


8

JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina





See you again someday.
Until then, good-bye.

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A brilliant
young woman
who, at an early
age, achieved the
highest rank among
mages—that of
witch. Currently
on a self-indulgent
solo journey.



"Welcome
back,
Master.
What would
you like to
order?"

"Apologies
for the
wait!
Here's our
specialty
omelet—
Ahh!
I'm sorry!"

The promising new
employee had ashen hair and
lapis-colored eyes. And she
was a traveler and a witch,
and also a beautiful young
woman. No one had ever
worn the maid outfit better.



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The girl seemed to have a natural skill with magic. You would never imagine that it was her first time casting a spell. I thought she would have a little bit of difficulty with it, but...

“...Are you sure you’ve never used magic before?”

“Something like this, I suppose?”

“Maybe I’m some kind of magical prodigy ...?”

WANDERING WITCH 8

The Journey of Elaina

CONTENTS

◆.....◆

CHAPTER 1 An Important Day for an Important Person

CHAPTER 2 The Curse of Immortality

CHAPTER 3 That Is There, This Is Here

CHAPTER 4 Welcome to the Den of Crime

CHAPTER 5 Welcome to the Cat Ears Café

CHAPTER 6 Frederika

CHAPTER 7 The Night It Rained Stardust





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The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

8


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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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1: An Important Day for an Important Person](#)

[Chapter 2: The Curse of Immortality](#)

[Chapter 3: That Is There, This Is Here](#)

[Chapter 4: Welcome to the Den of Crime](#)

[Chapter 5: Welcome to the Cat Ears Café](#)

[Chapter 6: Frederika](#)

[Chapter 7: The Night It Rained Stardust](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



CHAPTER 1

An Important Day for an Important Person

On a calendar hanging from the wall, a specific date, several days in the future, was circled with now-faded ink.

I was a wanderer, aimlessly making my way through one day after another, but on that particular day I had business that I could not afford to miss.

I had been looking forward to it for a long time. That day held a great deal of significance for me. It was a special day, and for many, many years, I had been waiting patiently, desperately yearning for its arrival.

It was the day I would be able to see her again.

I wondered what kind of face she would make when she saw me. Would she be surprised? Would she smile? She might even burst into tears.

I had learned so, so much from her. So much, I couldn't begin to recount every lesson.

This day was the beginning of everything—the one that led to all the other days I spent with her. Marked there on the calendar was the very, very important day of my reunion with the woman who taught me just how vast the world truly was.

“I can't wait.”

I gathered my bags, my heart dancing in my chest.

“A very near approach! Once every twenty-two years! The comet will be visible in the sky!”

Tucking a pamphlet advertising my destination into my breast pocket, I pushed open the door. The narrow portal let out an awful creak as I opened it, as if informing me of its own limits.

And then I closed the door behind me.

“I'm off.”

Off on a journey to see you again.



CHAPTER 2

The Curse of Immortality

When she and I met for the first time, she was already dead.

Now, that's not some figurative expression—she was absolutely, positively, literally dead.

I'd encountered her corpse during my travels while on my way to my next destination. I had just casually remarked to myself, "Ah, it's getting a bit tiresome flying by broom. Perhaps it's time we took a short break," and had brought my broom down under a single tree that was standing alone in an open field.

It was autumn, and a cool breeze was blowing slowly through the air.

I sat down in the shade of the tree and opened up my map of the region to look over my route as I rested.

"....."

But apparently, someone had gotten here before me. Someone else's bags were already sitting under the tree.

But there was no sign of their owner.

The luggage looked like it probably belonged to a woman, and a pair of women's shoes were sitting neatly just beside the largest bag.

"....."

What's more, there was a letter sitting on top of the bag. I picked up the letter, which was practically begging me to read it, and broke the seal.

The message inside was simple.

Life brings nothing but despair. This is the end for me. Good-bye. If anyone finds my body, please fulfill my final wish. Throw it into the ocean.

—From the traveler, Little Matryoshka

It was a last will and testament.

“...Suicide?”

Could it be? In a place with such a nice view?

