

Got it. Your resentment is completely unjustified.

She had been talking for a long time, but nothing she had said indicated that Ursula or the government were at fault. Frankly, I was getting a little fed up with it. In short, she had spent all her time on amusements, and she wanted someone else to take responsibility.

Wait, wait, what are you saying?

“And so, I vowed to get revenge on this land! I’ve lived the last year of my life resenting this place! I’ve written any number of threatening letters! I wrote that I failed my exam because of this resort town. And that I was going to get revenge on the Eternal Summer Witch! But even though I sent countless letters to her, she has ignored them all!”

Oh my.

“Is what she just said really true, Ursula?”

“Hah, hah...”

“Ah, sorry, I was foolish to even ask.”

It seems like menacing letters and the like are just more excitement to Ursula.

The passion of the enraged test taker hadn’t cooled off yet.

“Then this year, I showed up to this test venue, just like I said I would! And I thought I would get a meal at a seaside restaurant on my way home, but... but...!”

Let’s take a look out the window.

Well, the weather might have improved somewhat, but the ground is still completely covered with snow. It goes without saying that this is a far cry from eternal summer.

And I don’t have to imagine how the test takers felt when they got a look at the weather here. I’ve seen their reactions time and time again since I arrived.

“The Eternal Summer Witch has made it look like this just to harass me! I’ll never forgive her!”

Her persecution complex was entirely inflated. To me, it seemed like the girl was simply enamored with the resort town, just like anyone else might have been.

“Now, now...come on, calm down. Okay? We can see that you’re having a difficult time. But you can’t push people around like this.”

Lilitia tried again to persuade the girl to stand down, but—

“Quiet, you! Shut up!”

We couldn’t expect someone who had been holding on to her pent-up frustration for an entire year to calm down just because someone tried to convince her to.

“Come to think of it, you were the mage who tried to pick a fight with me at the entrance, weren’t you? What’s your deal? You wanna have it out with me right here?”

“O-oh no, I wasn’t trying to...”

By the way, Lilitia had advanced from apprentice to witch two years earlier. She had apparently decided on a rather foreboding witch name—the “Stonecrusher Witch” —that contrasted with her gentle appearance.

In other words, if she and the test taker had it out right there, it was obvious how the fight would turn out.

“Shut up! Never mind!” the girl shouted. “I’m telling you to bring the Eternal Summer Witch here right this instant! If you don’t, I’ll burn you all up one by one, starting with you!”

“Y-you wouldn’t...” Lilitia was in a panic. Her voice trembled and there were tears in her eyes.

“Stop right there.”

Then a lone witch forced herself between them.

The blue-haired witch stood in the way, as if she was protecting a helpless maiden.

Well now, just who could this be?

“If you want to hurt someone, hurt me!”

“L-Lady Ursula...!” Lilitia gave a cheer that sounded like a shriek. “Protecting me...how amazing...!” Her eyes were blurry with tears, and she clutched her chest.

What’s the matter? Is your heart pounding?

“I bear full responsibility for everything that happened. So, do to me what you

will! I'll take whatever you dish out...!"

"So you're Ursula...?! This is your fault... It's all your fault...!"

The student waved her wand.

She fired off a bolt of magical energy. The bluish-white ball flew through the air with a fair amount of speed before smacking into Ursula's cheek.

"Tch...! Is that all you've got...? Heh-heh-heh! That was nothing..."

Lady Ursula wore a confident smile. From my perspective, as someone who knew about her personal preferences, I couldn't help but hear the hidden meaning behind her words.

"Lady Ursula...!"

Lilitia, standing right behind her, worried over Ursula with tears in her eyes. If I had to say, she looked like she might be the one bearing the brunt of the emotional damage from the attack.

"Taste my wrath!" The student launched another spell.

"Ha...! That was a pretty good shot...!"

Not that I really care, but she stepped forward on purpose so she could be on the receiving end of all these spells, didn't she?

Behind her, Lilitia swooned.

"Lady Ursula...!"

The two women continued their battle.

"You rotten witch!"

"Good...!"

"Lady Ursula...!"

"Diiieeee!"

"Goood...!"

"Lady Ursula...!"

"Drop deaaaaddddd!"

“Ahhhhh! So good!”

“Lady Ursula...!”

“Go to heeeeeeeeeeeeeelllllll!”

“Aaaaaahhhhhhhhhh! M-more...!”

“Lady Ursulaaa...!”

“Wait a second.”

After several rounds of attacks, the test taker abruptly stopped casting spells, and walked briskly over to me. Then she gave me an incredibly dirty look and said, “Hey, you.”

“Yes?”

What is it?

“You seem to be the sanest person here, so I want to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Is that really the Eternal Summer Witch Ursula?”

“Seems so.”

“She’s a little...creepy, don’t you think?”

“I think so, too.”

“Hang on, hang on. Is that all? Are you done?” Ursula obliviously butted in. She even put her arm around her opponent’s shoulders in an overly friendly way. I felt like I was losing my mind a little bit.

Then the test taker burst into a rage.

“Shut up! Don’t touch me!”

Smack!

Her open palm violently slapped Ursula’s cheek.

“Good...!”

“What is your deal?!”

“*Hah, hah...* Call me Helen...”

“Are you happy with anyone, as long as they’re rough with you?”

So what was that about not revealing your true name to anyone but your life partner? Please, put yourself in my shoes. I’ve heard it twice just today.

“Stop it already! Poor Lady Ursula!”

The test taker was about to send another spell flying at Ursula when Lilitia grabbed the girl’s wand without hesitation and smashed it into pieces right there.

“Huh? My wand, you broke...huh?”

“Please...! Stop this! Stop fighting, okay?”

With eyes full of affection, Lilitia gently grabbed hold of both of the test taker’s hands and made her appeal. At their feet lay the pulverized remains of the wand.

The gesture looked every bit like it was meant to intimidate.

“.....”

The test taker was silent for a long time.

“Hah, hah...”

Ursula’s imagination was running wild, inspired by the fragments of wand on the floor.

“Please...!”

Lilitia threatened in a sweet voice.

“.....”

And I started handing out the question sheets for the test as if nothing much was going on.

Finally, the test taker sighed very, very deeply, as if she had accepted her fate.

“I understand... I give up. I won’t have anything more to do with this place. Is that what you want?”

She spit out this line, still trying to look cool so late in the game and escaped from Lilitia’s grasp.

“Wait.”

Lilitia immediately grabbed the test taker’s shoulder.

“Eek!” The girl let out a shriek that I couldn’t fail to hear.

“Oh, I’m jealous...” Ursula said, in a desirous tone that I would have liked to fail to hear.

“Wh-what is it?”

Surely you didn’t think you were getting off that easy after causing such a disturbance?

“All right, please don’t open your question booklet just yet,” I instructed the other testers as I watched what Lilitia and the troublemaker were doing. *I should keep an eye on them in case I needed to step in*, I thought.

“Your purpose for coming here was just to cause trouble? Surely that can’t be right, can it?”

“No, I did come to cause trouble, but—”

“Dummy!”

Smack! Without any advance warning, Lilitia slapped the test taker with her open palm. She went flying right into Ursula, and they both fell to the ground.

“Why would you say such a miserable thing? You are not such a bad girl! Don’t lie to yourself!”

“No, I’m not telling lies—”

“Don’t turn away from yourself!”

Smack!

“Um—”

“Let your true feelings out!”

Smack!

“Wait—”

“Don’t back away!”

“I want to take the test!”

“Great! That’s it!”

Then, as if nothing had happened, Lilitia helped pull the reeling test taker to her feet and sat her down in her chair.

Why?

“Miss Elaina, please allow this girl to take the test as well.”

...Why?

That student didn’t have the slightest inclination to take the test in the first place, did she? That’s what I thought, but as for the student herself— “Thanks to you, my eyes have been opened...”

She had fighting spirit in her eyes.

I think she might have hit her head.

“Huh...well, okay then.”

I handed a question sheet to her as well. Thankfully, there had been no casualties (except for Ursula), so the start time might have been delayed, but if we began right away, we could probably still be done by around midday.

“Don’t tell lies to yourself...yeah... Those words resonated more than any kind of scolding...”

Ursula, who had been pinned underneath the test taker during that whole exchange, staggered to her feet. She was wounded almost everywhere. But outside the window was sunlight and the haze of warm air.

She must be feeling good.

“Lady Ursula...”

As usual, Lilitia stared at Ursula like a lovestruck maiden.

“Lilitia...I...have something I need to say to you...”

Ursula gently touched her shoulder and gazed back at her passionately.

The two of them really looked like they were in love. However—

“We’re going to start the exam now, so could I get you to do that outside?”

Using magic, I casually levitated the two of them, then promptly tossed them both out the window. I was content to keep any heat strictly outside.

“Right. Okay then, begin the test.”

Then, I was the only one left up on the platform.

In the exam hall, which had once again fallen silent, the test takers turned over their papers in unison, and began running their pens over the answer sheets. All of those girls who had been complaining about what a pain the test was, how tiresome it was, and how they wanted to hurry up and finish the exam so they could go enjoy themselves now temporarily put away their frivolity and faced reality.

Up on the platform, I stood there staring into space, resting my chin in my hands, ruminating on the two hours I had ahead of me.

Outside the window, the snow melted under the hot rays of the sun, and midsummer arrived once again. Sunlight was shining down so brilliantly that I was certain once the exam was over, it would feel great to go down to the sea.

Shining just as brilliantly was the heated embrace of the two women outside.

I sighed at the spectacle and mumbled to myself.

“Guess it’s really summer...”

By the way, the troublemaking tester once again left the hall just thirty minutes after the exam had started.



As I might have expected, the advancement exams for apprentice witches held in a resort town known as the Land of Eternal Summer were over extremely quickly. Starting with the troublemaking tester who left the room after about thirty minutes, the students exited the room in droves, walking out one after another with straight faces, like, “*Oh, the test? Ah, it was so easy.*”

I collected the finished tests, but, well, the results were awful. It seemed like most of the testers had been more preoccupied with what was out the window than with their exams.

“Heh-heh-heh... Hey, did you hear? It sounds like the testers couldn’t help but

be curious about what was going on with me and Lady Ursula.”

No, that wasn't it.

“Oh no... I suppose my romance with Lilitia got a little too heated.”

“Oh, stop it, Lady Ursula!”

Smaaack!

“Ah...! So good...!”

“Stop it”? That's my line...

When the exam was about half over, the two of them had come back in from outside, and by then they were completely smitten with one another.

Lilitia and Ursula just spent the whole time flirting, unconcerned with what anyone else might think. Even now that the exam was over and it was just the three of us in the room, they were all over each other, not caring that I was shooting them chilly looks.

“Okay, say ‘aah.’”

Lilitia was feeding Ursula one of her homemade cookies.

“Aah!”

Ursula (a woman in her twenties) opened her mouth like a baby bird. It goes without saying that this extremely saccharine scene immediately turned my stomach.

If we hadn't been inside, I might have spit.

“The two of you seem to be getting along quite well...”

“Eh-heh-heh...” Lilitia was blushing.

“Oh-hoh-hoh...” Ursula looked pleased with herself.

I asked, and they told me that while they'd been outside, they had both confessed their hidden feelings to each other.

Lilitia had told Ursula how she longed for her.

Ursula had told Lilitia of her special fetish, and also that she had a crush on her. That, and that her real name was Helen. And it was her intention to pair up

for life with the person to whom she revealed her true name.

“Well...! Then, Lady Ursula and I are in love, aren’t we...?!”

“Oh-hoh-hoh...we are. And my real name is Helen, so...”

“Lady Ursula...I love you.”

“No, listen, it’s Helen.”

“Lady Ursula...”

“Um, but I want you to call me by my real name...”

“La-dy Ur-su-la.”

“No, um...my real name...”

“Eh-heh-heh...but aren’t you happier being treated this way?”

“...!”

I was surprised to see Lilitia acting so impishly. Ursula seemed to show her feelings by biting her lip.

I had to sit through it all, and I had no idea how I was supposed to react, but for the time being, I just responded with, “Seems like she’s already been won over, huh?”

Ursula was wearing a slightly gratified expression on her face.

What a masochist...

Eventually, after a lot of flirting, the conversation began to turn back to lighter matters, like, “What should we do now? Go get something to eat?”

“Hey, Elaina, if you like, why don’t you come with us?” Lilitia asked, in the same cheery mood as always.

No, no.

“I could never put myself between the two of you.”

It was a polite way for me to decline.

“Oh, come on!”

Whack!

A hand like a steel vise clamped onto my shoulder.



“Ow...”

You’ll break my bones...

“Miss Witch?”

Ursula beckoned me over with a quick wave of her hand.

When I approached her, Ursula whispered to me so that Lilitia couldn’t hear.

“Your reward. This is for you.”

She stuffed a wad of money into my pocket.

It had quite a bit of heft to it.

Well, then...!

“Ursula?”

“Yeees?”

“I certainly do understand your feelings.”

“Right... That is a gift of love from me to you, Miss Witch...”

“.....”

Wordlessly, I dropped the packet of money on the ground.

“Aah...and seeing you treat it with disdain is so good...!”

Lilitia, who had been off to the side watching our exchange, pressed in close to Ursula. “What’s all this, Lady Ursula?” she demanded. “You’ll take anyone, as long as it’s a girl? Huh?”

Her hands rested on both of Ursula’s shoulders. It was her way of saying, *“I could crush both of your shoulders in my hands at any moment, you know?”*

How terrifying.

“N-no...this is, um—”

“Hm? It’s what?”

“Um—”

“Care to explain?”

“Well, um...M-Miss Witch! Miss Witch, help m—”

“Elaina, we’ll see you later, okay?”

Just like that, Lilitia dragged Ursula off with her somewhere.

Ah, Ursula’s really in for it now, I thought, but the sun was still shining brightly.

“Well, just because someone stops lying to herself, that doesn’t necessarily mean that everything is going to turn out well...”

I suppose a little bit of suffering is just her getting her just desserts.

However, I was sure that the summer weather was there to stay for a long, long time.



Well then.

Meanwhile—

Though there had been many twists and turns, ultimately Ursula got her groove back, and high summer returned to the land.

You don’t need me to tell you the townspeople were delighted.

“We knew you could do it, Lady Witch!”

“Thank you so much! Our resort is back!”

“Resort life really is the best!”

“It’s summer again! Yahoo!”

The townspeople, dancing with joy, treated me with lavish hospitality.

We all have to be up-front about our desires, don’t we? So surely it wouldn’t be healthy for me to suppress my desire to get lots and lots of money.

So when it comes right down to it—

To borrow Lilitia’s words—

“Heh-heh-heh. Truly, we mustn’t lie to ourselves...”

In a land at the height of summer, there was a witch wearing a vulgar smile on

her face.

Well now, who on earth could this be?

That's right, it's me.

...Yep.

As I was counting my money with great satisfaction, I could clearly overhear the voices of the townspeople.

“—Hey, that reminds me, I heard there were some young folks playing at the beach earlier.”

“Oh? What happened?”

Right next to me, two men happened to be talking.

“Sounds like Lady Ursula got herself a girlfriend.”

“Oh, that is good news.”

“Plus, I just heard this from Ursula herself, mind you, apparently the weather has been bad lately because Lady Ursula was lovesick.”

“Ha-ha...huh? So, who is that girlfriend of hers? That witch over there?”

“No, it sounds like it's a different witch.”

“Well, what did that witch have to do with it?”

“I don't think she did much of anything, did she?”

“...Just a minute. So, what then? We paid out a reward to a witch who didn't really do anything?”

“Seems that way.”

“...Do you think maybe we were swindled?”

“Seems that way.”

My goodness!

The clouds are starting to look a little menacing—even though it's sunny outside.

Seems like it's the right time to leave this place.

So I gathered up the money I had collected, and— “Could we have a moment of your time, Lady Witch? We’d like to talk to you about the reward we paid you.”

One of the townspeople grabbed me by the shoulder.

When I turned around, I was faced with a group of residents glaring right at me.

My, my.

“What seems to be the matter...?” I asked with feigned ignorance. But I’m sure it goes without saying that the money I had swindled from the residents was confiscated from me right then and there.

Well, I suppose in the end—

Just because someone stops lying to herself, that doesn’t necessarily mean that everything is going to turn out well...



CHAPTER 3

Euthanasia

A cool breeze rustled through the light green grass that spread across the plain. A small cloud drifted aimlessly past on its journey across the early summer sky, which was otherwise blue and clear as far as the eye could see.

A lone traveler looked up at the cloud from below.

Wearing a black pointed hat and clad in a black robe, she was seated on a broom, hovering in the air with the tips of her shoes brushing the grass.

She held her ash-gray hair down as it fluttered in the breeze, and with lapis-colored eyes, gazed at the unchanging expanse of blue and pale green. Upon her breast was a star-shaped brooch.

She was a traveler, and a witch.

“...Maybe it’s time for a little break,” she mumbled quietly.

Standing in her line of sight was a single tree.

The witch had been flying over the grasslands for some time.

It seemed like the perfect time to take a short break.

So she steered her broom over to the tree, but—

“Young lady! Young lady!”

When she arrived at the tree, the witch realized that someone had gotten there before her.

There was a man leaning against the tree trunk. He had long, straight, bluish hair, and one of his eyes was shut tight. Perhaps he had gotten something in it? The man looked at the witch. The witch tilted her head quizzically, and the man smiled.

“Do you know what this gesture means?”

Then the man raised his thumb and held it high.

Now then, just what could the man have been trying to say?

Strangely enough, his motion bore a striking resemblance to the common gesture that is generally used around the world to signify that something is good.

So after a moment of hesitation, the witch realized what he meant.

“...You must be saying that you think I look cool,” she guessed. “Oh, how embarrassing,” she added.

Who on earth could she be, this witch who blurted out nonsense with a straight face?

That’s right, it’s me.

“...No, that’s not...what it means...”

The man seemed very annoyed by my joking interpretation. I could just tell that he was thinking, *“What is this lady talking about?”*

But honestly, he was the one who’d suddenly showed me his thumb and asked, *“What is this?”* The only response that came to mind was, *“First of all, who are you?”* I thought he ought to at least give me his name.

“By the way, my name is Yoze. As you can see, I am a traveler.”

“As I can see...?”

I cocked my head.

He appeared to be in his mid-twenties. He wasn’t dressed for traveling, wearing only black slacks on the bottom and a shirt and vest on top. He wasn’t really carrying anything that looked like luggage; there was only a single small pouch hanging from his waist.

That doesn’t look like a typical traveler’s outfit, though...

“And are you a traveler, as you appear to be?”

I feel like I also don’t look like a typical traveler, but...

“Yes. Yeah, that’s right.” I nodded as I pointed to my brooch. “A traveling witch, to be precise.”

“By the way, I don’t suppose you have any interest in death?”

“That’s awfully sudden.”

“Indeed! Death can come to anyone suddenly.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“As the first step to discovering that truth, Lady Witch—and I must say, it seems to be going quite well so far—what is your name?”

“It’s Elaina.”

“You seem to have a good sense for things, Lady Elaina.”

“What kind of sense...?”

“The sense to confront death...I suppose.”

“Uhh...?”

Really, what is this guy going on about all of a sudden?

I was perplexed, but the man just grinned boldly. “Lady Elaina, I am traveling to my death, you see.”

“Huh?”

Are you in some sort of trouble?

“Death is a distant land that all people ultimately manage to reach. However, it is an unexplored region, one from which nobody has ever returned. I have been yearning to see this afterworld for some time now.”

“Huh...”

“I wonder if you’re aware of this, Lady Elaina? The world after death is supposedly filled with incredible splendor.”

“Is there a legend about it or something?”

“It has been believed to be so in my country since antiquity.”

“Even though not a single person has ever returned from there?”

“No one has ever returned because it is a magnificent world, such that this world could never compare.”

“.....”

I guess that's just the sort of thing they believe, wherever this guy came from. His hometown or whatever.

"I'm just another totally ordinary citizen who has an interest in the world after death, and who has traveled like this from afar, seeking a place to die. Incidentally, do you know anything about the country up ahead?"

"The country up ahead?"

I gazed out over the grassland from the shade of the tree.

I couldn't see any hint of civilization.

It seemed to still be quite a distance away. However—

"Eldora, the Land of Repose, I believe it's called."

I was aware of a place that went by such a name. It was famous.

"Right. Eldora, the Land of Repose. It's said to be the only land in this region where euthanasia is allowed."

Among travelers and merchants, word had circulated that not only did this country permit euthanasia, the government actually recommended it. But at the same time, the country— "But if I remember correctly, I heard that even though they allow euthanasia, as of late, they haven't actually gone through with any procedures..."

I'm the type of person who is very attached to my life, so it was unbelievable to suddenly encounter someone like this. However, I had heard that there were a certain number of people in this world who visited this Eldora, the Land of Repose, coming from afar to request euthanasia.

Merchants and travelers had even told me of encounters with people who had actually gone there for euthanasia. But those stories were already decades old.

"—I've heard that recently, many people find themselves turned away at the gates, even if they come from afar seeking euthanasia."

Though I really have no idea what sort of reasons are causing them to be denied.

“So I’ve heard. I am aware.”

“You are aware?”

“But I think I am passionate enough about this to navigate the difficult path ahead, Lady Elaina.”

“Huh.”

What are you talking about?

“Even if no one has been permitted to actually undergo euthanasia in the last several years, that’s no reason to give up. Do you understand?”

“No, not at all.” I shook my head.

He was still leaning back against the trunk of the tree, wearing a cool expression.

“So, that’s my situation. I am on the road headed for Eldora, the Land of Repose—and as you can see, I have exhausted myself walking.”

When he was finished speaking, Yozeah leaned against the tree trunk, crossed his arms, and gained a self-satisfied expression.