I had my head tilted in confusion when—

Directly overhead, the tree branches creaked.

Hey now, what in the world?

At that point, I hadn't thought to question how unnatural it would have been for someone to leave their will in a place like this... Then I looked up.

“.....”

And there I saw the figure of a girl about my age.

Her coral-colored hair was just long enough to touch her shoulders, and just like me, she was wearing a robe. She had probably been a mage.

Her eyes were a faded gold.

I couldn't tell whether the dullness was something inherent, or if it was due to her current condition.

“.....”

Her legs swayed gently in the breeze over my head.

She wasn't riding on a broom. And she wasn't sitting on a tree branch.

She had tied a rope to a thick branch, secured it around her neck, and hanged herself. She must have despaired of life, as the letter said. Being the one who found her body, I supposed she would have wanted me to throw her in the ocean.

She was, in the moment I first met her, already quite dead.

I had no words. I had unfortunately seen quite a few dead bodies in my time, but a death by hanging was still a first for me.

And so I'm ashamed to say this, but in that moment, my eyes were wide with shock, and I couldn't get my brain to form a single thought.

I was completely dumbfounded. I was trembling a bit.

“Um...excuse me?”

So even when a raspy voice came from above me in the tree, I figured I was probably hearing things.

“You there, traveler... I’d like to ask something of you...”

I looked up with a start, and the moment I realized that the hanged girl was staring down at me, I let out a hysterical “Huh?!”

“This rope is getting rather uncomfortable. Could you perhaps help me down...?”

“...Huh?!”

That uninspired reaction was the best I could muster when a girl hanging by the neck suddenly asked me for help.

“...Um, you’re alive?”

I was the one who raised this fairly obvious question.

Even with the rope still tied around her neck, she nodded nimbly.

“Unfortunately yes, I’m alive, as you can see.”

.....

Well, she can speak, so I guess she really is alive.



With a single slash, I cut the rope and rescued Matryoshka, or whatever her name was.

“Ah...I thought I was a goner...,” she said with a sigh. It was hard to tell if she was being serious or not. “Well, thank you for saving me. I’m Little Matryoshka.”

She bowed once to me. Her eyes still looked dim, but the girl in front of me was clearly living and breathing.

But in that case, what on earth had I witnessed earlier? I was certain that she had chosen to kill herself in despair, as her last will and testament had stated, but...

“So this is embarrassing, but I suffer from an affliction that prevents me from dying, even if I elect to self-terminate... For some reason, ever since about a

hundred years ago, nothing can kill me, and I don't age, either. It's a real problem." She told me this while laughing and playing with her hair, as if she was embarrassed.

She won't die... No, she can't die.

It wasn't an easy story to believe, but the girl before my eyes made no attempt to offer any other explanation.

"....."

Wait, but...

Even supposing for a moment that that's true...

"...So why did you choose to hang yourself in a place like this?" I asked reproachfully.

Did you really have to do it in the middle of an empty field? I mean, what were you planning to do if I hadn't come along?

Matryoshka looked a bit embarrassed and averted her eyes. "Well...how should I put this...? Look, this place has great scenery, doesn't it?"

"That's true, I think the view is really great."

"Isn't it? So the thing is, well, since I'm immortal, I can't really settle down anywhere, so I'm always traveling."

"Uh-huh..."

I see... If you've been ageless and undying for a hundred years, it'd be easy to see why you'd have to keep moving.

"So for some reason, whenever I see beautiful scenery like this, I suddenly get the urge to die."

"Oooo-kay...?"

Huh? What is she talking about?

"So before I knew it, I had the noose around my neck, you know?"

"That seems like an awfully trivial reason to kill yourself..."

"The desire to die just came over me, you know?"

“Do you...do things like this often?”

“No, no, of course not!” Matryoshka laughed. “I only manage to kill myself about once every three days.”

“Sounds pathological to me.”

“Of course, I fail a lot more often...maybe once an hour?”

“Yeah, there’s definitely something wrong with you.”

Disturbingly so.

I recoiled from Matryoshka.

“Oh, that’s right!” she said, as if something had suddenly occurred to her. With an expectant expression, as if she had hatched some bright idea, she continued, “Come to think of it, you...um—”

“Elaina. The Ashen Witch.”

“Right. Elaina, are you a merchant?” She glanced over at the luggage that was tied to my broom.

Today was unusual. I didn’t usually carry so much with me, so that must have given her the wrong idea.

I shook my head.

“I’m just a traveler.”

“Oh, a traveler! Just like me!”

“.....” Well, that much was true, but I wasn’t too thrilled about being compared to her. “Yeah, so what about it?”

“If you don’t mind, how about you and I travel to our next destination together?”

“...Ehh...” I grimaced openly.

“It’ll be great, won’t it? Come on, it’s like I always say, no road to hell feels long with good company!”

“You’re awfully enthusiastic about dying, aren’t you...?”

And awfully enthusiastic about dragging me into it if you can... That’s even

worse...

“Well, all jokes aside—”

Didn't sound like a joke to me...

“I'm not very good at using magic right now, so I've got to ask you to come with me.”

Huh?

“You can't use magic, so what?”

What are you getting at?

“For a while after I die, my body feels heavy and I can't use magic too well, you see.”

“.....”

Maybe the reason she chose this place to commit suicide was that she thought she could snag a passing mage who had grown weary of flying on her broom and decided to stretch her legs for a while... No, it couldn't be something like that! That's gotta be crazy talk, right? Right?

Though I also don't have a good reason to turn her down... Besides, I'd hate to think about her killing herself again if I refuse, so...

“Sigh...well, all right, fine,” I replied with exasperation.

“Seriously? Hooray!” Matryoshka threw both hands up in celebration. The gesture made her seem, for a moment at least, like a girl her own age. I had to remind myself that she had been alive for a hundred years.

“All right, come on.” I readied my broom, while putting on an air of reluctance. “I've got a lot of luggage with me today, so you'll have to sit on top of my bags. Is that all right?”

I had business to attend to, so at the moment there was a lot of stuff tied to my broom. If we were going to ride together, there was no other way than for her to ride on top of it all.

“That's fine! I might not look like it, but I'm used to being treated like an object.”

As she spoke, she hopped up on top of my bags.

“Used to being treated like an object?”

“Yeah, I mean it’s happened a lot, actually. After I kill myself, people mistake me for a regular corpse and stuff me in a coffin.”

“.....”

I wasn’t sure what to do with that information.

“Of course, it’s not like I just up and kill myself on a whim, you know? I do regret the follies of my younger days.”

“.....”

Did you forget about how you just hanged yourself by the neck...?

“Come to think of it, I’ve never once killed myself with magic...”

Ignoring Matryoshka as she mumbled such ominous things to herself behind me, I launched my broom into the air. With all the extra weight, it struggled just to maintain walking speed. By the time we reached our destination, Matryoshka had already muttered twice, “...! I bet I would die if I fell from this height, right...?”

.....

It took us two hours to get there.



When we finally reached the border, the guard there said, “Welcome! The Ashen Witch, Elaina, I assume? We’ve been expecting you!” as he looked over me and my luggage, then bowed once. On this occasion, the place that I was visiting—the Anroonie Republic—had already been informed that I was coming.

While I was visiting the neighboring country, I had been commissioned to transport some bags to Anroonie. In other words, the people of this country weren’t actually waiting for me. It would be more accurate to say that they had been awaiting the arrival of the luggage strapped to my broom.

“Oh, and that young lady would be...your traveling companion?”

Of course, he obviously had no idea who Matryoshka, the girl still sitting on

top of the packages, was supposed to be. I had picked her up on the way, after all.

“Yes, she’s my companion.” I nodded.

“Yeah, I’m deadweight.” Matryoshka also nodded.

.....

Are we sure this girl doesn’t have an affliction where she’ll die if she’s not constantly thinking about suicide...?

Well, even if she does contemplate suicide, in the end, she’s immortal, so she can’t die anyway. I really don’t get it.

“Understood! So that’s two of you, the witch and the deadweight, right? Welcome, welcome!”