“Sorry, but you don’t look exhausted at all.”

“So, I want you to let me ride on your broom!”

“No way.”

“Please!”

Then he stuck his thumb up again and waved it toward me.

I’d thought it meant “Great!” but he made a point of explaining, “By the way, this is a sign that means ‘give me a ride.’”

Jingle-jangle.

While that was happening, some coins fell into my hand.

“By the way,” Yozeah remarked, “it’s quite meaningless for me to keep any money when I have plans to die.”

So that’s how it is, I see.

“Climb aboard.”



And that’s how we wound up making our way to Eldora, the Land of Repose. It only took about three hours of shaky flying over grassy fields.

“Welcome to our country!”

A guard saluted us and greeted us with a line that you might have heard anywhere. We were asked several questions as part of a simple immigration check. He asked us our names, our places of origin, and our occupations.

And he asked about our purpose for coming.

“Did you come on this visit for the purpose of euthanasia?” the guard asked.

Perhaps because euthanasia was publicly acceptable here, there were still lots of people who visited this country for that reason.

“Indeed.”

Yozeh took the opportunity to flash a camera-ready smile.

“I see.”

Then the guard asked with a slight nod, “Is the young lady beside you your companion?”

I am not his companion.

“No—” I shook my head, but right after he asked the question, the guard said, without hesitation, “By the way, in order to carry out your euthanasia, we will need the consent of a companion.”

“Oh, do you? Mm-hmm.” Yozeh nodded. “Well then, she is my companion.” He, too, spoke without hesitation, and said this thing that I didn’t really understand.

“Eh?”

What is he talking about?

“Lady Elaina, please. Play the part for me.”

“I’m not sure how.”

Seriously, what is he saying?

“Please.”

Jingling coins fell into my hand.

My, my.

“I am his companion.”

“Very well. Please go ahead—”

The guard urged us onward.

So that’s basically how Yozeah and I managed to enter the land where euthanasia is permitted.

After we had walked down the cobblestone main avenue for a little while, we came upon the government offices.

I, having accepted money to play the role of this man’s companion, was going to have to accompany him for a while so he could be euthanized.

“They haven’t been performing euthanasia for a while, right? That means you might be a living witness to history!”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

I didn’t really want to watch someone pass away. And actually, I still couldn’t understand why this guy was so eager to die.

Although now that I had accepted his money, I supposed I was going to accompany him to the very end—literally.

“Welcome. This is the euthanasia department.”

When we finally made it into the government building, there was a window open for the euthanasia department, lined up alongside other windows for departments like municipal services, taxation, and child-rearing assistance, like it was completely normal. However, compared to the other departments, the euthanasia department alone had a line of visitors winding and twisting like a snake leading to the window.

The person at the tail end of the line had to hold up a bizarre sign with the words **THOSE WHO WANT TO DIE, LINE UP HERE!** written in bold, cutesy letters.

Yozeh took it from the person ahead of him, as if this, too, was totally normal.

Once we were lined up, we started to realize just how long the line really was. I had to strain to see the window, far up ahead of us.

I sighed. “Are there really this many people who want to die?”

Just goes to show you the darkness of modern society, huh?

Just at that moment, a man in the prime of his life who was entering the line behind us took the end-of-the-line sign from Yozeh. As he did, he looked us over with a snort. His expression was obviously the know-it-all look of a veteran appraising some novices. His eyes were filled with the dreamy nostalgia of someone viewing a younger version of themselves.

When he spoke to us, the man’s quiet, elegant voice was brimming with dandyism.

“You two, by any chance is this your first time experiencing euthanasia?”

Wait, wait...

“It kind of has to be.”

I mean, it’s not like you can die over and over again, is it?

“I see. By the way, I am a ten-year veteran of this path.”

“Oh, so you’re immortal?”

Wow, amazing.

“No, I’m not. That’s not what I meant.”

According to the man in line behind us, he had been coming to this office regularly for the past ten years. He was a seasoned veteran of standing in this line.

“It will take more than an ordinary level of effort to make it through the paperwork inspection—better prepare yourselves.”

That was all. Kind words from one who had gone before.

“You hear that, Yozeh?”

“Certainly. I have long since prepared myself.”

He threw his chest out and nodded courageously.

He looked just like a knight riding toward his death.

After an hour of waiting in line with people who wanted to die, we finally arrived at the window.

At the reception window was a young lady wearing a bright smile.

“Welcome! How do you do? Are you here for euthanasia?”

“Indeed.” YozeH nodded. “I am.”

“Very well.” As she prepared the paperwork with practiced motions, the receptionist looked up at YozeH. “Do you know about our process, sir?”

“No, not the details—”

“Very well. Then allow me to explain.”

The receptionist cleared her throat once and laid the paperwork out on the counter.

“First, I’ll tell you a little bit about the euthanasia that is carried out in our country. So, the history of euthanasia is a long one, going back about a hundred years to when our people were beset by a historic famine, and at the time, medical technology was less developed than it is now, and there were a great many people suffering and passing away from disease, so some discovered a method that would allow people to end their lives without suffering, and it came to be used with solemn reverence. Ever since then, the practice took root as one tenet of our country’s culture, so much so that a number of people started coming from various other countries, seeking euthanasia—”

She went on and on.

“—Now, when it comes to receiving euthanasia, there are several important things to note, first of which is that in the event that you are a foreign national, it will be necessary for you to first become a citizen of our country, which is a precaution that we take in order to defend against anyone here from being prosecuted as a murderer for allowing a citizen of another country to undergo euthanasia, and since our process is strictly only applied to citizens of our own country, if you do not agree to this step, we cannot carry out the procedure,

plus there are a number of protocols to go through in order to access—”

Apparently, everyone in this line had to endure this lengthy yet crucial explanation from the young receptionist, and I could see why the long line stretched endlessly, on and on.

However, even though the receptionist was explaining everything in great detail, the individual seeking euthanasia was absolutely not paying attention to anything she was saying.

Beside me, Yozeḥ interjected from time to time with “...Hmm,” or, “...I see...” or some other vague, irrelevant response.

They were obviously just halfhearted replies.

It was almost like I could see right through him, and watch him thinking to himself, *“Well, I’m going to die anyway, so none of this really matters...”*

But even so, the receptionist lady continued talking.

“After you’ve transferred your citizenship to our country—”

“Mm-hmm.”

You don’t really understand, you’re just paying lip service, aren’t you?

“Then, after we get you to sign your euthanasia consent form—”

“I see!”

You’re just agreeing to anything, aren’t you?

“—Please, only sign if you consent to everything I’ve outlined.”

“Very well!”

You’re going to sign it without really understanding it, aren’t you...?

Then the receptionist said—

“Well then, as we just discussed, please fill out this application form. And when you submit it, we ask that you submit a signature from a third party, as well as your family’s consent forms along with it.”

As she spoke, she handed Yozeḥ a large stack of puzzling paperwork.

“...Hm?” Yozeḥ cocked his head.

What's this? he seemed to be asking.

"I explained as much in the beginning, didn't I?"

Even though she was wearing a cheerful smile, I could tell that the receptionist wanted to berate him.

With that, we were finished at the reception window, and began filling out the paperwork.

It was only then that I realized that apparently many people faced setbacks when submitting this initial paperwork. They either couldn't get consent from their families, couldn't get a signature on the euthanasia consent form from a third party they had only just met, or— "Hey, newcomer. Looks like you made it past the first checkpoint. But be careful. These forms will be rejected if you provide the wrong motive."

The extremely dandyish, mysterious veteran sitting beside us took it upon himself to offer advice. "This country is very strict about allowing euthanasia only when there's a good reason. Say you're in over your head with debt or something; well, if you give something like that as your reason, they'll reject you."

That made a certain amount of sense.

Fortunately, Yoze had come to this country for an almost excessively positive reason, so that probably wouldn't be a problem. And when it came to consent from a third party, well, I was there, so we didn't need to worry about that.

If there was going to be one stumbling block, it would be his family's consent.

However, according to Yoze, he did not have a single living relative, so it seemed like we wouldn't even need that consent form.

"Whew... Finished."

After he finished filling out his application forms without issue, Yoze thrust them back at the receptionist, turned on his heel, and came back.

"So now I get my euthanasia, huh...?"

Yoze was strangely emotional.

By the way, I'm curious—

“Considering you just turned in your paperwork with no issues, when will your euthanasia be?” I asked Yoze.

Typical of me, as long as I was with Yoze, I was making light of the whole situation. I hadn't listened to anything the receptionist had said. I figured it didn't matter since I wasn't the one getting euthanized anyway.

The person that answered my naive question was the dandy veteran who had been calmly sitting with Yoze for the last few minutes.

“Hm? What, weren't you listening?” the veteran said smoothly. “Now they'll hold an examination, an interview, and a review, in that order, and if you pass all of them, you can get euthanized. I'd say you'll get your decision after five days, at the earliest.”

“...Huh?”

Yoze was perplexed.

He turned around toward the reception window with a look that said, *“I didn't hear a thing about all that!”*

“.....?”

The receptionist tilted her head and gave him a smile that said, *“I explained it all at the beginning, didn't I?”*



Apparently Eldora, the Land of Repose, did not simply allow euthanasia for anyone who threw up their hands and proclaimed that they wanted to die. In order for someone's euthanasia request to be accepted, they had to follow the procedures precisely.

The government needed to make absolutely sure they were getting it right, because people were quite literally placing their lives in their hands.

And so—

First of all, a psychiatric evaluation was carried out.

“First up, we have the psychiatric evaluation, now the purpose of this evaluation is to ascertain whether your desire to die comes from a sound state

of mind, so first we will have you take a look at a number of pictures and respond with what they seem to be depicting, and after that, we will have you answer about two hundred questions, then finally once we conduct the interview, you'll be all finished."

"I see."

"So, do you really want to die?"

"I do!"

Yozeh made his case with such enthusiasm that it was hard to believe that he wanted to die.

The following day, a physical examination was conducted.

Apparently, the purpose of the exam was to ascertain whether or not Yozeh was burdened with any chronic illnesses.

"Take a good look at my healthy physique!"

"Ah, yes, you pass."

"Take a closer look!"

"You pass."

"Closer!"

"Next, please."

The day after that, his criminal record was examined.

"You've never done anything bad in your past, have you?"

"Of course not! I'm the very picture of an upstanding man, I am!"

"Glad to hear it. Do you have anything that can prove your non-criminality?"

"Do you know the phrase 'a sound mind in a sound body'?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's that."

"I see. By the way, why are you naked?"

"I thought I would first have you take a look at my sound body in order to

prove that I am of sound mind.”

“This guy’s bad news.”

Even though Yozeḥ had no criminal record, there were some suspicions that he might actually be a pretty bad guy. However, he did eventually manage to pass the psychological evaluation, the physical examination, and the criminal record check, too.

I was starting to wonder whether this country was really all right.

But anyway, he passed.

The day after that, we went back to the government office again, and Yozeḥ intently filled out more paperwork.

“Congratulations on making it through your psychological evaluation, physical examination, and criminal record check, but that doesn’t mean that you’ve finished everything just yet, and now I’ll have to ask you to read over and sign various forms, including a contract, an application, a consent form, and a pledge, spanning several dozen pages, so I appreciate your cooperation.”

“Hm, yes, I see!” Yozeḥ nodded, though he didn’t really understand.

“Tough break.” I hadn’t been listening to a single thing she’d said.

“You have an obligation to listen to my explanation before I can allow you to sign the next set of forms. This is so that after you’re dead, you can’t make a claim that things went differently from what you were told.”

“I see!”

“Wait, what do you mean, ‘make a claim after he’s dead’?”

Will he be a ghost?

“Now, first please take a look at this consent form—”

I was starting to get a little suspicious, but then the receptionist launched into a long explanation and started drawing up the paperwork.

“If you grant us your consent, please sign here.”

“Certainly!” Yozeḥ quickly and casually wrote his name on the paper.

“Now, as for the next form—”

“Sure!”

For a while after that, I waited through procedures so bothersome that the word bothersome wasn't sufficient to describe them. Yozeḥ received an explanation, and signed his name, received an explanation, and signed his name, then he received another explanation, and signed his name. Anyway, there were no objections to Yozeḥ choosing this means of euthanasia at the present stage, and he solemnly signed affidavits that no one else bore responsibility for his decision. While all that was going on, I passed the time by reading a book.

“Next is this one—”

“Sure...!”

He smoothly scrawled his name.

“And the next one is—”

“S-sure...!”

“And then you'll have to allow me to explain something about this next form. First—”

“...Sure.”

“And next—”

“.....”

By the time I had finished reading several different books, Yozeḥ had fallen silent.

My goodness, what on earth is going on? I wondered as I looked up at him.

“Once you grant your consent, if you could please sign this form—”

“.....”

I saw Yozeḥ sitting there signing forms with an expression that made it look like he was already dead.

I cocked my head.

Oh my, for someone who wanted euthanasia, that's an awfully miserable expression, isn't it?

"I feared it would come to this..."

The dandy veteran, who had taken up a position beside me without my noticing, mumbled this comment. It seemed like he really wanted to strike up a conversation.

"....." I reluctantly raised my head from my book. "Do you know something?"

"The psychological evaluation, physical examination, and criminal record check. It would seem like one's euthanasia is settled once one passes these three tests. But you know, young lady, for the newcomer seeking euthanasia, that is merely where hell begins."

"Huh..."

"As you can see, there are a deadly number of protocols to follow."

"Certainly, and as you can see, he looks half dead already."

Yoze's initial enthusiasm had vanished. He was just listening to the receptionist talk with a blank, expressionless face. However, the proceedings to obscure moral responsibility continued endlessly.

"If you could sign here—"

"....."

Yoze, who was drooping like a wilted flower, had become an empty shell of himself, just nodding and signing his name.

It was ironic that he had to overcome such agony in his quest for euthanasia.

Looking at him in that state, the dandy sighed. "*Hah*, but to think I've been overtaken by a newcomer who arrived just the other day..." He was exuding dandyism.

Apparently, Mister Veteran Dandy had been rejected after the very first paperwork review. Whatever could have disqualified him?

"Actually, my sweetheart broke up with me the other day."

It was rather obvious what disqualified him.

And then, while I was keeping Mister Dandy company to kill time— “—And with that, all the paperwork is finished. Congratulations, sir.”

I heard the flat voice of the receptionist.

“The paperwork is...over...?” the wilted YozeH asked in a trembling voice. “Which means...?”

“You’re all set for euthanasia.”

“Yahooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

The wilted YozeH seemed to be revived. He was just like a flower that had found some water.

“We’ll notify you of the specific date. Please be patient,” the receptionist said before leaving her seat.

But YozeH didn’t seem like he was able to hear her anymore.

With both arms raised in joy, he was released from all his suffering.

“I owe it all to you, Lady Elaina! Let’s meet again in the afterlife!”

He even had a mood about him, as if he was going to go and die right then and there.

“I plan on staying on this side for a long time yet, so by the time we meet in the afterlife, you’ll be an old man.”

“Hey, newcomer. Congrats. I never expected you to clinch your euthanasia on the first try... Not bad at all!” Mister Dandy clapped a hand on YozeH’s shoulder.

“Thank you so much!” Immediately after that, YozeH looked at me. “By the way, who is this guy?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

He just started hanging around with us at some point.

Nevertheless, the question of who Mister Dandy was surely had nothing to do with YozeH at that point.

“Well, I’ll be dying soon, so whatever!”

I mean, that is the situation.

It wasn't long before the receptionist came back. She returned just as Yozeah was at the peak of his celebration.

She offered the ecstatic Yozeah a round of applause. "Congratulations. Your euthanasia date has been set," she told him.

Hearing the receptionist say the words seemed to make it real for the first time.

Then, holding a slip of paper in both hands, the receptionist spoke again.

"Your euthanasia date is the 00th of the month of 00, fifty-six years from now. We wish you a happy, healthy life leading up to your euthanasia date—"

And so on.

As soon as she said that, Yozeah froze on the spot.

"...Hm?"

Fifty-six years from now?

"Um...? What did you just...?"

But Yozeah deflated. Had he misheard?

"I must have misheard you, right?" he asked.

But the receptionist informed him ruthlessly, "It's in fifty-six years."

That would explain the rumor that this land's government hadn't carried out any euthanasia procedures recently.

Since they had far too many reservations from people seeking euthanasia, even those who managed to make appointments were now being scheduled for several decades into the future.

People who made these appointments were living to the end of their natural lives before their turns ever came.

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!" Yozeah screamed. "I never heard anything about that!" he shouted, stricken with despair.

But the receptionist spoke to him as calmly as she possibly could.

She said—

“I explained it all at the very beginning, didn’t I?”

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CHAPTER 4

The Curse of the Sword, and Two People's Story

Liella.

She was a young lady with something very mysterious about her. She appeared to be in her twenties.

Her beautiful pink hair was tied up in a ponytail behind her head, and fluttered in the wind. Her eyes were blue and clear like the midwinter sky.

She was wearing a red robe. She was a mage.

But strangely, she always wore an Eastern-style sword at her hip. It made me wonder if she came from the East. However, she wasn't anything like any of the people that I knew from the East.

When I asked her, she looked a little embarrassed as she answered.

"I've never been to the East before," she said, and scratched her head bashfully before she continued. "But isn't assuming I'm from the East because I'm carrying a particular style of sword a pretty simplistic way of thinking?"

Very fair point.

"But I also feel like it's unusual to see a mage walking around with a sword."

Being a mage, she could sort out most problems by waving her wand. It didn't seem like she needed to go to the trouble of carrying a sword around with her since she should have been able to solve any problems with magic.

So then, why was she carrying around a sword?

I asked her.

When I did, she smiled cheerfully and answered me.

"You'd better ask the sword."

That was what she said.

Even the words that this mysterious girl spoke were filled with mystery.

Ah, I've got no money.

The moment I passed through the gates of a certain city, I was suddenly struck by a hunch. It was like a gut feeling that hit me all of a sudden, yet at the same time, as that single phrase flashed into my mind, it was clear as day.

I immediately checked my wallet, and it became clear that my hunch had been entirely correct.

My wallet gaped open, revealing just a few copper coins. It flopped limply, as if making a feeble complaint that it had no more left to give. My frank opinion was that if it was going to spit up complaints, I would rather it spit out some cash, but anyway, there was no helping it. Then I wrung it out just in case, but all that fell out was some dust and trash.

Anyway, my mind immediately began calculating with terrifying speed the events that might occur due to this new development.

I've got no money.

If I don't earn some, I can't go on living.

I'll die.

Crap.

In short, there was only one conclusion to be drawn.

"I'm in trouble here..."

I'm sure that when those words came out of my mouth, it was obvious that I didn't have an ounce of composure left. As a matter of fact, I hadn't eaten anything since that morning, and because of that, I was thrown into a little bit of a panic when I suddenly remembered that I had no money.

I've got to hurry up and make some money right away—

"Welcome! We've got fresh-baked bread, it's delicious!"

I've got to hurry up and munch, munch, munch.

"You've got a good appetite, miss. Is it tasty?"

"I'm in trouble..."

I'm sure you can infer from my poor decision and my poor description that I had, without a doubt, lost my composure.

Nevertheless, once I had fortified myself with a meal, my mind recovered a little bit.

"First of all, I've got to do something to earn some money..."

Even though I was out of ideas, I was sure I could come up with something if I put my mind to it.

But I thought I just made some money recently... It's so strange... Maybe I got carried away and went on a spending spree?

My wallet was flat and shriveled, like it had given up on life.

Ah, and even though I just ate some bread, it won't be long before my stomach is all shriveled, too... Oh-hoh-hoh...

"Miss? Do you not have any money?"

Maybe it was because I was wearing an expression of utter despair as I stuffed my cheeks with bread. The proprietor of the stall just seemed worried about me.

"Well... That is how I find myself..." I answered in a deflated voice.

The proprietor looked shocked like she was wondering why I had bought the bread at all, but then she said— "In that case, I know a good place to make some. You're in luck." She provided me with some welcome information.

In this city, there was one convenient way for foreigners like myself to make money, she told me.

"If you go straight down the main avenue, there's a plaza. Try going there."

"What's there?"

"The Cooperation Circle."

She told me that it wasn't just an expression, that there was really an arrangement by that name in this city.

According to the bread merchant, a large bulletin board had been installed in the plaza, and if you posted your troubles there, someone from somewhere

would come consult with you about them.

If you were seeking help, someone would respond to you, and if someone else was seeking help, you could respond to them. The country's bulletin board, which worked as a mutual aid station, was commonly called the Cooperation Circle.

According to the woman running the bread stall, you could earn rewards for responding to requests posted there.

"Although normally people don't worry about rewards, and take on the requests out of the spirit of charity, you know. But I have heard of people who are having money trouble helping other people out to earn some cash," she informed me.

Oh-hoh, I see, I see.

That's a good bit of intel.

"Actually, I'm not having money trouble at all. But I'm feeling extra charitable, so I think I'll go take a peek at that bulletin board."

"Oh? Sure, whatever you say."

"Thank you for the information."

I was getting the sense that the bread merchant doubted me. She was probably wondering if maybe I had a split personality or something. But even I am sometimes moved to action by the weight of the spirit of charity, I'll have you know.

After that, I made my way to the bulletin board known as the Cooperation Circle, and sure enough, there were requests from all manner of people posted there.

There was, for example, one that said, I WANT TO GET MY HANDS ON PROOF OF MY PARTNER'S INFIDELITY.

Another read, amusingly, I WANT TO GO TO A FANCY CAFÉ. SOMEONE PLEASE GO WITH ME.

There were also requests with blatantly unsavory motives, like, NOW RECRUITING SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO GO ON A DAYLONG DATE WITH ME!