But in the end, the guard must have wanted what was in the bags too badly to mind who was carrying them, and he quickly allowed entry for two people, one perfectly respectable witch...and Matryoshka, who was acting incredibly suspicious.

...Is this place crazy, too?

So then, since we had arrived in the Anroonie Republic, I was sure that meant our time traveling together was at an end, but Matryoshka kept following me, showing no sign of leaving my side even for a moment.

“What’s inside all these bags?”

“It’s medicine,” I answered. “Apparently, there’s some rare disease going around in this country, and they’ve been importing medicine from other places.”

“Rare disease?”

Matryoshka tilted her head in confusion and looked around at the city.

There were people coming and going down the streets. Frowning people, coughing as they went. People sitting in corners, staring up at the sky. People walking unsteadily, looking like they might fall down any moment... There were some normal, healthy-looking people among them as well, but with so many

who looked unwell, it was as if a pall hung over the place.

“I think that the people walking around outside are the ones whose symptoms are still mild. Once it gets bad, they don’t seem to be able to go out anymore.”

“I see...” Matryoshka was grinning from ear to ear.

“Why do you seem a little bit excited...?”

“Oh, it’s just that I’ve never experienced death from disease.”

“...By the way, how long are you planning to keep following me?”

“Where are you going from here?”

“.....” I looked away from her and pointed across the road. “I’m taking the medicine to city hall.”

“Then is it okay if I stay with you a little longer?”

Uhhh...

“...It’s fine, as long as you’re not thinking of doing anything reckless.”

“No worries. I was just hoping that I could get them to infect me with a little of that disease.”

“And you don’t think that counts as something reckless...?”

“Ah-ha-ha.” She laughed at me in my exasperation, then answered, “For me, fulfilling a death wish is an everyday thing.”

I wonder how many years she has spent committing suicide over and over again?

“What an awful way to spend your days...”

“Yes, I wish I could be freed from this curse, but...oh well.”

“.....”

I tried to think about what meaning could possibly be contained in those words, but it didn’t require that much thought, so I simply answered, “...I’d like you to please stop attempting suicide in front of me, okay?”

“Come to think of it, don’t they say that a cat will find a place to hide when its

time of death is near?”

“...Please also refrain from killing yourself immediately after parting with me.”



At city hall, a cat was meowing.

“Why is my natural enemy in a place like this...?”

It was in my nature to avoid cats, so the moment after I opened the door into the city hall, I raised my guard.

Sensing my apprehension, Matryoshka tilted her head in puzzlement. “Huh? What’s going on?”

A government official said, “Oh! We’ve been waiting for you, Madam Witch! Is that the promised medicine?” He prompted us to come inside, not paying much mind to my behavior.

I say he ushered us in, but it was more like he brought the medicine in.

“.....”

Figuring that wherever we were going would be just beyond the entryway, I put on a prim face and allowed myself to be shuffled deeper into the building.

We were led to a reception room, where I took a seat across from the official and handed over the bags. “This is the medicine you requested.”

With a thud, I dropped a considerable quantity of medicine on the table.

“Let’s see what we’ve got here.” The official opened one parcel and held up one of the bottles packed with powdered drugs. When he shook the bottle gently, the powder inside made a dry rustling sound as it moved around.

“...By the way, Madam Witch, who is your companion?” The official’s interest shifted from the medicine to us.

I suppose he wanted to know that she was not going to cause any problems.

“This is...”

...just my traveling companion, I was about to say— “I’m Little Matryoshka, that’s me-ow!”

—when I was interrupted.

“...!”

My nemesis, again...

There was Matryoshka, holding the detestable beast that had been encamped in front of the entryway. “Meow, meow,” she cooed as she played with the cat’s two front limbs. “Uh-oh, kitty punch!” she teased as she prodded my leg with its paw pads.

I felt a shiver. I felt a shudder.

“Seriously, what do you think you’re doing?” I gave her my best scowl. My expression was especially nasty because I was suppressing a sneeze.

“Well, it was so cute that I just—” Matryoshka blatantly ignored my angry face.