It seemed like people could ask for help with anything.

It also seemed like I was free to choose which request to answer.

“Huh... This request seems like it might yield a lot of money...”

“What? I can get paid just for going to a fancy café? What could be better...?”

“What? I can’t get paid without going on a date with some guy...? What could be worse...?”

And so on. Here and there, other people stood in front of the bulletin board, scrutinizing it.

Since I came all this way, I guess I should also fulfill one or two of these requests, huh?

“But wow, they all have really good rewards...”

At this point, it goes without saying that the spirit of charity within me had quietly taken a back seat, but at any rate, I searched the requests for something that seemed comparatively easy and looked like it would make me a comparatively large amount of money.

For example, if there had been someone asking for help with transportation, that would have been convenient, because it would have meant that I could get paid for giving someone a lift on my broom when I moved on from this city.

“...Oh!”

Before long, one such convenient request caught my eye.

It was a request from Liella, a mage who had come to this city about two weeks earlier.

It was a strange request.

“How do you do? My name is Liella.”

Her request, which started with such a common greeting, continued as follows.

“I am currently on a journey, headed for a certain destination. On my travels so far, I have asked merchants for help, and gotten them to transport me along with their cargo. Other times I’ve had to walk, and camp out in the open air. I’ve made it this far, but no matter how I try, I won’t be able to reach the end of this

road alone. So please support me, if you can. Right now I am staying at an inn. Anyone who can help me, come to the location below—”

The request on the bulletin board had her information written beside it as well.

Liella.

Twenty years old.

From an unnamed village far away from here.

A mage.

“I am incapable of flying on a broom. In my hometown, it is not customary to fly using a broom.”

The place she was headed was apparently some ruined city—now known as the Ruins of Voght.

The reason why she was headed for that particular destination was not mentioned.

I didn't know a thing about this Ruins of Voght place, so on my way to the inn where Liella, or whatever her name was, was waiting, I casually stopped in to see the proprietor of the roadside stall where I had purchased the bread earlier, to give her my thanks and ask her about it while I was there. But— “Hm? Ah, that would be the former site of a secluded city deep in the mountains, I think. They had a war a long time ago, and ever since then, no one has lived there, I hear.”

That was her answer.

“It's not a tourist attraction?”

“It's too far off the beaten path.”

According to her, the Ruins of Voght sat at the edge of a precipitous cliff in the mountains, and it was difficult to get to if you didn't have a broom. On top of that, because they had been abandoned many years ago, the ruins had almost entirely deteriorated, to the point where there was basically nothing left but rubble, so no one ever went near them.

"If there's someone who wants to go to a place like that, they must be a pretty strange person," the proprietor of the bread stall said, wrapping up our conversation.

I nodded in understanding.

Some of the requests that Liella had posted on the bulletin board read: *"I really have to make it to the Ruins of Voght, no matter what."*

"So please, somebody help me."

"Please."

"Please."

"I'll pay you half the fee up front, and the rest after the fact."

"I can pay you the full amount up front too."

"If the reward is too small, come talk to me. I can increase the amount."

"In fact, how much will it take for you to do this for me?"

It seemed like her situation must have been very urgent.

She had put up quite a few postings.

I was holding page after page of requests in my hand, all written in her name. She must have been writing them continuously over the course of the two weeks she had been in the city.

The board might have been called the Cooperation Circle, but it was sad to think that no one had taken her hand, no matter how many times it had reached out for aid.

"Here, I think?"

I came to a halt.

The building in front of me was a run-down inn. It had such an old, shabby appearance that it seemed like it might fall right over if I were to, for example, push hard with both hands.

"...Hello?"

So, I opened the door very carefully.

Even though it was the middle of the day, there was hardly any light shining into the dark, damp interior. There was one employee at the counter, and just one woman in the lounge, who seemed like a guest.

“.....”

The young woman sitting in the lounge was staring at me like she was evaluating me. She had pretty, graceful features, and a dangerous expression. But eventually a faint smile crossed her lips.

I feel kind of like she's got me in her sights...

Feeling the uncomfortable chill of a bad hunch, I walked straight up to the counter, and, holding up the request sheet, I asked, “Excuse me. Is there a mage by the name of Liella here? It sounds like she's been staying here for the past two weeks?”

The innkeeper seemed to know her name.

“Ah, if you're looking for her—” Then the innkeeper looked slightly to the right of me, past my shoulder.

The next moment—

“Yo, girlie. What's up? Hm?”

A young woman suddenly threw her arm around my shoulders, talking to me like we were already friends.

When I turned to look, the young woman who had caught my eye before was suddenly standing beside me. Her pink hair was tied up behind her head, and she was wearing a robe. There was no questioning the fact that she was a mage.

“...I've just got a bit of business with a mage named Liella.”

“Is this about the request that was posted on the bulletin board?”

“...You know a lot about it.”

I was a little surprised.

She nodded brashly. “Of course I do. Because it's my request.”

“.....”

“I am Liella. First off, let’s shake hands!”

“...Um, I’m Elaina... Nice to meet you...?”

I was confused, but Liella grabbed my hand. As she shook it, she said, “Now you and me are friends.” Then her hand clapped down sharply on my shoulder. “I’ve got great expectations for your work.”

Without a word, I stared down at the papers in my hands.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Liella.”

“I’m looking for some help.”

“Please, help me—”

The papers, covered in earnest, desperate appeals, had apparently been written by this person.

“.....”

“Hey, hey, what’s this, bestie? Don’t look so intense! Eh-heh-heh!” Liella chuckled.

“.....”

So I’ve already graduated from “friend” to “bestie”...

She’s got no sense of personal space...

“So what should we do, bestie? Head out now for the Ruins of Voght? I’m ready to go anytime.”

“.....”

According to the information I had gotten at the bread stall, the Ruins of Voght were in a secluded area, far enough away that it would take about three full days to get there, even traveling by broom. It was a troublesome distance to travel at the drop of a hat. In my opinion, it would be a real pain.

“No, leaving right now wasn’t what I—”

“All right, tomorrow morning, then! Let’s meet in front of the main gates.”

“Uh-huh... Well, in that case...”

“Great, it’s decided! Thanks a ton, bestie.”

Then she took my hand and gave me a strong handshake as she cheered with great joy. “Yaaay!” Here was Liella, with her boundless—or should I say, dizzying—cheer.

The longer I looked at her, the more I felt she was quite unlike the girl who had written the pages that were posted on the bulletin board.

“Does she have multiple personalities...?”

I think it’s safe to say that it was perfectly natural for such words to spill from my mouth.

The following day...

I opened my eyes in my room at the inn. As the sun rose in the sky, I crawled out of bed, and after some light stretching, washed my face, and got dressed. That was about when I realized, *Ah, come to think of it, we never agreed on a meeting time, did we...?*

But immediately afterward, I realized, *Well, who cares?*

I felt really bad for thinking it, but the girl I had encountered the day before was very, very easygoing, and because she was like that, I could easily imagine her arriving at the gates with a grin, saying that she had left her inn whenever she felt like it. So I decided selfishly that I could also leave my inn whenever I felt like it, and I took my time getting ready, then left at my leisure.

“.....”

As I was heading toward the gates, a thought occurred to me.

Liella would be my companion, the person traveling with me on the road, for the next few days.

Even though there was no need for me to become her “bestie,” as she’d called me, it still probably wasn’t a bad idea to close the distance between us a little bit.

I ought to make an effort to meet her halfway.

“Oh?”

Just as the cafés and other businesses around me were beginning to open, I

made it to the area near the city gates.

Unexpectedly—which is rude of me to say—Liella had already arrived.

“.....?”

I cocked my head.

She looks completely different from yesterday.

Her clothes and appearance hadn't really changed, but she seemed like a totally different person. The day before, she had been overflowing with confidence; now she looked anxious and forlorn.

...Maybe she's been waiting a really long time?

If that's the case, I was wrong to dally.

“Sorry I'm late.”

I called out to her while I was still walking.

She made eye contact with me and let out a quiet, “Ah!” Fidgeting with her own hair, she answered me nervously, “N-no... I also just got here...”

What is with this reaction? She's like a blushing bride.

Has our relationship moved from besties to sweethearts...?

“Yaaay!”

I didn't really understand what was going on, but I thrust one hand up in the air, matching the energy the other girl had demonstrated the day before.

I was going for a high five.

“...Huh?” She stared at me blankly for a moment, gazing up at the hand that was raised in the air. Eventually, she hesitantly touched it. “Ah, y-yaaay...?”

Stiffly, she went on, “Looking forward to working with you...”

Then she bowed once, very deeply.

.....

I don't understand...this relationship...

She was close yet far away, far away yet close; a girl who maintained a vague,

indistinct sense of distance, like a shimmery haze.

After exchanging a tentative high five, she stared fixedly at me, pulled a thick memo pad out of her pocket and opened it up, then looked back and forth between my face and the memo pad.

And then—

Finally, in a reserved tone, she asked me a question.

“Um, I met you yesterday, is that right? You are the mage who accepted my request. Your name was, let’s see—Elaina, is it?”

She spoke like it was our very first time ever meeting.

It goes without saying that I was astonished.

“Do you have multiple personalities...?”

So, I asked her that.

She shook her head slowly.



“Well, yes and no.”

She gave me a vague, indistinct answer.

Then we left the city, and from where I had positioned her on the back of my broom, Liella told me about herself.

According to Liella, at the moment, she had two personalities existing in one body.

I ought to have been surprised to hear such a thing, but I accepted it without question. I figured it meant that the person who had posted to the Cooperation Circle was the same girl I had just put on the back of my broom. And that the one I had met the day before must be her other personality.

“The personalities change at midday. Generally, I’m me until about three in the afternoon. After three o’clock, I become the girl you met yesterday. The two of us split the time that we’re awake exactly, so that’s when we swap.”

“I see.”

For convenience, let’s call them Morning Liella and Evening Liella.

Morning Liella was the comparatively calm personality. She wasn’t very animated, her voice was quiet, and she didn’t seem to have much confidence.

But what an extraordinarily strange arrangement that is.

While I was taking us by broom to a nearby settlement, I asked her, “Have you been like this since birth?”

“No.” She quickly shook her head. “I became like this two years ago. Until then, there was not another version of me inside me.”

“Two years ago?”

“Yes. Ever since then, she and I have been traveling, heading for the Ruins of Voght.”

“But it sounds like it’s way off the beaten path, in the middle of nowhere, right?”

“Seems that way—”

“What do you want there?”

I looked over my shoulder at her, and Liella frowned uneasily.

“I don’t even know all the details, but the Ruins of Voght are apparently where she was born.”

““She’?”

“The other one, who you can talk to after three o’clock.”

“.....”

Her personality had been split for the past two years, and the other one had her own hometown.

Is that what she is saying?

To put it another way, it wasn’t a case of multiple personalities so much as a complete stranger hijacking her body in the afternoons. At least, that was the sense that I was getting.

Yes and no—I was starting to see part of the reason she had told me that when we were standing in front of the city gates.

“Elaina, do you know anything about cursed weapons?” Liella asked me.

Cursed weapons?

I can’t say that I’ve never heard anything about them.

As I nodded, I answered, “They’re a type of weapon that burden the user with some major disadvantage in exchange for obtaining great power, right?”

It was only natural to expect some sort of drawback to accompany the acquisition of great power, after all. I had heard of cursed weapons that, for example, sapped the life of anyone who picked them up, and always returned, no matter how many times they were thrown away.

“That’s right.” Liella nodded.

“So, what about them?”

“Well, that’s the true identity of the sword that I wear at my side,” she said, tracing the hilt with her fingertip.

Well, then what kind of extra effect does it have?—I nearly asked, but then realized I didn't need to.

"Strictly speaking, I'm not Liella."

After we reached three o'clock in the afternoon, Evening Liella told me that.

Sitting on the back of my broom with her arms and legs crossed, her attitude seemed terribly brazen as she spoke to me.

"I became one with her two years ago, yeah, and we've been traveling ever since."

"So that means that the morning version of her is going along with you for your homecoming?"

"She's got nothing else to do."

"Oh?"

"Like, she can't exactly do whatever she wants so long as her sword is cursed, right?"

"...Is there no way to break the curse?"

"Once I make it home, I can return to normal."

"Ah..."

So, at the end of the day, whether or not she has anything else to do, Morning Liella has no choice but to accompany the cursed sword on its way home, is that it?

"So, what kind of curse do you carry?"

"Once someone touches me, I always come back, no matter how many times they throw me away, and possessing me shortens their life span, and, as you can see, they're taken over by a different personality in the afternoons."

"You're like a whole cluster of curses all in one sword."

"Stop it, I'm blushing! Eh-heh-heh." Liella chuckled.

It wasn't a compliment...

After that, Liella and I continued our conversation as we flew over the

landscape on my broom.

That was how me and my plus-one—or maybe it was plus-two—started our short journey of several days.



Strictly speaking, Liella did not have a split personality. The sword's personality just took over in the afternoons. I'm not certain that was the reason why, but I did know for sure that the person known as Liella was two different people between morning and night, without the slightest trace of the other remaining.

For example, even when it came to something as trivial as food preferences, Morning Liella and Evening Liella were so different it was almost funny.

"Bestie. There's something that I want you to make absolutely sure of when you're having dinner with me for the next few days."

We were on the road headed for the Ruins of Voght. On the first day we had devoted ourselves to flying over fields on my broom, and by the time the sun had sunk in the sky, we had arrived at a village.

For dinner, I ended up cooking for the both of us in our lodgings, but Evening Liella was crabby.

"Something you want me to make sure of?"

What's that? I tilted my head questioningly, and she answered with a single word.

"Mushrooms," she said.

"Mushrooms?" I lowered my gaze.

Dinner that night was a simple stew and plain bread. I detested mushrooms, so I hadn't put any in.

I thought it was a pretty good dinner. "Is there something wrong with this?" I tilted my head again.

In response, Evening Liella said, "I just love mushrooms, that's all."

"Huh."

“I want you to put mushrooms in the food every night from now on.”

“Huh...”

“C’mon, do it for me, bestie.”

I received that request from Evening Liella. Well then, at breakfast the next morning, how do you suppose Liella behaved?

“Hm...”

After glaring at her memo pad, looking extremely serious and maybe a little upset, the girl sitting across from me lowered her eyes to her breakfast.

Breakfast was yesterday’s leftovers. But, assuming Liella would probably be displeased again, I had gone ahead and added some grilled mushrooms only to her portion.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

Morning Liella looked at me with a sad expression.

“Why is only my portion garnished with mushrooms?”

I had been asked for mushrooms, so I had gotten up early to go mushroom hunting. But Liella was acting awfully strange.

She’s making the same face I do when I square off against mushrooms, isn’t she? Is this some sort of sick game?

Her reaction was hard to pin down.

So I asked her.

“Liella, do you dislike mushrooms?”

“I hate them.”

Well, that was a quick answer.

That was the moment I realized Morning Liella and Evening Liella had completely different food preferences.

“It seems like you and I will get along just fine.”

I took Liella’s hand and responded with a radiant smile.

“Huh...? Um, why are we holding hands...?”

“I also hate mushrooms. I hate them so much, I don’t think they’re really food.”

“Wha...? And yet you tried to make me eat them...?”

Liella looked at me with even more suspicion, like she was thinking that this must be some kind of sick game.

It wasn’t just food preferences. Morning and Evening Liella, of course, acted completely differently toward me.

“Hey, hey, bestie! Hey! Yaaay!”

Now, it was Evening Liella who said nonsense like that. And as she did, she raised both arms on the back of my broom and assumed the high-five position, leading me to wonder dubiously exactly what celebration-worthy thing might have happened. But— “Oh, nothing worth celebrating really happened, or anything. I just felt like a high five. Yaaay!”

Smack!

Evening Liella forced my hand into the air and slapped it for a high five.

Physically and mentally, she’s dizzyingly forward...

I don’t love it...

“By the way, bestie, listen, how much do you want for your reward?”

“Huh...? I mean, I’m fine with the amount that you originally posted, but...”

“Hey, hey, what’re you doing acting so selfless? You’re helping me make it home, so I figure I can splurge a little.”

“‘Splurge’...?”

“How much did you say the reward was?”

Let’s see, how much was it again?

I pulled the scrap of paper from my pocket and glanced at it to check.

“This much.”

One gold piece. A fairly extravagant amount, given that it’s a reward for three

days of assistance.

“Well, I’ll give you double that.”

“It seems like you and I will get along just fine.”

And so on.

For the most part, Evening Liella and I spent most of our time together sitting one behind the other on my broom, engaging in this sort of silly conversation.

However, in contrast, Morning Liella wouldn’t even get on the broom to begin with.

“Since we’re making a special trip, let’s get some merchants to give us a ride, Elaina.”

The Ruins of Voght might have been off the beaten track, but that didn’t mean that we never saw any settlements or traveling merchants along the road to get there. Morning Liella apparently liked to be tossed around with the merchants’ cargo. So the two of us basically traveled by wagon, and switched to walking whenever it seemed like we were straying from the road to the Ruins of Voght.

“You won’t ride the broom?” I asked her.

She nodded and answered, “I like walking better.”

Morning Liella and I maintained more physical and emotional distance. Though that had something to do with the fact that Evening Liella did strange things like yelling “yay!” and stuff at ridiculously close range.

Although that didn’t mean that Morning Liella never talked at all.

As the two of us were walking along, she reminisced about all sorts of things. She even told me extremely candidly about the start of her relationship with the cursed sword—with Evening Liella.

After prefacing it with a disclaimer that her story was not really anything special, she told me, “Two years ago, my job wasn’t going well, I had become alienated from my friends, I was on bad terms with my family, and lots of little unpleasanties like that were piling up. Around that time, I started to just get sick of everything.”

“Mm.”

“While I was going through all that, I just so happened to stop by an antique shop, and, she—this sword was sitting there.”

Liella touched her sword as she spoke.

Apparently, it had been love at first sight.

“I was immediately captivated by her beautiful appearance. From the moment I first saw her in that shop, I was seized by a sense of urgency that told me I had to buy this sword. I was probably cursed from that moment—” Liella laughed.

Then Liella had purchased the sword without any trouble.

She told me that she had been cursed to have her body taken over by the cursed sword during the afternoon hours.

“Still, it’s terribly inconvenient to only be present for half of each day, so I realized that I need to lift the curse quickly.”

Oh, quickly, you say?

“I’m surprised to hear that, considering we’re walking there.”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously at Liella, who chuckled elegantly.

“I like walking.”

But once it got into the afternoon, she suddenly hated walking.

Evening Liella found it bothersome.

“Hey, bestie. So does this mean that she’s been making you walk in the mornings?” As might be expected for someone with co-ownership over a single body, if there was anything strange going on with Liella’s body, Evening Liella noticed right away.

Hey, hey, bestie?

What’s going on here, bestie?

I’m sooo tired, bestie.

My legs are stiff already, like sticks, bestie.

Evening Liella nagged and protested constantly.

I wasn't sure what she wanted me to do about it.

"...I told her not to overdo it, you know?"

"What? So you're saying the morning girl forced you guys to walk? Really?"

Evening Liella narrowed her eyes.

Then she pulled a memo pad out of her pocket, and opened it.

A moment later she nodded, as if in understanding.

"Oh, she really did. It's written right here—" said Evening Liella.

According to her, the small memo pad that she looked at from time to time while we were conversing was an exchange diary between the two people who shared one body.

She told me that neither of them had any way of knowing what the other was doing once they gave up control over their shared body. After all, the only thing they traded was control of the body, and they couldn't share memories.

The two women, so close yet so far from one another, had never directly exchanged words or met eye to eye because of this.

So, for each other's sake, they both left behind written memos, she told me.

"By the way, what did Morning Liella write down?"

"‘We walked a lot from morning until afternoon,’ she said."

"I don't suppose she wrote anything else...?"

"You know, it's a little early, but I think I might go ahead and write her a reply."

"What are you planning to write?"

"I'm tired today, so I'm going to sleep early."

"Sarcasm, huh?"

"I hope she gets my point."

So then, as for how Morning Liella acted the following day—

“.....”

Sitting in her seat at breakfast, Liella read over the memo pad as she always did, looking extremely serious and a little upset. Then she started to eat her meal. She didn't really seem to understand the intention behind what her evening counterpart had written.

“Hm...”

But as if to say that such notes were no concern of hers, she closed the memo pad and ate her breakfast as normal. I could tell we were going to be riding in carts and walking on and on until three o'clock.

“I just like walking, oh-hoh-hoh.” Morning Liella chuckled.

“Is that so...? You're not under any strain or anything?”

“Not at all, why?”

“Oh really...” We had been walking continuously from dawn until afternoon.

“...But aren't you a little bit tired?”

“No, not a bit. Oh-hoh-hoh.” Liella chuckled cheerfully.

“Is that so...?”

Apparently, Morning Liella was a surprisingly strong-willed individual.

However, as soon as we made it to three o'clock, when the Liellas changed places, Evening Liella writhed around on the ground yelling, “Waaah, my leegs!” and, “My mind is so energetic, but my body is super tired!”

Her face creased up as she groaned her complaints. “Ohhh...bestie...carry me...”

I reasoned that Morning Liella had probably been enduring a lot.

So, the following morning, feeling slightly curious, I tried asking Morning Liella again, “You really are straining a little bit, aren't you?” But Morning Liella stubbornly refused to admit it.

“No, I'm not straining at all, oh-hoh-hoh.” She smiled radiantly.

“Yeah, but in actuality—”

“I’m not straining.”

“But—”

“I’m not.”

“.....”

So stubborn...

I had initially been under the impression that Morning Liella was just a timid, shy girl, but now that we had been together for a few days and she had opened up, I knew that she was unexpectedly strong-willed.

“Ah, Elaina? For breakfast tomorrow, toast will be fine.”

Also, she made a lot of demands about all sorts of stuff.

“Sure, okay.”

With a sigh, I nodded at her, and followed along with Morning Liella all morning.

When the clock struck three, Evening Liella switched in with screams that were getting more exaggerated by the day.

“Uaaaaaagh! My leeeeeegs!”

She rolled around on the ground.

“...Whoa!”

I looked down at her.

Basically, neither Liella nor I had been paying that much attention to the timing of the three o’clock change, so I had started to treat her screaming as pretty much the same thing as an alarm informing me of the time.

Time was constantly moving past us.

This day, as always, I knew that the afternoon had arrived without any need to go out of my way to check the clock.

“Gyaaah!” Evening Liella still continued to roll around indecently on the ground.

I crouched down beside her, and smiled as I always did. “It’s three in the

afternoon, huh? Want a snack?”

“Is that all you have to say to your fallen bestie?”

Then, after the two of us—me and the complaining Liella—had a light meal, she and I got on my broom and got back to our journey.



“We got majorly offtrack, huh?”

If we had actually been flying directly toward our destination, we would have arrived at the Ruins of Voght a long time ago. But the fact that Morning Liella was so extremely easygoing had impacted our plans, and it was our fifth night crossing the plains.

We were camping out.

Lying sprawled out next to me, gazing up at the roof of our tent, Liella let out a deep sigh, as if she was basking in the aftertaste of the dinner we had just finished eating.

Following her lead, I, too, gazed up at the tent’s roof, but all I could see was an ordinary piece of cloth blocking my view, nothing interesting.

Even so, Evening Liella was wearing a contented expression.

“My journey will also be over soon, I suppose.”

We’d come quite far on our travels, and we only had a little ways left to go to get to the Ruins of Voght. She must have realized that this would be the end.

Liella turned to look at me and said, “Thanks for looking after me so far, bestie.” As always, she acted like we were very close.

“It’s still early to be thanking me. The last day of our journey is tomorrow.”

“But I probably won’t have a chance to thank you tomorrow.”

“If we keep going at this pace, we’ll probably get to the Ruins of Voght in the evening. You’ll have your chance,” I told her.

“...Probably, yeah.”

In the dim light, I could sense that she was smiling faintly.

The unguarded moments before sleep are the best time for a person to confess the honest feelings that they normally keep hidden, and the way that Liella was acting somehow seemed even more tender than usual.

Maybe her thoughts had turned to her hometown.

“...Voght, what kind of place was it?”

All I knew was that it was in a distant land, far from other human settlements, and that it had been destroyed long ago. So I wondered, what had her home been like?

“It was a small city, deep in the mountains, on the edge of a precipitous cliff.” Evening Liella answered me bit by bit. “The people of Voght built their city on top of a rocky mountain that towered over its surroundings, to keep themselves safe. It was a modest place, but the city flourished deep in the mountains. The people there lived simple, humble lives.”

But it had all been destroyed.

Liella launched into a story from long ago.

Long, long ago.

“A plague spread through the city of Voght.”

Liella told me that it was a dreadful illness.

The infected would bleed from the eyes and forget who they were. They would attack anyone and everyone around them, and then their victims would contract the illness.

The illness, just like a curse, spread unchecked throughout the city.

The source of the plague apparently lay in a lovely, light green flower that had started to grow on the edges of the city’s territory. The flower looked exactly the same as another plant that had been cultivated there for many years. The sole difference was that in the darkness, the toxic flower gave off a green light.

Under a cloudy sky, being fanned by the wind, the flowers looked beautiful, giving off small round balls of light like fireflies, and the people definitely thought that they were special herbs.

The special green flowers were harvested along with other herbs, and presented to the king that very same day. The king was delighted by the green flowers, which were still giving off light even after having been picked.

The herbs were dried, and served to the king as tea.

The king drank the tea with great joy.

The following day—

The king passed away.

“It was probably some kind of sudden mutation. Before the king died in great agony, writhing on the ground with blood pouring from his eyes, not a single person suspected that the green herb was poison. Because they had cultivated a plant that looked basically the same since antiquity.”

“...And then the disease spread from the king?”

Liella nodded.

“It happened so suddenly. In the blink of an eye, our entire history disappeared in a haze of blood.”

And so the city perched high on a mountain was piled high with corpses.

Years passed, with no one the wiser about the city’s destruction. In the present day, the prevailing theory was that Voght had been destroyed by civil war.

However—

“You know a lot about how it was destroyed.”

Even though she had said that she came from Voght, the fact that Liella was able to tell me the true story in such detail made me suspect that she must have been present at the moment of the city’s destruction.

“That’s true, I do.” Evening Liella—or rather, the cursed sword—nodded in the affirmative. “It’s because I was carried out of the city after it was destroyed.”

Perched high on its craggy mountain, the city of Voght became the Ruins of Voght, and after many years had passed, treasure-seeking merchants visited the

ruins. The treasure that they retrieved from the ruins turned out to include the very same cursed sword with whom I was conversing at that very moment.

“After that, I wandered around the outside world for a long time. I can’t possibly remember just how long I spent out there. Many swordsmen picked me up, and parted with me.”

“Have you been a cursed sword the whole time, ever since you were at the Ruins of Voght?”

“Eh-heh-heh, guess so.” Evening Liella nodded proudly. “I don’t want to boast, but there was a period of time when I was a big deal in one part of the world. I had quite a reputation as a super annoying cursed weapon that, once taken up, could never be laid down.”

“Wow...”

“But you know, you spend long enough as a cursed sword, and you get bored.”

“Is that how it goes?”

“Yeah, I eventually started to feel like I wanted to go back to the countryside and spend the rest of my days relaxing.”

“You sound like a gangster who’s gotten old and fattened up.”

“Maybe so.”

She smiled slightly, which made me smile, too. After that, in the cramped tent, we had a lively conversation about nothing in particular.

The following day, Morning Liella was staring at her memo pad with a slightly puzzled look on her face.

“Oh, is there something strange written there?” I asked.

“Hm? Well, there’s always strange stuff written here, but—”

For the past few days, the notes left for her had been almost desperate. I WAS WIPED OUT TODAY, SO I’M GOING TO BED EARLY, and, TIRED AGAIN TODAY, SLEEPING EARLY! and, SERIOUSLY, I WAS SO TIRED! and, HEY, HEY, ARE YOU READING THESE?

On the final day, which was today, there was the following entry:

THANKS FOR EVERYTHING.

Just that.

That's all that was written there.

"No, thank you," Morning Liella mumbled to the memo pad.

Then, after finishing up a simple breakfast, she and I headed for the Ruins of Voght.

Just as we had for the past several days, on this final day the two of us traveled on foot.

We had talked about all sorts of things on our journey together so far.

Even as we crossed through the forest that led to the Ruins of Voght, we were still making chitchat.

"You'll be all on your own from tomorrow on, huh?"

"That's right, I will—" Liella nodded to me. "It's kind of a strange feeling. I got used to this way of living, where I'm me until three in the afternoon, and become her in the evening."

"Well, I guess if you live that way for two years, it becomes normal, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I grew accustomed to it. Starting tomorrow, I suppose I'll have to get accustomed to a different sort of daily routine—" She let out a sigh. She sounded a little regretful.

I said, "I think you'll get used to it pretty quickly."

While I was making this irresponsible declaration, I looked at where we were headed.

At the site of the former city, high up on the mountain.

We were getting very close to the Ruins of Voght.



Deep in the mountains, far from human settlements— We made it through the rugged forest, and once we climbed the craggy mountain, the Ruins of Voght were there, sure enough, standing quietly before us.

“.....”

The story that no one had visited the ruins for a long time after the city’s destruction seemed to ring true. The top of the rocky mountain was covered in green as far as the eye could see. The city of Voght must have built its houses out of stone. But the structures that had once been houses were now covered with greenery, taken over by ivy and moss over the long years, and most of them had crumbled, fallen, and decayed.

The place was in such ruin that it was no longer possible to even imagine what kind of city it had been.

There were no traces anywhere of its former prosperity.

The road into the city was lined with a lot of flowers. The pretty, light green blossoms swayed back and forth in the gentle breeze like they were shaking their heads.

The whole road was covered in flowers, filling the spaces left by the absence of humans.

I pulled out my watch.

“One minute left until three o’clock,” Liella said. She was gazing at her own watch just the same as I was. She slowly began walking through the field of flowers.

She thrust the sword into the ground, sheath and all.

Then Evening Liella appeared in the field of flowers.

“.....”

Undoubtedly, the scene was not a very good sight to her.

Beneath the cloudy sky, the light green flowers that covered the road were giving off a green glow. Their light illuminated the path. The small, round lights, like fireflies, swayed between us.

If you overlooked the fact that these abundant blossoms were the very thing that had destroyed the city, and judged the sight by appearance alone, it made for a beautiful, whimsical spectacle.

Surrounded by the pretty poison blossoms, I fixed my eyes on Liella.

The clock had struck three.

“We made it.”

When I called out to her, she turned around.

“Looks that way.”

Surrounded by beads of light, her eyes narrowed like it was a little too bright, or like she had just been forcibly awakened.

Evening Liella, who had a slightly different presence to her than usual, then said, “Thanks for looking after me until now,” and bowed slightly.

I shook my head.

“Not at all,” I answered humbly.

I’m happy as long as I get my money.

“But as far as I can tell,” I continued, “well, it doesn’t seem like the curse has lifted, does it? What do you have to do so that Liella can return to normal?”

The curse will lift once you return to the Ruins of Voght. That’s what you told me, isn’t it?

I cocked my head.

“.....”

All I got was silence. I wondered whether my words were really getting through to her. All her attention seemed to be focused on the sword that was stuck in the ground right in front of her.

“Liella?”

I prompted her again.

“.....”

Finally, at long last, she looked in my direction.

But she was gripping the sword in her hand.

“.....?”

Why on earth—?

I was about to ask her a series of quick questions, but I blinked, and at that moment, she disappeared from the flower field.

The only thing left where she had been standing were small beads of light drifting upward toward the sky.

And then—

When I realized that each one of those points of light was a flower petal, and then followed those lights upward, lifting my face, I suddenly understood the situation I was in.

Liella was falling from the sky, aiming right at me.

“—Sorry,” she mumbled in an emotionless voice, as she swung her sword down. It glinted as it drew a lovely arc through the air. Though I twisted my body around and dodged the blow just before she fell to earth, I was cornered by the sword-swinging girl.

Her attack, which had failed to hit me, sliced through dozens of flowers.

More beads of light whirled up into the air.

“...What are you doing?” I asked her, as I pulled out my wand.

“Just as I’d expect from my bestie. You dodged it, huh?”

Liella stared at me while swinging the sword again, as if testing the blade, cutting down yet more flowers. Finally, I felt like I had managed to exchange some words with her.

“Sorry, bestie. I’ve been hiding one thing.”

Standing there in front of me was not the boisterous girl I had come to know. We had gotten along so well that I had started to forget that she was not even a human being.

She wasn’t just a person, and she wasn’t just an object—she was a cursed sword.

“My curse can’t be broken just by coming to a place like this.”

Even though she had returned to her birthplace, when afternoon came, the

cursed sword had taken over Liella's body again.

Actually—

I had wondered whether bringing a cursed weapon back to the place where it had originated was really the right way to go about releasing someone from its curse.

Wait, wait.

There ought to be a simpler way.

In fact, to tell the truth, that was something I had realized the moment I learned that she was a cursed weapon.

To get to the point, in other words, that way was—

The cursed sword said it.

“In order to break my curse, you need to kill me.”



“Wai—”

Wait a minute. What are you talking about? Let's talk this out.

Faster than I could speak up, Liella closed the distance between us, and swung the sword down at me. When I leaped away from her and dodged the attack, she swung the sword sideways after me, and more flower petals scattered to the ground.

It was one narrow escape after another, but I did manage to fire a ball of magical energy at her as a diversionary tactic—hoping to at least break her stance.

“Humph!”

She casually cut the approaching ball of energy in half with a single stroke. The flower petals behind her were struck by the magical energy and gave off light.

“Whoa...”

She can cut them...

I was stunned.

Liella said, “Come on, kill me. Smash me to bits. If you don’t, you’re the one who’ll end up dead.”

She smiled. I didn’t think it was something one should say while smiling. But before I could say anything to that effect, she swung her sword at me again.

Over and over again, she thrust her blade at me.

I dodged it every time, and occasionally retaliated with a spell.

But she cut down my attacks each time with her sword.

“Why don’t we talk for a second...?” I proposed as I dodged and weaved.

Did you really have to attack me all of a sudden?

“What’s that? You’re going to come kill me?”

“What happens if I kill you?”

“If I’m destroyed, the curse will also cease to exist. This girl’s evenings will never be stolen from her again.”

“But your essence will also disappear, won’t it?”

“Yeah, that will happen.”

“Then I don’t want to. Killing you wasn’t part of Liella’s request, after all.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

With a smile, she readied her sword, then swung it at me again.

“That’s all the more reason why you have to do this,” she said. “Because this helpless young girl’s body can’t possibly kill me—”

I shot off a wind spell as I dodged her latest attack. The sudden gust blew through the field of flowers, sending flower petals flying wildly into the air, surrounding Liella with their green light.

But she dodged them easily, and once again closed the distance between us.

We repeated this same sort of exchange many times.

She slashed at me with her sword, I fired off a spell, and she dodged it. We did

this again, and again, and again.

“From the moment that the king bled from his eyes and died, our city was done for.”

In the middle of our battle, which seemed to be going nowhere, Liella started to talk to me as she slashed at me. Maybe she’d finally gotten bored, or was longing to do something with her mouth, or maybe she genuinely just loved to chat.

What she told me was the story of the city’s path toward destruction.

“The next person to die after the king was the doctor who had been treating him. Then came the doctor’s family. And after that, friends and acquaintances of the doctor’s family. By the time anyone realized it, the illness had spread throughout the land.”

She told me that at the time, the land was just like hell on earth. She told me this while still slashing at me.

“Some struck their neighbors as they sought help, bleeding from their eyes. Some wrung their own necks, bleeding as they died. Some cried tears of blood as they incinerated their own bodies. People became confused once they contracted the disease, and kept ending their own lives, tormenting themselves and others like that as they did.”

“...Why did they do that?”

“I guess there weren’t many of them who could keep it together once they contracted a disease with no cure, so they started immediately trying to end their lives to escape the suffering.”

“.....”

“But even in a city consumed by panic, there was one human who kept their cool.” She swung the sword, then said, “That person was my owner.”

According to her—

The person who had originally owned Evening Liella—a swordsman who had guarded the king—had just barely managed to hold on to his wits in the midst of the pandemonium.

At the same time, he had realized that no one would be able to help the infected anymore.

So he had taken up his sword.

Intending to at least make their time spent suffering as short as possible, he had gone around killing his own neighbors. One after another, he had cut down the bleeding people.

Their lives had been ended by his hand.

“Why...?”

“You murderer!”

“How dare you hurt my wife?! I’ll kill you!”

“Why are you doing such a terrible thing?”

All of them went on to die by his hand.

One by one, the swordsman murdered all his neighbors who were beset by such anguish.

Not a single person expressed feelings of gratitude. Some pointed their own blades at him and swore to get revenge. Some even resisted to the last of their strength.

“Curse you!”

Time and time again, the swordsman heard those words. Even so, he kept on killing, down to the last man.

Finally, after every other person had laid down life’s burden—

The swordsman tried to kill himself.

That was when he finally realized something.

“The swordsman’s body was already long dead.”

When he looked down, he saw that countless spears and swords had pierced his flesh. The flow of blood had stopped long ago, and without question, his body had already died.

So then, how was his body moving?

The true identity of the entity that was controlling the swordsman's body—
“It was me.”

That was how the cursed sword—Evening Liella—had come into the world.

“.....”

Before I realized it, her attacks had come to a stop. She was standing in the midst of the little dots of green light, panting and looking up at the sky.

It was cloudy, as it had been before.

Her expression was gloomy enough to rival the cloudy sky.

“After that, I was picked up by a merchant who just happened to visit this city, and got out of here. But I was cursed. After leaving the city, I have no memories for the next several years.”

What she did remember, just barely, was being cursed with a sense of duty to kill everything that she laid eyes on. She remembered being passed from master to master.



She remembered being covered in blood every day.

She remembered living always in a rain of blood, even when the setting changed, or when she changed masters.

“I regained consciousness two years ago. Right around the time I became one with this girl. By then, I had so much blood on my hands that I knew I’d never be able to wash it all off.”

“.....”

“So I decided to die, without delay. I decided to die, and erase my existence from this world.”

“.....”

“I’ll die, as penance for all the people I’ve killed up to now... *So please, kill me,*” Evening Liella asked, holding out her sword to me.

She seemed to be telling me to destroy it, using magic or some other means.

“I won’t.”

“.....” On the other end of the sword, Evening Liella’s eyes went blank. “How many times do I have to tell you before you understand, bestie? Do we need to cross swords again? Repeat the same actions, over and over again?”

Evening Liella responded with obvious frustration.

But no, no. That wasn’t really what I was trying to say at all.

“I’m saying that I don’t want to destroy that sword, because even if I do, you won’t die,” I said with a sigh.

I stared at the sword she was holding.

It seemed that I simply hadn’t taken a good enough look under the cloudy sky.

“What about that sword is cursed?” I asked.

“—Huh?”

The longer I looked at it, the more obvious it was that the sword being offered to me was cheap, and brand new. It looked like one of the blunt replicas the merchants in the area had been selling.

What on earth is going on?

I looked at Evening Liella again.

She was a young lady with something very mysterious about her. Her age was probably twenty or thereabouts. Her beautiful pink hair was tied up in a ponytail behind her head, and it fluttered in the wind. Her eyes were blue and clear like the midwinter sky. She was wearing a red robe.

Without a doubt, she looked just like Liella.

But something about her features was different.

For example, her hair was just a little bit longer than the real Liella's. It was pink, but somehow redder than Liella's. Even in age, she looked ever so slightly older than the real Liella that I knew.

They were similar enough that if I looked at them side by side, they could be mistaken for sisters.

Though they looked almost the same, there was something vaguely different about them, the human and the object.

Their relationship seemed just like the relationship between me and my broom.

"Hello."

A girl with an easygoing air about her stepped out in front of Evening Liella.

Her name was also Liella.

As a matter of convenience, I had been calling this girl Morning Liella.

"Nice to meet you."

She smiled gently.

I looked at my watch—my own watch, which showed the accurate time.

It was two thirty in the afternoon.

There were still thirty minutes to go before three o'clock.



"Once we get to the Ruins of Voght, I think she will probably ask you to

destroy her,” Liella had told me, while we were traveling.

Early one morning, while the two of us were walking side by side, she had said to me, “It’s unavoidable that the cursed sword wants to eradicate herself.”

Right after we’d departed, Morning Liella had told me about what had happened two years earlier.

She had told me the story of how her evenings had been stolen.

I AM THE ONE WHO HAS STOLEN YOUR EVENINGS. I AM A CURSED SWORD.

One morning, Liella had found these words written on a note near her pillow. She had been growing rather worried that there might be something wrong with her mind, since, for the past few days, she had been dealing with some kind of strange affliction that somehow made it so that she had no memory of anything that had happened in the evening hours.

I HAVE STOLEN YOUR NIGHTS. IN ORDER TO TAKE THEM BACK FROM ME, YOU HAVE TO GET ME BACK TO MY BIRTHPLACE. YOU MUST COOPERATE.

The only thing that Evening Liella even remotely knew was that the place she had been born was some city named Voght, and that was it. She had no clue where the city was, or how many years had gone by since it had been destroyed.

“At any rate, we decided to leave.”

The two of them wandered at random, trying to figure out where Voght might be. The cursed sword took over Liella’s body in the afternoons, while Liella inhabited it in the mornings only, and they traveled around asking people about Voght.

Liella told me that it was a strange feeling.

“Even though my body was supposedly being stolen, it didn’t feel that way at all. The fact is that I’ve been introverted my whole life, the kind of girl who can never manage to say what she wants to say. Until two years ago, I wasn’t treated very well at work, or by my family.”

It wasn’t that she had been shunned by the people around her. But Liella, who rarely expressed her wishes to anybody, told me that she had often been

taken advantage of by the people in her life.

She'd had unpleasant jobs foisted onto her.

She'd received cutting remarks when she couldn't do the work.

Even when she had gotten her work done, she'd been taken for granted.

Liella told me that in those days, she had endured that pitiful situation.

However—

Around the time that she'd first had her body hijacked by the cursed sword—
Around the time that she'd realized she was lacking any memories of her evenings, Liella also noticed that the way the people around her behaved toward her was changing.

Her boss, who had abused Liella by telling her that useless girls like her ought to hurry up and quit, started sucking up to her instead. Her father, who had lost control of his drinking and turned to violence, was driven out of the house before she knew it.

Once she had the cursed sword in her possession, the bad things in her life had started to turn around.

It was clear that someone was taking care of them.

EVERYONE AROUND YOU IS A REAL PIECE OF CRAP.

Because these frank words were written on her memo pad.

She heard the story from the people around her at a later date.

The boss, who had foisted so much work on Liella that it was practically harassment, had apparently been crushed by Liella's own hand. But Liella herself had no memory of this.

And Liella's father, who had been addicted to alcohol, had been thrown out of the house by Liella's own hand one night. But of course, she had no such memory.

In that way, the other personality that dwelled in the cursed sword went on to eliminate all the difficulties from her life, using methods that were quite unlike anything Liella's original personality would have employed.

If they had stayed in her hometown, somebody was sure to notice that she had two completely different personalities by day and by night. And there was also the possibility that Evening Liella might get more violent than strictly necessary.