“Ha-ha-ha, he is cute, isn’t he?” The government official seemed to think that our exchange was joking between friends or something. Grinning broadly, he said, “There are many cat lovers in our country, you see, and I am definitely one of them.”



What was that? Is this place hell?

The girl by my side hadn't seemed the type, but she said, "What a heavenly country this is!"

Perhaps I might have appreciated the cat more if just being near the thing didn't send me into sneezing fits. I might have even wanted to pet it, but as things were, that was an impossibility.

"By the way, what do you think of the medicine?"

I returned to the matter at hand, trying not to look upset or irritated.

"Well...I can't say whether it will be effective or not until we try it..."

"....."

I suppose not.

"But with only this small amount...even if it does work, it may not be enough to save us now..."

The official replaced the bottle of medicine on the table with a *clunk*.

"Unfortunately, there are already twice as many infected people as we could treat with this medicine. And that's not even considering any future patients..."

"...Is it that bad?"

The official nodded sharply at me. "Yes, well..."

And then he started to tell me in bits and pieces about the situation.

The Anroonie Republic had no famous products to speak of, and its scenery was nothing special. In short, it was an entirely ordinary place—but there was one thing that its people were proud of. There was a single incredibly beautiful pond in Anroonie, in the exact center of the country.

"Meow, meow!"

This very beautiful body of water was well known in the country as Iris Pond, named after a witch who had once helped the city flourish. A statue of the witch had been erected in the pond, by which I mean that Iris herself had commissioned a statue in her own likeness. Just before her death, she had

stood before the statue and left behind these words: “The water of this pond shall become a medicine to cure all illnesses. The water of this pond shall become holy water!”

“Meow, meow!”

Incidentally, the witch Iris apparently died a normal death, from normal illness.

So then, Iris Pond was supposed to be filled with holy water, but after the witch died, the water became cloudy. Though the waters had once been so beautiful and clear that you could see all the way to the bottom, now it was a murky purple color. Even the statue of the witch Iris seemed as if it were lamenting the current state of the pond and looked alarmingly close to collapsing.

No one knew why this was happening. But one thing had become clear. When the water clouded over, a rare disease spread through Anroonie. The pond had transformed into a toxic bog, and it was sealed off from the public. But many of the people had already drunk the poison. A majority of the population had contracted the illness.

It was a strange poison. It didn’t always result in death. There was no pain. But the people who drank it soon lost the ability to move their bodies.

Even now, a great number of people in this country were suffering, paralyzed by disease, the official said.

“Meow, meow!”

.....

Before I knew it, there were tears rolling down my face.

“Are you crying for my homeland...? What a kind witch you are...”

The official started weeping, caught up in the emotion.

“No, this isn’t what you’re thinking...”

As I had been listening intently to the official’s story, Matryoshka had continued prodding my cheek or my arm with the cat’s paws to emphasize every important point. My allergies had gone into overdrive.

I was having a physical reaction to the cat, and the cat also seemed unhappy about the situation. Matryoshka aggravated the cat until it scratched my leg and arm. That was why I was crying.

I certainly wasn't feeling sorry for the people here.

"Anyway, thank you for the medication. I don't know yet whether it will be effective, but—now we have some hope against this strange disease."

At any rate, with this exchange, my job here was finished, so I was ready to get moving, but...

"Meow, meow!"

Matryoshka, for whatever reason, was enamored with the cat and refused to leave city hall until she had meowed at it...

.....

...for several more agonizing minutes.



"What an awful experience..."

By the time we left the city hall, my legs and arms were covered with fine scratches, and my entire body was throbbing with pain. What's more, thanks to the cat, my eyes were still full of tears, my nose was running, and I couldn't stop sneezing. It was the worst. I wanted to hurry up and find lodging so I could sleep.

I was in an incredibly bad mood, but beside me, Matryoshka was in such a good mood, she was humming a little tune.

"Do you dislike cats, Elaina?"

"Obviously, yes."

"I thought maybe you liked them so much it brought you to tears..."

"My body rejects them so strongly it brings tears to my eyes."