Ultimately, Liella decided to leave.

If she never traveled to the Ruins of Voght, she would never get her nights back as long as she lived.

So, she had set off on a journey to find the birthplace of the cursed sword, trying not to make any particular acquaintances along the way.

“But to tell you the truth, I don’t want the cursed sword to go away.”

Even though her nights were lost to her, her time with the cursed sword had been very, very meaningful to her.

“So, I just have to talk to her, one time—” Liella had said.

I thought back to the day I had first met her.

I had found Evening Liella when I had been enticed by the idea of the bulletin board known as the Cooperation Circle in the middle of town. Sure enough, the reward she was offering was good enough for me, so I had decided to accept her commission.

But there had been one other deciding factor.

I had felt certain that this was a request only I could fulfill.

The requirements for her request were written in this way.

“I’M LOOKING FOR SOMEONE WHO CAN CAST A SPELL TO TURN AN OBJECT INTO A HUMAN.”



Morning Liella took the hands of Evening Liella, which resembled her own so closely. “Nice to meet you. I’m glad I finally have the chance,” she said.

Liella had set the time on her watch just one hour ahead. It was actually currently two thirty in the afternoon. It wasn’t time for them to swap yet.

“I knew that you, the cursed sword, were trying to get rid of yourself, to destroy yourself.”

Morning Liella had decided on one thing before reaching this place.

“I decided that if the method for lifting the curse would kill you, I wanted to stop you from going through with it. And I decided that if you, the cursed sword, were trying to disappear for my sake, I was going to stop you.”

One way or another—

Morning Liella needed to have a conversation with her.

That was why, on our journey to reach this place, I had been teaching Morning Liella magic. I’d been teaching her the spell to turn an object into a human.

Because of that, it had taken a little extra time to reach our destination, but, well, since they had successfully met face-to-face like this, I decided to call it a win.

“This is my place of death. Do you understand, little girl?”

“I do not.”

“I have to die here.”

“I don’t want you to die yet.” Morning Liella’s voice grew just a little stronger. “Why do you have to die?” she demanded. “Because you hurt a lot of people?”

“.....”

“In that case, from now on the two of us will go around making amends. So please don’t die here.”

“.....”

“Don’t die and leave me, please.”

“But wait, what does it matter to you—?”

“I have long since become a part of you. And you are a part of me. So if you’re going to apologize, I’ll go with you.”

“.....”

“Besides, it might not seem like it, but I’ve been enjoying these days splitting the time with you.”

Evening Liella, who had been cursed and detested since the day she was born, had continued to torment herself all her days with the idea that she had to die.

Even though not every human had wished that for her.

“Come with me, won’t you?” asked Morning Liella.

Surely those were words that she had been longing to say.

She must have wanted to talk about this directly, face-to-face, and not in writing.

Even as I was teaching her the spell to change an object into human form, Liella had told me time and time again— “—There are so many things that I want to say to her, but the two of us still haven’t met even once.”

Perhaps the sword felt responsible for changing Liella’s life.

Maybe she was under the impression that she could take responsibility for that by laying down her own life.

But Morning Liella didn’t want that, not in the least.

I told Evening Liella.

I told her what we had talked about the whole time I had been teaching Liella the spell.

“It sounds like Liella wants the two of you to walk together forever.”

She’s a girl who likes walking, after all.

I’m sure she’d like to walk side by side with her favorite person.

“That’s the first I’ve ever heard of it.”

Evening Liella smiled at the girl who resembled her so closely.

Morning Liella smiled too, a beat later.

Then, holding her hand out to Evening Liella, she said, “Well, today’s the first time we’ve met, isn’t it?”



CHAPTER 5

Ashen Witch Counseling Agency

[A Certain Traveler's Testimony]

Every human being alive on this earth goes through life beset by problems.

Problems are basically a built-in part of the human body.

You there. When you open up to someone about your problems, are you mocked with thoughtless comments like these?

"Is that all? I'm having an even harder time."

"Imagine being bothered by something so minor."

"Everyone else is doing their best, you know."

And so on?

Yes, even though you just want someone to listen to your troubles, they just don't get it, do they?

They're always working harder, they're suffering more, and the people who have such contemptible, rotten dispositions want to feel like they're superior to everyone at all times, so even when they do lend an ear to another's problems, they hardly offer the smallest scrap of sympathy before launching into useless sermons.

Regardless of how the other party might be suffering, or how hard they might be working, or whatever else, you're the one asking for advice, and yet they turn a deaf ear.

Ah, how stupid is that?

But it's all right.

Even if no one else will listen to your problems, God will lend an ear to what you have to say, confront your problems earnestly, and come up with possible solutions with you.

...Hm? What's that?

There's no way God could be so close at hand, you say?

No, no, that's not true at all. God is always by your side. But she's a little bit shy, so she doesn't often make an appearance.

By the way, this may be off-topic, but I have met God before, you know. I've gone through a little bit of special training, and to make a long story short, I can converse with God.

So, I am able to speak on God's behalf, and offer you some welcome advice.

The person traveling the world doing just that, in order to bring peace to all the land, is me, the Ashen Witch Elaina.

May every human being alive find happiness.

Now, reveal your problems to me.

...Hm? The fee, you ask?

Ten minutes of counseling for one silver coin.

Oh? Expensive, you say?

I see.

Then, perhaps you need someone to counsel you for your problem of the counseling fee being too high?

...Just kidding. Go ahead and have a seat. I'll listen to what you have to say.

[A Slave That I'm Selling Doesn't Listen to a Thing I Say, and I Don't Know What to Do]

"I've made a fair amount of money as a slave trader, but recently, I've been faced with a somewhat bothersome situation. One of the girls that I have for sale doesn't listen to anything I say."

Ten minutes after I set up my questionable business by the roadside— The shady-looking young man who appeared as my first customer of the day suddenly laid out his preposterous problem. A slave trader, he said.

"That's certainly a...questionable job you're doing, isn't it? Is everything all right?"

I wonder if it's actually a good idea to openly run a consultation booth right off the main avenue?

“There’s nothing wrong with the job itself. Slave trading is a legitimate occupation, after all. Well, I did end up breaking up with my girlfriend after I started trading slaves, I guess. I couldn’t sell girls while I had a girlfriend of my own, after all.”

...Well, if the slave trade is treated as a legitimate occupation in this land, I guess it is what it is. I won’t delve into it any deeper.

And so I asked him, “When you say that your slave won’t listen to you, in what way do you mean?”

“To put it simply, she doesn’t act like a slave at all.”

“Meaning?”

“It’s a long story, but— Oh, before that, I guess I’d better explain exactly what a slave is.”

In a torrent of speech, the young man told me about recent developments in the slave trade.

It wasn’t something I particularly wanted to know anything about, but since I had made a big deal of asking about his problem, it was too late to back out. I settled on letting his words flow into my right ear and straight out the left.

According to the man, when people heard the word *slave* it usually made them think of pitiful young girls being passed from one unsavory adult to the next, forced to cook, clean, and do laundry, and take care of *other everyday necessities*. But recently, there had been a considerable decline in that type of customer. Instead, more and more young men were buying slaves.

“Men who have no luck with girls despite having the interest and the money to burn have all been buying slaves. Recently, the slave industry has been really popular among single men.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean, think about it. Just by paying some money, these fellows can rescue a poor slave girl from the grasp of some dirty old man, right? Since the slave

girls are usually so impressed with the lonely men who come to their rescue, they're less defiant, and won't turn on their new masters. And the guys never have to worry about the pesky problem of being appealing in any way. It's the best solution, you see? There's no need for them to find true love or whatever. Buying a slave solves all their problems."

"Uh-huh."

I would have thought that at some point he would have noticed how hard I was cringing, but his mouth just did not stop running.

"Now, because of this, all the slave traders like me have been training their girls to fawn over their new masters and praise them no matter what sort of stupid crap they're into. But there's one girl who just won't listen at all."

"And you say this girl is being defiant?"

"She sure is! No matter what I say, she just answers me like, '*Tch...* Just kill me! I'll never yield to a lowly man like you!'"

"She doesn't sound like much of a slave to me."

"Well, what should I do?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that."

However, since I was the one who (had set things up as if I) could act as an intermediary for God's words, I also couldn't flatly turn the young slaver away. I felt like the best thing to do in this situation was to at least give him one fitting piece of advice and send him away happy.

So, I cleared my throat once.

"Uh... God has this to say. 'Everything's sure to work out if you can put yourself in the slaves' shoes and think about things from their perspective,' she says."

Of course, if he had asked me what on earth those words were supposed to mean, I wouldn't have had any clue. It was all according to the will of God, after all.

...Or rather, I actually just gave him the first answer that occurred to me, without really thinking about it.

“Put myself in their shoes...? Oh! I see! I get it! Thank you so much!”

I would have liked to hear exactly what he thought he’d gotten from any of that.

[I Have a Feeling My Undercover Investigation Has Been Found Out]

“I work at one of the public institutions in this country, but, well, the fact of the matter is that—and this is strictly confidential information—there seem to have been some unsettling developments in the slave trade recently.”

I continued to ply my questionable business the following day, and as I might have expected, my suspicious establishment only attracted suspicious customers. Sitting across from me was a young woman speaking in a confident tone of voice, despite her shabby appearance.

“Unsettling developments, you say...? Just what sort of thing do you mean?”

At my words, the young woman nodded.

“That’s right. Apparently, more and more young women are looking to become slaves these days. In fact, it seems like most of the slaves on the market put themselves there. This fact is rather hard to explain, you see, so I’ve been investigating.”

“I see.”

“You see, at the moment, the profession ranked most desirable among teenage girls is...being a slave.”

“This country is messed up, huh...?”

“By the way, the profession ranked most desirable among teenage boys is...being a slave trader.”

“Really, really messed up...”

“You’re absolutely right.” The woman nodded with a sigh. “What I’ve discovered through my undercover investigation is that all the girls who aspire to become slaves have been saying, ‘Once I become a slave, a rich man will buy me right away, and furthermore he’ll hardly ever lay a hand on me, seriously nothing could be easier.’ Apparently, today’s slave market is being used by these girls as a kind of matchmaking service.”

“Oh wow, this is deeply messed up...”

“Well, so that’s the reason that I’ve been conducting an undercover operation myself, and investigating all sorts of things, but...the trouble is that I seem to have been exposed as an agent of the state.”

“...How on earth did that happen?”

She hemmed and hawed as she answered me.

“Yesterday, I was just sitting there absentmindedly in my cage, playing the part of a slave as usual, when the slave trader suddenly pulled me out of the cage and said, ‘I’m getting in there now. You oppress me,’ or something.”

“.....”

“The man said something else that was strange, too. ‘I have to become a slave in order to understand you,’ or something like that. I had absolutely no idea what he’s hoping to achieve, but...as of yesterday, that man has become the slave, and now I’m the master.”

“.....”

That’s got to be the slave trader from yesterday.

But this woman didn’t know one bit about the situation, so his actions and words must have been a complete mystery to her. I mean, they didn’t even make sense to me, and I knew what was going on.

In any case, she cocked her head and wondered out loud, “How on earth did he find out I am a state asset...? Was there something wrong with my behavior...?” she grumbled.

Well, I think that your behavior is definitely the reason why you fell into this sort of situation, but...

“But don’t you think it’s possible that you haven’t been exposed as an agent of the state? Maybe the man simply wanted to become a slave, you know?”

For the time being, I gave her a careless answer.

“No. That can’t be it. After getting in the cage, the man made me torture him every which way. He said things like, ‘Now, tie me up. Lash me with a whip.

Break me,' and so on.”

“.....”

Gross.

“Tch... I didn’t go undercover as a slave so I could torture people! Why should I have to hold a whip?! Especially for some weirdo who wants me to hit him.”

“Are you sure you’re in this for the right reasons...?”

How far did your undercover investigation, or whatever you call it, go?

“Actually, I was suspicious from the start. Whenever he handled his slaves, this slave dealer always treated them courteously. The only training he gave them that really seemed like training was forcing them to say, ‘That’s my master!’—that’s all. By resisting that, I just barely managed to establish myself in a position fitting for a slave, but... But it was no use. The slaver just made a sad face every time I resisted...and no, that’s not the kind of face that I want to see... I only want to see the dirty expressions of a more vulgar man, and yet...”

“You’re not in this for the right reasons, are you...?”

What were you trying to accomplish by going undercover?

“Anyway, apparently the man has discovered my true identity, and must have decided to give me that kind of treatment... I’m really in trouble here... It seems like that man is going to keep harassing me.”

“No, I think you’re imagining that...”

“What should I do? Please, let God give me some guidance!”

Are you sure it isn’t the devil that ought to be guiding you through this?

I couldn’t say that, so I acted like I was puzzling over the situation for a moment. “Let me see...” Then I announced, “...God has this to say. ‘Thou art to enjoy the present,’ she says.”

“Enjoy... That’s it? What does that mean?”

I had come up with it on the spot, so I had no idea how to answer her question.

“Well, it’s...just one of those things. You don’t know for sure that the man has

realized your true identity, so you can't be sure that he's making you train him in order to harass you. His interests just run that way."

"What...did you say...?"

"The slave trader is a natural-born masochist. I'm sure he would be delighted if you were to abuse him further."

"That's... In other words, I can think of it like, if I become a more sadistic woman, as my reward, he'll abuse me?"

"Uh, sure. Why shouldn't it work that way?"

I've got no clue.

So then, this lady doesn't care what happens with her undercover investigation at all, does she?

"Understood. Well then, there's no avoiding it. This is part of my job, too. I'll do the best that I can! Thank you!"

With an expression full of hope, she stood up and left.

...Why is it, I wonder? Why is it that, despite her expression of relief, I'm not particularly reassured?

[I Suspect My Ex-Boyfriend Has Been Hanging Out with a Shady Lady]

"I wanted to get back together with my boyfriend who I split up with a long time ago, so I headed down to the slave market. But you know, my old boyfriend wasn't anywhere to be found there... That made me really sad, and frustrated..."

I was already starting to feel like closing up shop and leaving my gig as a counselor behind. And that day, as before, a strange customer took a seat in front of me.

"Uh-huh..."

I nodded vaguely. But the woman didn't seem to be paying any attention to my behavior.

"So, listen, my boyfriend, he used to be a really good person. But now he's working this terrible job as a slave trader, if you can believe it... He's changed

since he started that job... He's not his old self anymore..."

"In what way has he changed?"

Ah, I bet this is the ex-girlfriend of the slave trader who came to see me two days ago, I thought.

"...He's become a masochist. Yesterday, when I went to see him, he was getting whipped by this weird woman..."

See, I knew it.

It really is a small world.

"But all you did was observe him, right? Did he look unhappy about it? Maybe some evil person somewhere lured him into it or was forcing him to do it, maybe that's all it was?"

Well, that evil someone was me, but...

However, if the man was behaving that way in order to experience things from the slaves' perspective, then maybe he ought to have been unhappy about it.

That was what I thought, but—

"Not at all! He looked really happy!"

Ah, so he was enjoying himself—?

"W-well...that's, um, look. It's one of those things. He just looked that way on the surface, but I'm sure his mind was actually suffering. I don't doubt that he's feeling hurt."

"He didn't look that way, though..."

"All right then, he's a lost cause, so please give up on him."

"No way! I want to get back what I had with him, no matter what! Help me, God!"

"God is dead. She's not here anymore."

"Please, do something!" She refused to back down. I wondered why on earth that was. "Right now, the slave industry is really popular! I just know that that

man is selling tons of slaves right now and making money hand over fist! This is my chance to marry into wealth! Please! Help me!”

I see, so you're a slave to money.

“.....”

I was already way past fed up. I wanted nothing more than to tell her God was dead, then close up shop and run far away.

But even so, this was my job, so I calmly made my best effort.

The God inside me whispered something.

“God has this to say. ‘The slave boom is likely to end soon. There is nothing to worry about. You are fine just the way you are now.’”

“Just the way I am...now...?”

“Yes. Your heart which is full of concern for that man will prove to be the sole ray of light that saves him from the darkness. Motherly love that gently envelops wounded men is what we need in these depraved times. Thou art to love that man like a mother—says God.”

“...Put it simply, what do you mean?”

I take it that means you didn't understand?

“I don't understand either.”

Actually, I would have liked to ask the question myself, but unfortunately the god inside me died a long time ago, so I didn't really know the answer.

[I Came Up with an Idea for a New Trade]

My consulting isn't worth a thing anymore, let's not kid ourselves.

That was what I wished I could say. I wanted to hurry up and get going already, but since the next customer was someone I recognized, I ended up letting him have a seat in front of me.

“Hey, long time no see, Miss God.”

“I am not God. I am nothing more than a mouthpiece through which you can hear the voice of God.”

“Hah... That’s right...”

The slave trader seemed less burdened than he had the last time he’d appeared before me.

“Oh, did something happen?”

I’ve heard all sorts of things through the grapevine, but...

“Yes...our conversation yesterday. While the defiant slave girl was abusing me, my ex-girlfriend barged in on us... ‘Stop it right now! Don’t bully him!’ she said, and the slave stopped.”

Well, actually, she’s not a slave girl, she’s a state employee playing the role of a slave, but...

“Oh? And then?” I asked.

“The slave ran away at that point, but my ex was kind enough to console me in my misery... While she was holding me, she said, ‘Now, now. You tried your very best. You did so well.’”

“Uh, okay.”

“My heart started pounding, quite unexpectedly.”

“You’re rather simpleminded, aren’t you?”

“Anyway, it was in that moment that I struck upon an idea for a new business.”

“I have a feeling that a business you came up with while you were being cradled in a girl’s arms isn’t going to be much of an idea, though.”

But he ignored me and moved forward with his story.

“Here’s the new business idea that I came up with! And the name for it, too! The ‘Get Incredibly Pampered by Cute Girls Shop’! What do you think? Seems like it’s going to be popular, right?”

“...I’m sorry, but I’m not seeing how that’s a business, at all.”

“Well, to give you a rough idea, it’s a shop where tired adult men can come to get pampered. We’ll use my remaining unsold slaves. After all, I believe that the gentle care and attention of a young girl is a vital remedy for adults fighting

their way through this brutal world.”

“In other words, this will be an indecent establishment, is that right?”

“Not at all. It’s a purely charitable organization.”

“.....”

Well, if he says it’s going to be a charitable organization, I’ll assume that’s true... I’ll just leave it at that, shall I...? I’m already so tired...

Actually, I wonder if there’s anyone who would be kind enough to pamper me?



“So, with all that said, I came to swear an oath before God that I will conquer the world with my new business venture! Thank you so much for listening!”

“Sigh... My pleasure...”

Then he walked away from my booth on lively feet.

All I could do was offer up earnest prayers to God that I would never see the man again.



After several months had passed, I heard secondhand a story about that place.

I heard that all the adults there had started patronizing a business where they could be pampered by young girls.

According to the rumors, the profession ranked most desirable among girls was ‘mother.’ Meanwhile, the profession ranked most desirable among the boys was apparently now ‘office worker’ (but that was wearing down their spirits and the soles of their shoes).

Compared to before, the situation seemed much healthier, but behind it all I could glimpse the painfully unwholesome truth of the situation. The boys wanted nothing but to be pampered by young girls. They were past being peaceful herbivores; they were fully fasting.

It was so funny I couldn’t laugh.

In fact, it was really, really messed up.

But as messed up as it all was, there was a demand for it, so the state seemed to have decided to look the other way—well, they probably just kept a lid on it to hide the stink. But anyway, on top of that shady situation, apparently new jobs were cropping up which consisted of just sitting around getting pampered by girls.

Well, even if something is rotten, you can still eat it if you let it ferment, right?

I suppose that was how they survived and kept going. I wasn’t fully satisfied with a lot of things about what I’d heard, but if the parties concerned had found their solution, then it would be insensitive for an outsider like me to criticize

them.

“Sighhh... I’m exhausted...”

And so.

Along those lines.

Even though it stank, I continued my journey.



CHAPTER 6

Moving Hotel Renoir

“Across the plains, thick with greenery, there are large footprints in the ground. Those huge footprints, each big enough to contain a whole human body, belong to the Moving Hotel.”

One of the stories that I heard from a merchant in a particular city was this very intriguing tale.

The Moving Hotel.

“It never appears in a fixed spot, but wanders the land on a whim. Whether or not you’ll encounter it on your journey is a matter of luck. Anyway, if you spot any gigantic footprints on your way, you might have a look around—” the merchant told me.

While I was listening to this story, I was puzzling over something. The words “footprints” and “hotel” just weren’t fitting together in my mind.

How could a hotel leave footprints?

That makes it sound like it’s a living thing, doesn’t it?

As soon as I heard the story, I began to consider such questions, but—

The fact of the matter was that this Moving Hotel thing was alive.

At first glance, it looked like a giant dragon, crawling along the ground.

Its body was covered in black scales, and it had no wings. Sprouting on its back in their place was a single hotel.

The hotel had a simple appearance—it was a wooden, three-story building. It even had a garden and seemed to have been with the dragon since antiquity, long enough that the moss growing on it showed its age.

I had heard all about the external appearance of the Moving Hotel from the merchant’s tale.

My goodness.

It was a perfect description of the building that I now saw in front of me, a curiously perfect match.

“I never thought that such a thing really existed...”

In the midst of my journey—

I pulled my broom to a stop, and gazed at the hotel in fascination for some time.

The black body moving across the plain, and the single, venerable hotel. The dragon’s long tail swung gently back and forth as it crawled across the ground on all fours.

I could see a small sign hanging on the hotel on top of the dragon’s back.

MOVING HOTEL RENOIR

As the dragon moved away with a *thud, thud*, birds took flight in surprise from the trees in its path. The dragon snaked along, avoiding the trees, headed off somewhere.

According to what I had heard, the Moving Hotel just wandered around without any purpose, and its gait at the moment didn’t make it seem like the Hotel was walking toward any particular destination.

Almost like it was on a never-ending journey of its own.

“.....”

I’m not sure what to make of this.

After pausing for a while, I started following the enormous footprints on my broom.



I’d heard that the Moving Hotel Renoir stopped moving whenever anyone approached, and that it guided its guests to climb up along its tail.

After I had been chasing the dragon for some time, I managed to get close enough to it, and the dragon looked back over its shoulder languidly, then immediately stopped moving and lowered its tail for me.

Up ahead, at the top of its tail that snaked upward like a hilly road, I could see

the entrance to the Moving Hotel Renoir.

They're giving me a warm welcome, I see.

I followed the directions, got off my broom, and walked up the hard, black scales.

When I arrived at the old building, which was covered in moss, I wondered just how long it had been in business here on the dragon's back. The green moss creeping along the walls covered the whole building.

The front door was no exception; it was old and covered with greenery.

Just how long has it been since they had any customers?

"Hellooo?"

The ancient door creaked open. My intention had been to slowly crack it open so that I could take a careful peek inside, but I got an unpleasant surprise when the door made a loud shriek.

Light streamed into the interior of the hotel through the windows. The beams of light illuminated the wood grain in the floor. I could tell that the hotel had been very well cared for. The interior was old, but not a single mote of dust hung in the air, and as far as I could see, everything was trim and tidy.

Across from the front door was a reception desk.

There was a small bell sitting on the counter, with a note that read, PLEASE RING FOR ASSISTANCE. Apparently, someone would come out when called.

But there was no need to ring, because there was already a young woman on the other side of the counter.

Her hair was a light purple color. It was long enough to go past her shoulders. She was wearing what looked like the hotel's uniform. She had on an outfit of deep green.

I couldn't see her expression very well, much less tell how old she was. In fact, the only things I could actually tell about her were her sex and her hairstyle, and a tiny bit about her clothes.

"...And she's asleep."

Using her own arm as a pillow, the girl on the other side of the counter was conked out, dozing pleasantly in the peaceful sunlight.

Seriously, just how long has it been since they had any customers?

“Umm...” Trying not to startle the girl, I slowly moved closer and called out to her.

“Nnnyah.”

She looked comfortable as she breathed deeply in her sleep.

“Excuse me?” I said, trying to wake her.

“Nnnyah.”

But she was off in dreamland.

“Hello, I’d like to stay here?”

“Nnnyah.”

She showed no signs of waking.

“.....”

“Nnnyah.”

I see, okay.

Well, there’s no avoiding it, then.

“Here goes.”

Ding! The bell resounded right beside her head. It had a slightly pitiful tone, not very well suited for the tranquil lobby.

“Pyaaaaaahhh!”

Then the girl who had been fast asleep in front of me let out a pitiful shriek of her own and returned from dreamland.

The girl, who had just woken up, was wide-eyed, obviously not sure what had happened, but eventually she noticed that I was there on the other side of the counter.

A beat later, she realized that she had been doing the unthinkable—dozing off

in front of a customer.

“Ah, h-hello!”

Blushing bright red, the proprietor hurriedly straightened out her clothing. She looked like she was in her mid-twenties. Her eyes were like two dark pits, and she peered at me with a downcast look.

“I’d like to ask about accommodations, so...”

When I said that, she reacted with extreme surprise. “Huh? Accommodations...? You don’t mean...you’re a customer...?!”

“If I wasn’t a customer, what would I be doing here...?”

“You’re not some kind of apparition or hallucination, are you? You are a real customer, aren’t you, Miss Customer...?”

She was still flustered, not calm at all, and then she slapped her own cheeks and said, “Ah, ow! It’s not a dream... So this is a real customer, ahh...! Waaah...!” Her dark eyes sparkled.

This girl is a little strange...

“How much is one night’s stay?”

“I wonder how many years it’s been since we had a customer...? How delightful!”

“Um, the price for one night?”

“And how many nights will you be staying with us...? I’ll be very happy if you stay a long time!”

“Um, like I said, what’s the price for one night?”

“Eh-heh-heh.”

“I’m going somewhere else.”

I turned sharply on my heel.

“Ahhh, waaait! Don’t leave me heeere! You can even stay for free, just stay with meee!”

The girl reached out from across the counter, as if asking for help. Her slender

hands clung to me tightly.

She's really strange...

"Setting aside the question of whether it's with *you*," I said as I pulled away from her, "I did come here with the intention of staying, but...do you have any open rooms?"

"Of course! Now, please fill out this form!"

Then the girl, who had retreated to her side of the counter, slapped a form down on top of it. I did as asked and filled in my name, occupation, and so on into each field.

When I handed the completed form back to her, the girl said enthusiastically, "All right, allow me to prepare the best room in the house!" She rustled around on a shelf searching for something, then handed it to me. "This is the key to your room on the third floor!"

I appreciate the kindness, but—

"Um, as far as the cost, about how much will it be...?"

To be frank, that was the thing about which I was most concerned. I doubted that I could stay for cheap in such a unique hotel.

"Eh-heh-heh. There will be no charge," she said in an enticing tone full of charm.

Sure, she did say that I could stay for free just a moment ago, but—

"I don't expect it's actually free."

"Nope, free is fine."

"No, but—"

"Free is fine."

"....."

"If you like, I could pay you to stay."

"How long has it been since a customer showed up...?"

Ignoring how bewildered I was, the proprietor said, "Now, here you go! The

third-floor key! Here, here!” and forced the key into my hands. There was an overbearing forcefulness in her attitude.

“Uh, ah...okay...”

“So then, how many nights will you be with us?”

“Umm...for now, let’s say three—”

“A little bit longer, please!”

“Huh? No, but I really don’t need to spend all that many nights—”

“How about a week?!”

“No, really, three days is—”

“Please! Please stay a long time! Please!”

“Uhh...”

Ultimately, I ended up agreeing to stay in the hotel for one week, for free.

As a traveler, nothing made me more grateful than not having to pay any money. But I was suspicious that there might be some ulterior motive behind her generosity.

Well, maybe she really just can’t stand the fact that no customers have been coming by, maybe that’s it, but...

I was both happy and suspicious, and with this strange mix of feelings, I headed up to my room on the third floor.

On the way—

“—My name is Renoir.”

A voice called out to me from behind my back.

I turned around.

The girl from the other side of the counter pointed at her name tag, and smiled. “Miss Customer, if you should need anything, please call me! No matter the time, no matter what the circumstances, I will come running,” said the girl with dark, bottomless eyes like an abyss.

The third floor—

When I unlocked and opened the door, I was greeted by a fine room.

There was plush carpet covering the floor. In the center of the room, two sofas sat facing each other on either side of a table, as if it had originally been meant for multiple people to stay in. It was obvious at a glance that the bed was so spacious that my fingers wouldn't reach the sides even if I spread both arms out wide; it looked almost square. It was ridiculously oversized and much too large for me.

There was even a kitchen in the corner of the room. Come to think of it, there hadn't been a restaurant or anything as far as I could see, so it was possible that the hotel didn't offer meals. I decided that it would probably be best for me to ask about that later.

In one part of the room, there were two doors.

One of the doors led to the bathroom.

The other door, when I opened it and took a look, led to a balcony. It was a simple space, with a wooden floor and wooden railing surrounding it, and there was a similarly wooden set of a table and two chairs. When I put my hand on the railing and looked out, I was able to watch the scenery flowing past below. It was an incredibly majestic view. This place seemed like it was almost too luxurious for me to have all to myself.

"I wonder how much one night's stay is supposed to cost...?"

Thinking about how awful it would be to be billed after the fact, I went back into the room, and opened up my bag. At any rate, I didn't have much to do for a while, so I could spend my time relaxing and reading a book or something—that was what I figured.

However, that was exactly the moment when I caught sight of the guidebook that was sitting on top of the table.

".....?"

I tilted my head to the side, confused.

There was a piece of paper on top of the guidebook, something that I had

rarely seen at other inns and hotels. On it was written the same few words I'd just heard, in handwritten letters.

"If you should need anything, please call my name'...?" I read aloud.

Those were exactly the words that Renoir at the front desk had said to me a few minutes earlier, when we'd parted.

I whispered in a voice that was so quiet that it could hardly be heard even inside the room, and as soon as I did—

"Miss Customer, you called?"

Bam!

Renoir energetically burst through the door to my room and in a flash was standing before me.

She had appeared with such swiftness that it was as if she had been waiting right outside the room the whole time. Then she said, "Oh, you called for me right away! I'm so happy! Please, ask me for anything!"

She was almost singing the words, spinning in place like she was dancing. Each time she turned around, her skirt buoyantly caught the air and spread out like a blooming flower.

As if to pour cold water on her extremely good mood, I said, "But I haven't called for you yet."

"Don't be silly! I heard you call me clear as day, Miss Customer!"

She whirled over until she was right beside me, pressing me toward the sofa and forcing me to take a seat.

"I understand... I can see your request clearly... I understand..."

Then, with a theatrical flourish, she leaped over in front of me and said, "Miss Customer, right now, you're feeling thirsty. Isn't that right?" she asked with a self-satisfied look.

Her hands were already pouring me a cup of tea.

Wait, wait.

"I'm not feeling particularly thirsty, though..."

“Here you are. The tea that you requested.”

“I don’t remember requesting this...”

“.....”

“.....”

“Um...please wait a moment, Miss Customer.”

After she set the tea down on the table, Renoir whirled around and turned her back to me. Then she opened up a thick tome and started flipping through the pages in a hasty panic.

My goodness, just what book might that be?

Drawn in by the scent of something even more enticing than the aroma of the black tea, I peered over her shoulder at the book.

Renoir kept flipping through the book, and before long she started tracing a passage on one page with the tip of her finger.

“Sure enough, it says right here, ‘When a customer summons a member of the staff, most of the time, they want tea,’ and yet...”

“What’s that book?”

“Ah...! Y-you mustn’t look! Pervert!”

“Opening it up in a place like this is practically inviting me to take a look, you know.”

“Wait, so I’m the pervert...?”

“If one of us has to be.” I lowered my gaze to the book in her hands. “So, what is that?”

“Th-this...?” Squirming bashfully and casting her eyes downward, she answered, “It’s the Service Handbook.”

“Service Handbook?”

“All the ways to provide the best hospitality are written in here. It contains everything I’ve learned from customers who have stayed here previously.”

“I see. So does it say that bursting into a guest’s room before you are called is

one way to provide great hospitality?”

“No, I took the liberty of using my own judgment for that one.”

“Why?”

“Because I heard you call for me...”

“.....”

She giggled and stared at me with her black eyes. Her cheeks were flushed.

She didn’t seem malicious. Though she was a little weird. Weird enough that she did make me somewhat nervous, but—

“.....”

In order to escape her intense gaze, I averted my eyes and turned my attention to my tea. The tea, which was at the perfect temperature, flowed down my throat, and hydrated my body, which was weary from traveling.

Frankly, the tea had a strong fragrance and a nice flavor, and it was good enough that in spite of myself, I let out a sigh.

I wonder if this flavor was prescribed in her book, too? Or if it’s the result of this girl herself being so eager to please?

“I-is it good...?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

I was sure that it had to be the latter.

Because when I nodded, she smiled at me innocently, like a child.



After teatime—

Once Renoir had left me alone in my room, I went out onto the balcony and gazed at the scenery outside.

The Moving Hotel Renoir, which sat on the back of a dragon crawling across the land, cruised ceaselessly through majestic nature. In the distance, I could see rocky mountains covered in a blanket of white snow. Like a mirror, a tranquil lake reflected those mountains and the sky above them, streaked with

pale clouds.

The world felt very fresh and new, looking at it from a somewhat more elevated perspective than usual, and I stared out at it for a while.

“This is the life...”

I sat down in a chair and cracked open a book. It seemed as if any book I read in this wonderful outdoor space would somehow have a wonderful story inside.

If there's one thing missing from this space, I'd say it's a good cup of tea.

“If I could enjoy this scenery while sipping a cup of tea, I'm sure there could be no greater happiness—” *That said, I did just receive some tea, and she just left the room, so I'm hesitant to call her back.*

“My apologies for the wait, Lady Elaina. I've brought cookies and tea.”

In a flash, out of the corner of my eye, I saw that she was there, setting an assortment of cookies laid out on a tasteful plate down on the table next to another cup of the black tea I had just finished.

“.....”

When I looked up, Renoir was wearing a proud grin.

I never...called her...though...?

“I'm so happy to have you ask for me again.”



“.....”

Wait, but...I didn't...call her...

“Ah, speaking of which. The fact of the matter is, Lady Elaina, that this hotel goes by the name of the Moving Hotel, and we quite literally run the place as we travel all over the world.”

“Uh-huh...”

“To that end, please take a look at this.”

She ignored my bewilderment and spread out a large map in front of me.

When I looked at it, I saw that nearby tourist attractions and spots with superb scenery had been noted in handwritten script. Since I was going to the trouble of staying in a moving hotel, it would surely be a waste if I didn't see all that I could see.

I picked up my tea, and as I was gazing at the map, Renoir said, “Come now, tell me about your favorite spots, no matter where they are! I'll take you there, without fail.”

“Hm...”

On the map were handwritten notes about the characteristics of all the nearby lands, and each of their sightseeing spots. The large sheet of paper was covered in writing.

I gave up on reading each note one by one, and asked, “Where are we now?”

Renoir pointed to the lower-right corner of the map. “Somewhere around here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“By the way, Lady Elaina, where are you headed on your journey?”

“I'm not headed anywhere in particular,” I shook my head, clearing away the shadow of doubt that had crossed my mind. “I'm just drifting around, going where I can go.”

“Well then, you're the same as me. Being able to go anywhere is just wonderful, isn't it?” she added, smiling happily.

According to her, this Moving Hotel Renoir could head for any place at all, following the whims of its occupants, regardless of how long it took to get there. In other words, we were free to go anywhere at all.

Basically, we're both carefree wanderers, huh?

"Then, may I take the liberty of choosing our destination based on how I feel?" she asked.

"Yes, please do." I agreed quite naturally to her proposal. "I'm looking forward to it," I added.

"All right, allow me to show you some great tourist attractions. I know about a lot of really good places." As she folded up the map, she smiled at me once again. "By the way, Lady Elaina, do you have any requests for the rest of your stay?"

"Requests...?"

"Fulfilling the guests' requests to the best of one's abilities is an essential duty of a competent hotelier... Heh-heh-heh." She stuck her chest out proudly.

She and I were both free people.

Honestly, I'm not really that hung up about it, but since this is a rare opportunity, I guess it wouldn't be so bad for me to make just one little request.

So, I looked straight at her and I said it.

I said—

"Before you come into my room, please knock first."



I spent a quiet day in the Moving Hotel.

In the morning, I awakened to a pleasant aroma. The first thing that my sleepy mind registered was Renoir. She was cooking in the kitchen. She was obviously in a good mood, and she hummed as she worked, and murmured to herself from time to time, "—I hope that this will please my dear, sweet customer," as she handled the frying pan.

She came in without asking again...

She seemed to have already forgotten what I had told her the day before. Assuming that was the case, I asked her with a yawn, “What happened to knocking?”

“I knocked before I entered the room.”

“Okay?”

“But no matter how many times I knocked, there was no answer, so I suddenly became anxious that the person called Lady Elaina who had checked in yesterday might have been a vision that I invented out of my unbearable loneliness, so in spite of myself, I just had to break my promise to you and come on in.”

“Uh, okay...”

Creepy...

The girl with the dark eyes smiled at me as I shuddered with fear.

“In any case, I believe that the best way to satisfy your customers is to cook them good meals in great places. Wait just a little bit longer please, Lady Elaina.”

Breakfast was done soon after that.

I was sitting in a chair on the balcony reading my book while I waited, when the table was suddenly garnished with an omelet, a salad, bread, and other dishes that Renoir had prepared.

I directed my gaze out from the balcony, where the scenery spread out before us.

While I had been idly sleeping, the dragon that carried the Moving Hotel had apparently climbed to the top of a rather high mountain. Orange clouds, illuminated by the morning sun, obscured the ground. Even looking down, I couldn't see the ground, and the sea of clouds formed undulating waves far into the distance. The summits of mountains, poking their heads up through the clouds here and there, looked just like solitary islands.

“I really wanted you to have your first breakfast with me here, in this place.”

Renoir sat down across from me, wearing a broad grin.

It certainly was a magnificent view. Surrounded by extraordinary scenery, I ate my somewhat refined breakfast with relish. I don't know if it was because of the environment around me, but the flavor of it was more than enough to wake me the rest of the way up. At the end I let out a sigh of contentment.

“.....”

But one thing that was making me uneasy was the presence of Renoir, who spent the whole time I was eating sitting in front of me with her chin in both hands, wearing a broad grin. There was a superb view spread out right there, but she paid no notice.

As you might expect, eating a meal with someone staring at me was difficult. I felt like I had to be excessively careful.

And so—

“The scenery is wonderful, isn't it?” I casually directed my gaze outward, but — “It sure is.” Renoir nodded indifferently, and peered at me with her deep, dark eyes.

“...Come to think of it, aren't you going to eat, Renoir?”

“I'm fine,” Renoir said with a decisive nod. “My customers' happiness is my own happiness.”

She was smiling brightly.

The strange awkwardness of it all had me staring fixedly at the sea of clouds.

But even after I had excluded her from my field of vision, her voice still reached me.

“—Ah, my precious customer... I just want to eat her up...”

“—She's eating my homemade meal... I'm so happy...”

“—My dear, sweet customer...”

And so on.

She was whispering things that I didn't know how to respond to.

I see now that I need to distract her a little, so she stops whispering troubling things.

“On that subject, your cooking is really tasty, but how do you procure your ingredients?” I asked.

I really was honestly curious about this. How did this girl, who was moving around twenty-four hours a day, get her ingredients, I wondered.

In response to my confusion, Renoir cheerfully answered, “Oh, I get money by selling the dragon’s scales.”

According to her, the dragon that the hotel sat on belonged to quite a rare species, and its scales could be sold for quite a high price. Whenever she encountered traveling merchants and the like, she apparently sold some of the scales, and used the proceeds to buy food.

I see.

“So earlier, when you were so quick to say that you didn’t need me to pay for my room, that was because you have plenty of savings, is that it?”

“No, the reason I didn’t demand payment for your lodgings, Lady Elaina, isn’t because I already have money.”

“Then why?”

“It was because I wanted to see my customer’s happy face...”

“Uh-huh...”

I don’t remember showing you my happy face, but...

I averted my eyes.

“—Ah...your confused face is also adorable...”

She was still whispering troublesome things just out of my line of sight.

I had guessed this when I first encountered her, but just as I had suspected, Renoir was indeed quite eccentric. Then again, I figured that if she wasn’t eccentric, she probably wouldn’t have been able to run a hotel like this one.

But as eccentric though she was, her skills as the proprietor of the hotel were amazing. While I was staying in the hotel, I basically spent the whole day in my room sitting on the balcony, but when it came to making the bed and cleaning the room and so on, she was able to complete her duties in the few moments

when I wasn't looking.

For example, when I went back into the room from the balcony after eating breakfast, all hints that I had used the place had completely vanished, from the bed and from every corner of the room. Any trash that I had produced from the previous day until that morning had been spotlessly cleared away, down to stray strands of hair. The books that I had been reading and other belongings that I had left nearby had been neatly tidied up. They looked as if they were on display. Everything made it seem as if I was an extremely fastidious person.

"Here, Miss Customer, please have some fresh-baked cookies."

She did things like bake me cookies in the middle of the day while I was reading. The strange thing was that the cookies she made never seemed to run out, even though I kept eating them and eating them. She must have replenished them without me noticing, so that it seemed like there was an endless supply.

Anyway, I traveled in the hotel with Renoir, who was overly attentive.

"Please take a look, Miss Customer. Here is a nameless lake."

In the middle of the perfectly still lake, which reflected the sky like a mirror, there was a small willow tree, growing there all alone.

Renoir pointed it out to me. "This is one of my favorite sights," she told me.

"Is that so? It certainly is pretty."

"Eh-heh-heh..." Renoir blushed bashfully.

"Come on, it's not like that was directed at you..."

I let out an exasperated sigh. Just at that moment, though there was no wind, I suddenly noticed that the surface of the water was rippling. When I followed the ripples on the water with my eyes, I saw that the dragon we were riding on was drinking the water.

"This hotel's dragon makes sure only to drink clean water."

I see, I see.

"How elegant of it."

“Eh-heh-heh...” Renoir blushed bashfully.

“Come on, like I said, it’s not like that was directed at you...”

“By the way, the dragon eats beautiful trees. Crunches them right up.”

“What’s a beautiful tree?”

“Eh-heh-heh...”

“I don’t really understand why you’re blushing here.”

Immediately after I expressed my exasperation, the dragon that carried the hotel lumbered over to a nearby grove, and immediately began crunching and munching on the nearest tree.

Wow!

“It’s really wild, huh?”

“Eh-heh-heh...”

“I truly do not understand why you are blushing...”

According to my host, the dragon’s movements were apparently under her control. If she decided that she wanted to go to the mountains, it went to the mountains, and if she decided that she wanted to leave the mountains, it would leave. Like a jockey gripping a horse’s reins, Renoir could make it walk or stop at will, and all of its actions other than drinking water and eating food were under her control.

“How do you move the dragon?”

“The dragon goes to whatever place I think I’d like to go,” she replied immediately.

I didn’t quite understand what she meant.

“What are you...?”

“I’m just the hotelier... Heh-heh-heh.” She snickered.