"....." After staring vacantly at me in my exasperation for a moment, Matryoshka said, "I see, I see, so it's one of those cases—Elaina, you're just like I used to be."

“...? What do you mean?”

“Long ago, I also couldn’t stand cats. If I touched one, I would start to tear up.”

“.....”

“But after I spent a whole day cuddling them, I was fine! Now I’m like this! I don’t have any problems at all, no matter how much I touch them!” Matryoshka crooned, waving her hands around.

What a carefree girl.

“...Well, you haven’t been scratched to ribbons, have you?”

She didn’t have a single wound on her arms or legs. Apparently, I was the only one the cat had disliked. Little jerk.

“Oh no, I got scratched plenty, too!” Not making any effort to conceal her good mood, Matryoshka kept on walking ahead of me as she made this inscrutable statement.

“You say that, but the only thing covering your body is cat hair. I don’t see any scratches anywhere.”

When I said that, she whirled around. “That’s because when Little Matryoshka gets hurt, it heals right away.”

“.....”

“Elaina, being immortal and ageless means that I come back to life when I die, but it also means that I heal immediately if I get injured. That’s why I’m like this...” She waved her hands at me again. “For a long, long time, I haven’t known injury or illness. I think that the instant any abnormality occurs in my body, it takes it upon itself to return to its original state. Even if I get infected with the disease, my body will probably purge it right away. I also don’t age. Same thing happens if I get hurt.”

As she spoke, Matryoshka pulled a knife out of her pocket and held it against her fingertip. “Watch.”

When she pressed the edge into her skin, red blood from her finger pooled along the blade.

However, the blood stopped immediately after she'd pulled the knife away, and it didn't flow anymore, or even trickle out.

"So you can see what a pain it is to have an immortal body."

"But your blood doesn't disappear when your wounds heal?"

"That's right. Even though the wound closed up, there's still blood, which is so strange." She looked around restlessly, then asked, with a tilt of her head, "By the way, do you have a handkerchief or something? It feels dirty to have blood on me, so I want to wipe it off."

"...Why did you cut your finger even though you don't have a handkerchief?"

With a sigh, I wiped her fingertip off with my handkerchief. Sure enough, once it was wiped clean of the blood, there wasn't a single scratch on her finger, just as if it had never been cut by the knife in the first place.

"Thanks, sorry. I'll buy you a replacement, so please forgive me, heh-heh." Matryoshka laughed.

"....."

In the end, it seemed like she was just using that as an excuse to stay with me longer, but oh well.

"...Sure, it's fine."

While I was at it, I used the handkerchief on the wounds I'd gotten from the cat, too.

Before we continued our tour of the town, I tossed the handkerchief, stained with our blood, into a nearby trash can.

A bloody handkerchief is just trash, after all.

So then, the result of all this was that I had to throw away my handkerchief, and as she said before, Matryoshka was going to buy me a new one, so we set out to look in the many shops and boutiques around town. But partway through our shopping, I gave in to an urge and made a suggestion.

"Honestly, it would make me happier to have you buy me a book rather than a handkerchief..."

“Huh? A book? Okay then. Which one do you want?”

“All right, this one.”

The bookstore we were in had an autobiography of the witch Iris, so I got Matryoshka to buy me that one.

And then we headed together to a café.

At the café, Matryoshka sat across from me and was staring at the autobiography of the witch Iris that I was holding in my hand. “What are you going to do with a book like that?” she asked.

“I thought I might learn something about this witch Iris.”

Since the medication I’d brought was obviously not going to be enough to solve this epidemic, I was sure that tomorrow I was going to receive a request, either to go somewhere else to retrieve more medicine, or to figure out some other way to help with the crisis. So I figured I ought to go ahead and learn a bit about the source of all the trouble—Iris Pond. This book ought to contain a few clues.

“You’re taking this seriously.” Matryoshka rested her chin on her hands and stared at me with a foolish look on her face.

“Matryoshka, you’ve lived for a hundred years. You’ve never visited a country plagued by a disease like this?”

“I haven’t, no,” she answered bluntly. “After all, I may have lived a hundred years, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that I’m so much better than young people like you living now, Elaina.”