She smiled with her dark, black eyes that threatened to swallow me up if I stared into them.

“.....”

Creepy...

As frightened as I felt of the mysterious Renoir, I spent day after day in the hotel with her.

She seemed to be fairly knowledgeable about the region around us, and she took me to all sorts of places.

“Please take a look, Miss Customer.”

We were on top of a hill. Looking down from the balcony, I could see a huddle of low, white buildings near the seashore.

“The city that you can see over there takes very good care of the surrounding scenery, and the view from here is especially magnificent.”

“Wow, it sure is.”

“It’s a lovely sight, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Is it pretty?”

“Yeah, sure... It’s pretty.”

“Eh-heh-heh...” Renoir blushed.

No, I wasn’t saying that to you...

“By the way, Renoir, have you been to that city over there?” I asked.

“No, I haven’t,” she answered immediately.

Apparently she didn’t have much of a desire to leave the hotel.

“Miss Customer, do you know about that place? Long ago, it was used as a pathway that connected two countries.”

The next thing that she informed me about was a little, tiny forest road.

The dragon paused between two trees, looking uncomfortable. Then, just as it had when I had gotten on board, it lowered its long tail.

It seemed to be telling me to get down. I did as I was prompted, and walked down the dragon’s tail. Once I alighted from the tail, Renoir, who was leisurely sitting on the tip of the tail, pointed at the forest road and said, “I’ve heard that

down this road is some spectacular scenery that you really ought to see at least once. By all means, please enjoy it.”

“.....”

I stared at the forest road. The trees, lined up neatly in rows, spread their canopies over the single narrow path, forming an arch. When the wind blew and shook the trees, countless beads of light peeking through the gaps between the leaves danced along the road.

I could tell just by looking at it.

Walking down a road like this one would be a pleasant experience.

However—

“If you like, why don’t you come with me?”

I could guess from the way she spoke that she had probably never gone down this road, even once.

I thought that it was kind of a shame that, although she knew that this little forest path was beautiful enough to show it to strangers, she had never seen what beauty it held.

“No, I have work to do.”

But she turned me down.

Work?

As far as I can see, you’re just sitting there... Well, if you say you have work, I can’t force you to come. Though I don’t really understand what you’re doing.

“Got it. All right then, I’ll go alone.”

After bobbing my head in a little nod, I started walking toward the forest.

Then I stepped under the arches of the trees.

But—

“—I wish I could go.”

“—How nice.”

“—I’m sure it’s really beautiful.”

Behind my back, I heard echoes.

When I turned around to look, I saw Renoir waving at me from the tip of the dragon's tail. Her expression seemed somewhat cloudy.

"....."

Turning down my invitation despite actually wanting to go was more than a shame; it didn't make any sense.

If you want to go that badly, you ought to go.

I immediately headed back the way I'd come, and forcefully took Renoir by the hand.

"Let's go."

"Ah, but, my work—"

For a moment, she tried to shake off my hand, but I kept ahold of her and walked off, pulling her along.

There's a limit to how pitiful someone can be.

"At any rate, I doubt any customers are going to show up in the middle of a remote forest," I chided her as we started walking down the forest path. I insisted that it would be just fine to take a little walk through the woods.

"....."

As we walked along together, hand in hand, she ignored the scenery that she had traveled so far to see, and only stared at our grasped hands.

Even though she had traveled so far, she was wasting her chance to see it all.

Once night fell, I did nothing but sleep soundly in my room, but even then, Renoir thought nothing of visiting me there.

The dragon also seemed to stop moving once the sun went down, since all the swaying and noise stopped.

I was quietly reading a book in my room late at night when I heard two knocks.

"Good evening."

On the other side of the door was Renoir. Wearing a cheerful smile, she peeked in on me, and asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, how would you like to share a bed, or lay your head in my lap?”

I see. This must be a service they offer on sleepless nights. This place is just brimming with the spirit of service, isn’t it?

“No thanks.”

I’ll just go ahead and shut this door.

I’m not really having trouble sleeping, after all.

“But, Miss Customer...” Renoir opened the door again.

“No thank you.” I closed the door.

“Miss Customer?”

“No, really, I’m fine.”

“Well then, how about a goodnight story?”

“Nope, I’m already feeling sleepy, I’m good.”

“Humph...”

After we repeated this back and forth several times, Renoir sulked on the other side of the door.

That was generally how our end-of-the-day exchange went. When Renoir finally gave up, she said politely, “Very well, sweet dreams,” and left.

When things finally settled down, I slipped into bed and fell asleep.

Then, the following morning, I once again awoke to Renoir’s humming.

My days at the hotel passed in this fashion.

They were completely ordinary days, and if I can confess something, my entries in my travel diary consisted solely of accounts of Renoir taking me to visit places known for being scenic spots.

For example, we went to a mountainous region that I had visited once before.

“Miss Customer! Please take a look! The creature you can see over there is the extremely rare angier!”

“Um, I feel like there’s a much rarer creature right beneath us, though.”

For example, we went to the seaside.

“Miss Customer! Please take a look! A mermaid and a man are kissing!”

“It’s rude to stare.”

For example, we sat around idly while we were on the move.

“Miss Customer, you have a delightfully cute face, you know?”

“I’ll sock you good if you stare at me like that.”

For example, we went to a place known as a natural hot spring to use the baths.

“By the way, Miss Customer, why won’t you get in the bath with me?”

“Because it’s kind of scary.”

For example, she trespassed into my room at night.

“It’s kind of spooky, so won’t you sleep with me?”

“No,” I said as I drove her away. “Sleeping together is even scarier, I don’t want to.”

And, for example, we simply gazed out at the plains together.

“...Miss Customer?”

Renoir, who was sitting right beside me, plunked her head down on my shoulder.

Hey, hey, what are you doing?

I interrupted my reading to glare at her.

“.....”

Maybe it was because it had been a long trip. Maybe it was because she had been attending to me constantly for the better part of a week. She leaned against my shoulder, and fell deeply into an afternoon nap.

She must have been quite tired.

Even I couldn’t bring myself to wake her when she was sleeping so peacefully.

So I just stayed quiet, and lowered my eyes to my book.

Then, during this quiet time—

Out of nowhere, I heard a voice.

“—I wish that these days could continue forever.”

Maybe she was awake after all. Or maybe she was simply mumbling in her sleep.

But I didn't check, and I didn't say anything in response. I simply let everything remain vague, and kept reading my book.

I was a customer staying at the hotel, and she was an employee.

There was no way that this wish, echoing out of the afternoon haze, would come true.



And then we came to my final day.

It was time for me to disembark from the hotel.

We were in the middle of a field. In the middle of a world that was overflowing with green as far as the eye could see, the great dragon came to a halt.

“Miss Customer, will a place like this really do?” Renoir asked me from behind the hotel counter.

“Actually, it's perfect because it's a place like this.”

I really could have gotten off anywhere, but I had a feeling that if I made a wish to get off at a specific location, the journey to reach that place would have been marked by sadness.

So I had decided, to save myself the trouble, that I would disembark in an inconsequential place, at an unremarkable time.

As I was returning the key to my room—

“Thank you for the pleasant week. It was quite a nice stay,” I said to Renoir.

Renoir cried, “M-miss Customerrrrr...”

She was bawling, crying great big tears like a father watching his daughter leave home for the first time. “Just getting to hear you say that means my life has been worth living... Waaah...”

“You’re exaggerating...”

“Today’s as good a day as any to mark my death...”

“You’re really exaggerating...”

With a sigh, I picked up my luggage.

Renoir watched my every movement with tears in her eyes, then bowed very deeply and said, “Be sure to come again, please, Miss Customer.”

“Yes. If I ever have the opportunity again, I certainly will.”

To tell the truth, the arrangement of a hotel that can move while you are staying in it is certainly advantageous for a traveler. On top of that, I had been allowed to stay for free, so there wasn’t a single reason for me to refuse to visit again.

Though since this hotel and I both traveled the world around the clock, I had absolutely no idea when we might be able to meet again.

“Bye, then. Let’s meet again someday.”

Even so, as Renoir implored me to come visit again, she gave just one last bow, and turned her back to me.

Then I started to walk away, but when I put my hand on the front door—

“—Don’t go.”

I felt a sharp tug on my sleeve from behind.

“.....”

Uh-oh.

I wanted to end this without any trouble, but...

Maybe I haven’t said enough in parting yet.

I turned around to face Renoir.

“.....?”

As soon as I turned around, I was met with a strange sight.

Renoir, whom I'd assumed had pulled on my sleeve, was still standing on the other side of the counter. She looked at me after I suddenly turned around, and tilted her head curiously.

"Did you forget something?" she asked.

She didn't even seem to be aware that she had been tugging at my sleeve just a moment earlier.

Actually, not only did she not seem aware of that, she didn't even seem to know why I had turned around at all.

"....."

At this point, I suddenly realized something.

Something about her speech and conduct during the week I had been there.

If my memory served, she had been whispering peculiar things the whole time, *but only when she was out of my line of sight.*

—My dear, sweet customer.

—I wish that these days could continue forever.

—Don't go.

Over and over again while we were together, she had whispered a number of rather forward things to me, the type of thing that I, personally, would never have been able to say.

I had been certain that she was just eccentric, and had paid no attention to it.

But there had been a definite sense of discomfort ever since I had arrived.

"Miss Customer...? Is something the matter?"

Renoir clasped both hands in front of her chest, wearing an uneasy expression. She was eccentric, and she could be a little overbearing, but— The girl who had tried with all her might to offer me hospitality with the Service Handbook clutched in one hand, the girl who had smiled so happily she was on the verge of tears just because I told her the tea she had eagerly poured for me was tasty—was she the type to do something that would only cause trouble for

her guest?

No, no, she wasn't that kind of person.

"In which case, who...?"

If it wasn't her, then who had pulled my sleeve a moment earlier? Who had been whispering strange things to me day after day?

That meant it had to be someone other than her, but—

But she and I were the only ones there.

It was clear that something strange was happening around me. Maybe I was just tired?

Hmm...?

"Um, Miss Customer...?"

Even stranger was the fact that Renoir, on the other side of the counter, was suddenly staring at me, and her face was as pale as a sheet. It looked like all the blood had drained from it, and her expression was gloomier than usual.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

With her line of sight directed slightly above my head, she said, "Miss Customer... Um, would you mind doing me a favor, and coming over here slowly, right now, without saying anything...?"

"Huh?"

What's that? Are you playing some sort of trick on me?

"Come over to me without turning around, no matter what...! Please!"

"I'm not sure if I should listen to you..."

The trouble was that it was in my nature as a traveler to want to do anything that anybody told me not to do.

If someone told me not to turn around, as a matter of course, I would start feeling like I wanted to turn around.

And so, I whirled right around to look behind me. It had taken me just about one whole second to ignore Renoir's warning.

“.....”

And after I turned around, I stood there frozen for about ten seconds.

“Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.”

Countless whispering voices assailed my ears.

There in front of me was a darkness even deeper and blacker than Renoir’s eyes. Something in the darkness was staring at me from point-blank range, close enough that I could hear its whispering voice. Its physical shape was modeled after Renoir, but it was solid black, from the tips of its toes all the way up to its eyeballs. It was just a silhouette, like a living shadow.

“Ahhh! I said please don’t turn around, didn’t I, Miss Customer?!” Renoir shouted from behind me.

At almost that exact moment, countless arms stretched out toward me from the black shadow.

“Don’t go,” it said, as it tried to embrace me.



“Miss Customer! This way!”

The real Renoir grabbed me by the hand and started running at basically the same moment that I shook off the hands of the black shadow.

Without looking back, Renoir dashed up the stairs. With countless shadowy arms reaching out and trying to embrace us from behind, Renoir led me to the room on the third floor—she shut us in the room I had been using until earlier that day, and locked the door.

I took my wand in hand and used magic to slide the bookshelf over in front of the door. In the unlikely event that the lock was broken, I figured the bookshelf ought to block any incursion by the shadowy hands.

“I’m sad.” “Don’t go.” “Please.” “Don’t go.” “I’m sad.” “I’m sad.” “I’m sad.”

Along with the sound of knocking at the door, we could hear that sorrowful

voice coming through. All the incessant whining that it was emitting was in an exact duplicate of Renoir's voice.

"What the hell is that thing?" I stared at Renoir as I asked.

Its form and its voice were just like hers.

Renoir couldn't possibly deny there was a connection. It would be hard for her to play dumb and pretend she didn't know anything—and judging from her reaction a moment earlier, it was easy enough to guess that this wasn't exactly her first time seeing that mysterious black shadow.

"Umm...that is...well, it's one of those things that's hard to know how to explain..." Her eyes slid evasively away from me to look out the window.

To keep her from getting away, I tilted my head to block her field of vision, and smiled as wide as possible.

"What is that thing?"

"O-oh, Miss Customer... You're so close..."

"Start talking and I'll back away."

When I answered her that way, Renoir gazed at me with her deep black eyes.

"Oh...so if I don't talk, you'll stay with me forever...?"

Then, for some reason, those words came from behind the bookshelf.

Behind the bookshelf.

To put it simply, I heard the words coming from the direction of the mysterious shadow.

"....."

I smiled at Renoir again, pushing her to tell me what it was.

"Um...well...this is, you see..."

Flustered, she averted her gaze from me again. Her cheeks were flushed.

What are you blushing for?

Still the thing was banging on the door, and whispering in its quiet voice on the other side, "I'm embarrassed... You found me out... Don't go..." and so on.

The things that the shadow was saying seemed to indicate that it was reflecting exactly what was in Renoir's heart.

I'm just guessing here, but—

"That weird black shadow creature, is it like...a part of you?"

Taking all the evidence into account, it seemed only natural to arrive at more or less that conclusion. It was as if Renoir was clinging to me because she was reluctant to let her customer leave the hotel.

And my guess seemed to be generally correct.

At my words, Renoir's expression grew bitter. "...Um."

And the shadow whispered from behind me, "You found me out."

I see, I see.

"....."

Well then, I think I have the right to demand an explanation from you, don't I?

I grinned at her without saying a word.

"...I'm sorry."

Then, as if resigned to it, she began telling me bit by bit.

It was a story from an absurdly long time ago.

There was a dragon that traveled all over the world. This dragon, which was capable of going anywhere at all, didn't dwell in any one specific place. It never stopped walking. It just roamed around aimlessly.

The dragon, who was timid in spite of its huge body, was always worried that it might be causing trouble for someone, and it moved through the world fearfully. Even when it ate the trees that were its food, it got terribly depressed about causing trouble for the birds when they got startled and flew away. Whenever it drank water from a lake, it drank slowly so that it would not bother the fish that were living there. And if it ever inadvertently swallowed a fish, it was so afflicted with feelings of guilt that it couldn't stand up straight for three days.

This curious dragon was an exceptionally timid creature.

“I’m sad.”

On days when it was feeling terribly depressed, the dragon gazed at some beautiful scenery to soothe its heart.

That scenery might have been a sea of clouds viewed from a mountaintop, or a single willow tree growing in a lake, or maybe simply the mountains illuminated by the rising sun, or the view of a city where people lived.

All throughout the world, there were many things that could bring peace of mind to the dragon.

“I’m jealous.”

Among them all, gazing upon city scenery was a particular favorite of the dragon’s.

In a cityscape, when viewed from afar, there was a kind of beauty that existed nowhere in the natural world. And looking at cities meant even more to the dragon when it learned that they were built by cooperation between tiny creatures smaller than one of the dragon’s footprints.

The dragon was always fascinated by the cities’ beauty, which it could never experience in its own draconic body.

The dragon wished to have contact with humans someday, but it was difficult because its body was so large. Merely dreaming of a relationship with the humans, the dragon passed day after lonely day.

Then one day, something happened.

“.....?”

The dragon, who was spending its time in solitude as always, suddenly felt a slight discomfort on its back. Like there was some sort of strange weight up there, or like the dragon had been possessed by something mysterious, or like something had climbed on board. To make it obvious, the dragon felt like some kind of house was riding on its back.

Then the dragon realized, when it went to drink water from the lake as usual — “Ah...there’s a house riding on my back...”

And so on.

.....

Wait, wait, hold on.

“What’s with the plot twist?”

I found myself scowling.

I thought this was a story about a lonely dragon, then suddenly it takes this nonsensical turn about having a house riding on its back. What’s that about? What the heck happened here?

“Most likely, the spirits of the forest used their miraculous powers... How romantic!”

Renoir said something that barely made sense, with a deadly serious look on her face.

Well, it sounds like this dragon or whatever was eating trees on a regular basis, so most likely the magical energy that dwelled within the trees had an effect in some way that’s not entirely clear, and it probably spurred a sudden mutation.

Renoir’s story continued.

“Then, on the day the house appeared on the dragon’s back, the dragon obtained a second body. It was a tiny little dragon body, small enough that the inside of the house on the big dragon’s back felt spacious to it.”

Wait, wait, hold on.

“Sorry, but what is with that plot twist?”

“The forest spirits must have made a new body for the dragon... How romantic!”

“You seem to think you can get away with anything as long as you call it romantic, don’t you?”

According to Renoir, this small dragon body was connected to the large dragon body that walked around the outside world, like two halves of the same creature.

The little dragon lived quietly inside the house, and the large dragon

wandered around the world as it always had.

A small house sitting on the back of an enormous dragon. The odd sight quickly attracted a lot of attention.

One day, some eccentric travelers came to the conclusion that someone must be living in the house.

Then the travelers jumped up on the large dragon's back, and opened the door to the house.

The travelers were shocked.

Inside was a little dragon, just about the size of a puppy, standing there all alone.

The eccentric travelers found the idea of a house with a dragon in it quite intriguing, and they decided to settle there. Riding on the back of the large dragon, they could go anywhere in the world. As far as the travelers were concerned, there could be no more convenient means of transportation.

In exchange for living inside the house, they provided food for the small dragon, and took care of it. That was their way of saying thanks for borrowing the house.

In that way, the eccentric travelers lived their days on the back of the dragon.

Time passed, and eventually the travelers' journey came to an end. They settled down in one location, and the dragon was all alone in the house again.

After that, the large dragon traveled the world alone for some time, but there was one thing that was different than before. From time to time, travelers whose names the dragon didn't even know would stay in the house for just a few nights at a time.

The eccentric travelers had apparently spread many rumors about the enormous dragon all over the world. It was already a well-known fact that the house fixed to the back of the huge dragon could be used in place of normal lodgings.

Whenever travelers caught sight of the dragon crawling across the land, they would climb up to the house on its back. Every time they did, almost without

fail, the travelers gave the dragon food in place of paying a lodgings fee.

The little dragon, sitting there alone inside the house, was dearly beloved by all the travelers. Even though it couldn't understand their language, the little dragon sensed the kindness of the travelers who came to stay.

The little dragon met and parted with all sorts of humans, and each time, it came to understand them just a little bit more.

Eventually, the little dragon started to think—

"I want to become a human."

Then, much like before, when the house had suddenly appeared on the dragon's back, changes occurred to the little dragon's body.

One day, when it awoke, the scales had disappeared from the little dragon's body, replaced by smooth skin, and it had grown a head of hair. Its eyes were higher off the ground than they had ever been before, owing to the fact that it now walked upright. As you can probably tell, the dragon had taken on a human form.

"And that little dragon who assumed a human form was, to make a long story short, me."

And once she had taken a human form, she opened a business called the Moving Hotel Renoir in the house on the big dragon's back. Just like in the past, she desired contact with humans.

She set up shop as the Moving Hotel Renoir, and day after day, all sorts of customers came to stay with her. As a rare hotel that did not ask for any lodgings fees, her business became quite popular quite quickly.

Her hotel was beloved by many people, and many people sought her out in the course of their travels. In order to keep her customers happy, she created the Service Handbook, and devoted herself wholeheartedly to the customers who came to visit her.

The dragon's hotel was beloved as a place where travelers could stay for free. Then, eventually, it fell out of fashion.

It wasn't that she had been treating her guests poorly, or that she had gained

a bad reputation. It was simply that, to many of the people who visited, her hotel was seen as a thing of the past.

“After all the customers stopped coming, I started hearing strange voices, from time to time, in the hotel. Then the black shadow started to appear.”

The shadowy thing that she only sometimes glimpsed gave voice to all the emotions that weighed on her.

If she was feeling bored, it grumbled, “I’m bored,” and if she was sad, it cried out, “I’m sad.”

“I reasoned that it was probably another strange phenomenon related to this hotel, like when a house appeared on top of the dragon, or when the little dragon obtained a human form.”

“.....”

“I’m so sorry, Miss Customer... That shadow appears at times and opportunities that even I can’t predict... Really, I should have gotten rid of it before it could cause any bother for my customers, but...”

But the black shadow had manifested just as I was leaving the hotel.

“Really, I truly regret causing you so much trouble...!” Renoir said, bowing her head over and over again. “From here on out, please leave everything up to me! I will defeat it, one way or another. I know this will be an inconvenience for you, Miss Customer, but if you could please check out through the balcony—”

She rattled on and on as she spoke to me.

The pounding on the door behind us was gradually growing louder.

It was just a matter of time before the door broke down.

Renoir babbled on frantically, explaining that it was possible to leave via the balcony in case of emergency, and that she was giving me a dragon scale as a token of apology, and that at any rate she would try to settle the scandalous matter of the black shadow’s emergence.

I ignored her, and absent-mindedly mulled some things over.

The week that I had spent in the hotel had been very pleasant. I was sure that

the customers who had stayed there in the past would also have agreed with me.

I knew that they must have wondered why their stay was free, when it was such a fine hotel.

I was sure that long ago, people must have flocked to the hotel when they'd heard about it, because it was free and easy. But because it was free and easy, everyone stopped coming once the excitement wore off.

It's difficult to get people to care about something they can get for free.

People feel they ought to pay a reasonable amount for good things.

So I said something to Renoir, who was panicking as she tried to calm things down.

"Is it all right if I check out after we get the job done?"

Then I pulled out my wand.

At almost the same moment, the countless shadowy arms broke down the door.



After they broke through the bookshelf, the shadowy hands came slithering at me, and I used my wand to swat them down one by one, and crushed them beneath my boot.

"Renoir, that black shadow, what do we have to do to defeat it?"

I asked Renoir, who was panicking over by the balcony.

If it's been with you this whole time, surely you must know how to take it down?

"D-defeat it...?"

"Yes. What do we do?"

I swatted aside a shadowy hand.

"....."

I ground a shadowy hand underfoot.

“.....”

Finally, shaking her head very, very slowly, she told me, “I don’t know...”

You don’t know?

“Even when it appears in this form, if I ignore it for a while, it always disappears, so... This is the first time I’ve ever seen it act so violently...”

I see, I see.

I nodded in understanding, and the next moment, another batch of shadowy arms reached for me from the other side of the door.

“Hyah!”

It’s gonna be difficult to ward these off while we’re talking—I pulled out my broom, immediately kicked off the floor, and flew up into the air above the hotel, carrying Renoir, who had been panicking near the balcony, up with me.

“Pyaaaaaaahhh!”

A scream just like the one I’d heard when I first met Renoir echoed through the air.

Beneath us I could see the Moving Hotel Renoir continuing to walk along at a leisurely pace.

Dark, shadowy arms came wriggling out of the third-floor balcony, wavering unsteadily in the breeze.

Before long, one of the swaying black arms grabbed onto the roof of the hotel, and the hand swelled and changed shape, morphing into the shape of Renoir.

The ever-changing black shadow then looked up at us from the roof.

In its eyes, I could see a mixture of anger and sadness.

“Why is it so angry...?”

Confused, Renoir clung tightly to the sleeve of my robe.

Somehow or other, I had a feeling that I knew the reason why that black shadow was angry.

“Renoir. Do you remember what you said to me on the day we first met?”

“.....?”

On my first day there, when Renoir had asked me where I was traveling, I had answered, *“I’m just drifting around, going where I can go.”*

And then, Renoir had said something to me.

“You said that I was just like you.”

“.....”

“Being able to go anywhere is just wonderful, isn’t it?”—she had said.

But I had come to doubt that as I spent the week with Renoir.

I’d wondered whether she and I really were alike. Sure, I might be the same as her in the sense that I, too, was traveling without any particular destination.

“I think that my definition of travel and yours might be different, Renoir.”

But the ways we spent our time when we got to wherever we were going were completely different.

“You said that you’ve never gone into that city before, even if it looked very pretty, didn’t you? You told me that you’ve looked at that beautiful road, but never gone down it. All of the many sights that you showed me were beautiful, but it was all just scenery to look at. There was hardly anything we could touch.”

That’s what sets her apart from me—from any typical traveler.

“On a typical trip, you eat things wherever you stay, and meet new people—but these days that I’ve spent with you, on your travels, we’ve only been gazing at those sights from afar.”

Why is that?

“Are you afraid to make contact?”

Maybe you think that you’ll break things if you touch them?

That might have been true when you were an enormous dragon, but now you’ve got a form that’s almost exactly like a human’s.

Really, there's no need to be afraid.

"Humans are sturdier than you'd expect," I said as I took her hand. "So it's okay."

If there are words that you want to say, you mustn't hold them in. Just staying silent, just watching from the sidelines, just giving to others won't get anyone to understand what's in your heart.

"Please don't ignore me," I said. "Please listen closely to what I have to say."

"Listen to...what you have to say...?"

"Yes."

"But, considering the circumstances, what will talking accomplish?"

"I think I can probably do something or other about that, so we'll be fine."

"But—"

"Great. Okay, let's get going."

"Huh? No, wait—Miss Customer?"

"Okay!"

Without waiting for an answer, I stashed my broom.

Suddenly, we were falling sharply toward the ground.

Action before overthinking. You could call it reckless or haphazard, but well, aren't such things the very hallmark of travelers?

"Pyaaaaaaahhh!"

I heard her screaming behind me as I readied my wand.

Countless black arms stretched toward us as we fell.

They were easy enough to deal with. I cast spells at them in the order they came, cutting, crushing, freezing, melting, breaking, smashing, and transforming them into flowers.

One by one, I got rid of every one of them.

Finally, the two of us fell onto the roof.

“Don’t go.”

A hand reached out.

I brushed it away with my wand.

“Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go.” “Don’t go—”

The hands reached out again and again.

“You can say that all you like, but—I have to check out, you know.”

Each time I knocked away an arm, I slowly closed the distance between myself and the black shadow.

Again and again, I knocked down those clinging hands.

“I’m sad.” “I’m sad.” “I’m sad.” “I’m sad.” “I’m sad.” “I’m sad—”

One by one, I knocked them all down.

When I’d first seen the mysterious shadow, I had been put on my guard—but once I’d squared off against it, I knew that it was nothing to worry about. The numerous hands might touch me, grab me, even, but they would never cause me any harm.

“What is making you so sad?”

At last, I had gotten close enough that I could touch the shadow by extending a hand of my own.

The black shadow lowered its arms, sunk down where it stood, and whispered, “Is my hotel not worth visiting more than once...?”

The Moving Hotel Renoir.

Its heyday was clearly in the past.

Now, hardly any customers came anymore. Even so, she had been waiting for the customers that might return someday, cleaning and tidying the rooms to perfection while she waited.

The days spent waiting, the days she’d spent all alone, must have given birth to the black shadow—to the avatar of her true feelings.

“

I knew that she, too, must have vaguely realized the truth—that the black shadow was itself a manifestation of her true feelings, that it was a part of herself that she had been keeping secret from everybody.

Renoir stepped out in front of the black shadow, and crouched down before it.

“...For me, the days spent in this hotel were simply wonderful.”

To Renoir, who had longed to become a human, and been granted that wish, the days she spent interacting with people in the hotel must have been the happiest times of her whole life.

“So I was sad—sad that that era had passed, sad about the days when no one noticed me anymore.”

She continued, “Every single sight that I saw with my customers was meaningful, and yet...”

And yet, once she had been forgotten by the world—

Once everyone had stopped coming—

She hadn’t been able to accept that reality, and the hotel had produced the shadow.

But—

As I crouched down beside the two of them, I said, “I’m just guessing here, but—I don’t think that people stopped coming because there’s nothing valuable about your hotel.”

The hotel offered a bounty of incredible scenery, and on top of that, you could stay there for free. It was far too luxurious for anyone to dismiss it just like that.

I was certain that most of the guests felt like their days there were spent in a dream.

“I’m sure that most of your guests thought their time here in the hotel was lovely, just like me,” I explained. “But, well, simply put, it’s just a matter of them not being able to express those feelings.”

I was sure that most of the guests had felt like their days there were spent in a dream, but they probably also felt like riding around in a moving hotel that wandered across the land on a whim was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

I took the shadow and then Renoir by the hand and said, "Please, tell her clearly how you feel."

If you don't, she'll never know.

Then Renoir turned to face the black shadow.

"...You're right." She nodded sharply to herself. "You, too, are a part of me. I'm sorry for ignoring you until now—" she said.

The black shadow heard her words, and an expression of relief appeared on its face. Then it disappeared.

It disappeared into the shadow under Renoir, on the plain where the sunlight was streaming down.



There had been many twists and turns, but I was once more facing the end of my days at the hotel.

The large dragon stopped in the very center of a field, and as a gesture of parting, Renoir bowed once very deeply.

"Please come again sometime, Miss Customer."

She was following the manual to the letter.

"Yes. If I ever get the chance, I'll be sure to visit again."

And I answered her with the exact words laid out in the manual, and returned her bow. However, it was possible that she took my calm reply as nothing more than lip service.

Even though I did genuinely want to come visit again, Renoir had been unbearably disappointed in the past.

"If I ever catch sight of you again on the plains, I'll definitely come and stay, so please rent me your third-floor room at that time."

Renoir cried, "M-miss Customerrr..." Big tears flowed down her face. "Just

getting to hear you say that means that my life has been worth living... Waaah..."

"You're exaggerating..."

"Today's as good a day as any to mark my death..."

"You're really exaggerating..."

With a sigh, I picked up my luggage.

When I turned my back on the counter and walked to the door, Renoir trotted over and overtook me, then opened the door for me.

Outside, the weather was fine.

Sunshine streamed in through the open door.

I stepped into the sunlight, then turned around, and bowed to Renoir again.

"All right then."

Goodbye—

With a wave of my hand, I started walking.

But as soon as I did—

“ _____ ”

Along with a whisper so quiet I could barely hear it, I felt someone grab onto the hem of my robe.

When I turned around, Renoir was there beside the door, head hanging low.

I touched her hand, and responded, "I'll come again."



So please wait for me until I do—I added.

She lifted her face and said, “I’ll be waiting for your next visit,” smiling innocently, like a child.



“Across the plains, thick with greenery, sometimes you see large footprints in the ground. It’s said that those huge footprints, each big enough to fit a whole human body, belong to the Moving Hotel.”

I had just arrived in a certain city.

A traveler who had recently gotten to the region asked me, “Know about anything interesting around here?”

I’d answered, “As a matter of fact, there is something of great interest,” and offered him a particular tale.

A story about the Moving Hotel Renoir.

“It’s a hotel that never appears in a fixed spot, but wanders the land on a whim. Whether or not you’ll encounter it on your journey is a matter of luck—”

The traveler listened carefully to what I had to say, but when I got to that peculiar trait— “That makes it sound like it’s alive.”

He showed some real interest.

“Yes, that’s right. As you say, the hotel is alive.”

I nodded in the affirmative, then listed off the other characteristics of the hotel.

It was shaped just like a dragon. Its body was covered in black scales, and in the place where its wings should be stood a three-story hotel with a garden. It moved slowly across the plains, always traveling to places with superb scenery. Renoir, the proprietor, provided excellent service, and her cooking was delicious, which guaranteed a dreamlike stay.

“Plus”—I said to the traveler, to wrap up my story—“it’s such a nice hotel, you’ll want to go back again and again.”



CHAPTER 7

Two People's Story Continued

Two mages were walking along through a certain city.

Both of them had tied their pink hair up into ponytails behind their heads.

The two of them, smiling harmoniously at one another, looked just like sisters. In fact, when they walked through the city gates wearing matching robes, the proprietor of a roadside stall called out to them, "Oh, this is a rare sight. Twin travelers?"

It probably wasn't unusual for people to assume that the two of them were twin sisters.

"You mean us?"

The girl who appeared to be the older of the two—the one who was a little bit taller—walked over.

She seemed like a strong-willed young woman.

She looked over the bread that was on display in the stall.

"Mm-hmm."

As if scrutinizing them carefully, the girl who appeared to be the older sister brought her face close to each piece of bread one by one. Finally, after looking them over for a while, she asked briefly, "Don't you have any with mushrooms?"

"Huh? Mushrooms?"

"I'm looking for bread with mushrooms in it."

"Huh...well, I know we have some—this bread here has mushrooms in it. Will you buy some?"

"Mm-hmm." The girl who appeared to be the older sister nodded. Then, after a moment, she asked the girl who appeared to be the younger sister, "You gonna eat anything?"

The longer the shopkeeper looked at the two girls up close, the more identical their faces seemed to be.

But their personalities probably couldn't have been more different.

The girl who seemed to be the older sister laughed flippantly, while in contrast, the girl who seemed to be the younger sister wore a somewhat indignant expression.

"I am not you."

The girl who seemed to be the younger sister turned her face away sharply.

Perhaps they were on bad terms.

"Ah, fine, fine. Sorry. What would you like, Liella?"

Apparently the younger sister's name was Liella. Just being called by her name seemed to be enough to lift her foul mood.

She looked at the shopkeeper and asked one thing.

"Do they have any bread without mushrooms in it?"

"That describes most bread," the older sister said.

"All the bread except for what your sister just bought does not have mushrooms in it..." the shopkeeper confirmed.

"I see."

With a nod, the younger sister, whose name was Liella, examined each piece of bread in turn, just as her older sister had done, then finally said, "All right, this one please," and chose a safe piece of bread.

"Much obliged."

The shopkeeper wrapped up each piece of bread, and handed them to the two young women in exchange for money.

The sisters who closely resembled each other each took their bread, one with mushrooms in it and one without, and bowed in unison.

Then the younger sister, who had been called Liella, beckoned to the older sister with her hand, and walked off.

“All right, we’re going, Liella,” she said as she went.

The younger sister had addressed the older sister by the same name.

“Yeah, yeah,” the older sister responded. She sounded annoyed.

The two travelers, who had exactly the same name, disappeared into the hustle and bustle of the city.



“I do still think it might be better if you used a different name when you’re addressing me, though,” Evening Liella said to Morning Liella as they walked through the crowd.

Morning Liella had been the one who had unilaterally decided to call the girl who was actually a cursed sword Liella. “You’ve gone by Liella for these whole two years, so surely Liella is fine,” she’d said, and determined that Evening Liella would go by the same name as her.

“Won’t that be confusing?”

Evening Liella had been rather dubious.

However, in response to her question, Morning Liella had casually shaken her head.

“It won’t be confusing at all,” she had answered casually.

“.....”

—I have long since become a part of you. And you are a part of me.

Those words, which Morning Liella had said to Evening Liella at some point, suddenly came back into the mind of the young woman who was also a cursed sword.

If the two of them were indeed one person, then being called by different names probably would be strange, after all.

“But wow, this is quite a crowd, huh...? I feel sick...”

As the two of them were walking side by side— Morning Liella let out a sigh.

She was introverted by nature, and didn’t do too well in boisterous, crowded spaces. She frowned, and her eyes darted around at the groups of people that

were passing by.

Even though the two girls had planned to walk around as they ate the bread they had just purchased, the streets of the city were overflowing with so many people that there wasn't any room.

"Ahhh..."

Morning Liella started to swoon, grasping her wand tightly.

"....."

Evening Liella saw the state she was in.

"Ahhh..."

"....."

Even so, the flood of people kept flowing past them relentlessly.

"You are a part of me..."

As Morning Liella said these words, she looked as pitiful as could be.

Then, gradually, tiny bit by tiny bit, Morning Liella fell behind Evening Liella.

She was really struggling to keep up.

With a sigh, Evening Liella stopped, turned around, and extended a hand.

"Mm."

In the middle of the crowd, without saying much of anything at all, her hand hung there, extended awkwardly.

When Morning Liella finally stood up, she looked at that hand and smiled. She looked just a little bit happy.

"Thank you."

Then Morning Liella took that hand, and started walking again.

Together with her curse.



Afterword

“It’s strange... My work keeps increasing, but my deadlines keep getting shorter...”

It felt like the amount of work he had to do had basically doubled, and yet the time until the deadline had been cut roughly in half. Jougi Shiraishi was in a terrible panic. How panicked was he? Just as panicked as that one time when, in the middle of running, a hobby that he had taken up, he got the absolutely harebrained idea, “Oh yeah, let’s try running a slightly different route than usual today!” and veered off the road, arriving at a country lane he had never seen before as a result, not knowing the way home, not knowing how to get back to the original road, with zero yen in his possession, no smartphone, carrying nothing at all except for his house key, and then while he was in this desperate situation, the sun set and it started to rain and he found himself on the verge of tears. “Wahh, I can’t take it anymore!”

By the way, once he just kept on running, he made it back to a familiar road and got home no problem. His muscles were sore the next day.

But enough of that.

Basically that’s how it felt, like I was on the verge of death, as I once again finished my manuscript at the eleventh hour. I inconvenienced people on all sides, which I feel terrible about, but in all likelihood, Volume 14 is going to come down to the wire, too...I think... I’m sorry...

Well, even so—

Before the afterword, first I’d like to start with my comments on each chapter.

My comments are just packed with spoilers, so anyone who hasn’t read the main book yet, please turn back now.

All right then, here you go.

- Chapter 1 A Day in the Life of a Traveler

A story that summarizes the daily life of a witch in interview format. Wow, can you believe that there are some witches who make money through sleazy trades?

Personally, I think this chapter might be something of a prologue story.

- Chapter 2 A Blizzard during Eternal Summer, and an Easygoing, Lovable Girl

I feel like it's been a long time since I wrote a long story that was pure comedy from beginning to end. By the way, while I was writing it, I almost came to my senses several times, and asked myself, "Why on earth am I spending so many pages on a story like this one...?" but somehow I kept on writing to the end. Personally, I find characters like Ursula, who have a screw loose, really easy to write, so I like them.

- Chapter 3 Euthanasia

A story about viewing something negative in a positive light.

From the agreements we make to open social networking accounts to the contracts we sign with mobile carriers, everyone has been faced with overly long explanations, but no one really listens to them, do we? But from the side of the business making the contract, they have to offer the explanation, so the salespeople drone on and on. The majority of consumers sit there picking their noses like, "Well, it can't be anything too important," and let the whole thing go in one ear and out the other, but the information the salesperson is giving them is all important—that's why they're saying it... We really must listen more attentively...

- Chapter 4 The Curse of the Sword, and Two People's Story

I've wanted to write a character with a split personality for many years, but what came out this time was a story about a personality that dwells inside a sword and also possesses a human host. Strictly speaking, that's not a split personality, now, is it?

In the story of the cursed weapon, Evening Liella was hated from birth, but I don't think that being hated and cursed means that there was no way for her to find happiness.

If I ever have the chance, I'd still like to write a story about a character with a real split personality.

This chapter continues in the epilogue, "Two People's Story Continued."

- Chapter 5 Ashen Witch Counseling Agency

At every opportunity, Elaina takes on questionable jobs.

When I decided to include this chapter in Volume 13, I was beside myself thinking, "I've already got a chapter with an unhinged masochist and sadist in it, though... What should I do...?" But after thinking about it, I concluded, "Oh well," and kept it in as one of multiple such episodes.

- Chapter 6 Moving Hotel Renoir

This was a story about the lonesome Renoir.

I've been holding on to the idea of a hotel that moves around for a long time, but without the slightest idea what kind of story I wanted to make out of it, I let it rest for a long while, and the result was that I ended up penning this chapter.

A snack that was beloved when people of my generation were young stopped being produced, and when news of it spread on social media, I saw a lot of comments mourning its loss, like, "But I loved the stuff!" and, "I wish I could eat it one more time." But what's done is done. By the time they were regretting their loss, it was already too late. If we take it for granted that something beloved will always be there, it loses its value, and can quietly slip away. Before grieving the loss of something, I'm sure it must be important to say how much you like it while it's still around to be liked.

- Chapter 7 Two People's Story Continued

This chapter forms a sort of epilogue to the volume. Actually, not so much to the whole volume as to Chapter 4; it's like the payoff for that story.

I found myself in a bind after I finished writing everything because I had two chapters that could have been the last story in the volume, "Moving Hotel Renoir" and "The Curse of the Sword, and Two People's Story," and both of them seemed like decent conclusions, so I didn't know what to do. One way or another, after some discussions, the final chapter itself became "Moving Hotel

Renoir” and the epilogue became the wrap-up to “The Curse of the Sword, and Two People’s Story.” I digress, but this time I wrote quite a few long stories for the first time in a while, so I’m super tired.

So, that does it for my comments on each chapter.

By the way, this is changing the subject, but recently, I’ve been tending to not get enough exercise, so my frustrations have just been building and building, you know, and finally, I joined a gym. These days there’s apparently such a thing as web enrollment, an incredible system by which you can join from home without even going to the gym. But it’s all very good that I joined, except I can’t stop thinking about what I’ll do if people tease me, like, “Hey, look, a lanky little bean sprout came to give it a try!” or, “Why are you here? Come to show off your skinny body?” or, “With a physique like that, what do you even plan to work on? Are you mental?” And I think I might cry if I’m surrounded by bulked-out six packs, so I’ve been too scared and haven’t been to the place yet. Help me.

A number of things have changed since I stopped using the treadmill I bought previously when I moved, and I’ve tried my hand at running, and just now joined that gym.

I feel like I’m getting more active year by year, so by this time next year, I’ll probably be skydiving or something.

By the way, changing the subject again, but you should know that there are plans to start broadcasting the *The Journey of Elaina* anime in October. I’m getting loads of emails every day to go through all sorts of checks, but I always look forward to doing them while looking at the original manuscripts.

There’s not much time left before October, but I’d be very pleased if you would wait restlessly along with me.

Well then, let’s get started on the acknowledgments.

To M, the head editor.

I was cutting it especially close on the schedule for this one. I do want to try to be careful and not run up against the deadline for Volume 14, but I apologize in advance if things turn out just like Volume 13 all over again.

To Azure.

Thank you, as always. Once again, the cover illustration was just incredible... That, and this Volume 13 had a "Special Edition with Character Model Sheets" available, but as a matter of fact, there were a number of illustrations that even I hadn't seen yet. "A-awesome...so this is the hidden treasure they've been keeping..." I thought. Just the best.

To Itsuki Nanao.

I always look forward to seeing your comic book versions. Especially in the chapter "A Runaway Princess, Pursued by Whom?" Chocolat was ridiculously cute all over again... That's what I thought.

To all the anime staff, and to the licensing team at GA Books.

Really, thank you so much for your efforts in this extremely difficult social climate. Both the viewers and the original author are really looking forward to the anime broadcast in October.

That's it for the acknowledgments.

The Journey of Elaina, Vol. 14 is scheduled for publication in October. There's also going to be a special edition that comes with a drama CD, and once again I was allowed to write the script just as I please. I'll be very happy if you enjoy it.

Let's meet again in Volume 14.

See ya!

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