“.....”

“For a hundred years, you see, I...pretty much just wasted time.”

“.....”

“So if you’re hoping I can lend you some wisdom or insight, you’d better think again, Elaina. It’s pointless to expect much of anything from me.”

“...You certainly don’t think very highly of yourself.”

“Why would I? It’s not like I’ve done anything other than live a long time.” Her

tone was flippant, but no matter how cheerfully she behaved, when I first met her, she had been hanging by her neck... She probably didn't have the slightest expectations for herself, either.

“.....”

I was still silent. In order to avert my eyes from the girl putting herself down, I turned my attention to my book.

There were all sorts of things written in the autobiography, from Iris's early upbringing to her many achievements into the present day. It went on and on. It even mentioned Iris imbuing the pond with magical medicine when she said, “The water of this pond shall become a medicine to cure all illnesses. The water of this pond shall become holy water!”

The appendix precisely outlined the ingredients that went into the medicine in the pond.

.....

“Um, it looks like the spell Iris used on the pond is written in here...”

Matryoshka narrowed her eyes intently. “...Why would something like that be written in an ordinary book that anyone can purchase?”

She makes a good point.

I was intrigued and read the recipe thoroughly.

“...Well, it seems she made the recipe public because she wanted them to replenish the pond if its medicine ever stopped working.”

“Like a secret recipe soup or something, right?”

But if you simply publish instructions to make a medication that works against all diseases, how will you ever make any money? I mean, I suppose the moment she turned all the pond water into medicine, she made the cure worthless...

But now it's become a poison pond. It's like the opposite; instead of curing all illness, it only spreads disease. And the statue that was erected there in her lifetime seems to be dissolving into the pond and becoming one of the ingredients. How awful it would be to drink something that had dissolved bits of statue in it...

“Ah!” As I was studying the list of ingredients for the medication, I noticed one thing. “There’s a mistake in how this is mixed!”

“A mistake?” Matryoshka repeated my words and tilted her head quizzically.

I nodded. “It uses ingredients that are dangerous when combined.”

“What happens if you mix them?”

“Something terrible.”

“More specifically...?”

“I think you’ll get a pretty good idea if you take a look around.”

The witch Iris had probably been thinking of the future of her country and wanted to leave behind a fountain that could cure all illness. But she had made a fatal mistake and created a toxic swamp instead. I couldn’t think of a more wretched outcome.

I slammed the book closed with a sigh.

...Well, now I understand the source of the problem, but that doesn’t do anything to help the people who are suffering from sickness.

After taking a short rest at the café, we bought some bread from a roadside stall and rudely ate it while walking.

We didn’t have any particular destination in mind, or anything we especially wanted to do, but we walked around for a while, and before we realized it, we had arrived at Iris Pond.

Perhaps her story had been on our minds.

“My, my,” Matryoshka marveled as she munched on her bread.

“What have we here?” I munched away on my bread beside her.

Before us was the pond, an eerie purple color just like in the government official’s story. A fence had been erected around the pond so that no one could get in, complete with a sign that stated, ENTRY PROHIBITED.

“This looks baaad.” Matryoshka kept chewing.

Just as we had heard, in the exact center of the pond stood a lone statue, the

one apparently erected by the witch Iris.

“Sure does,” I said, chewing away. “Even supposing the medicine does work, I don’t think this water will ever be drinkable again.”

The ragged statue was missing its arms, its legs were dissolving, its face was slowly crumbling, and overall, it looked like wax that had begun to melt and lose its shape. It wouldn’t be long before the statue had completely dissolved.

“Everything comes to an end, Elaina. That’s true for this bread, and for Iris the witch’s statue, and for this pond. Even Iris’s life was the same. The end comes for everything, no matter what it is or what shape it’s in.”

Matryoshka stood next to me and popped the last bite of bread into her mouth as she added, “...Except for Little Matryoshka.”



I didn’t feel like heading back to a café after eating, so I decided to find lodgings and stay in the room.

There were many inns in this country, but since I had my hard-won payment for transporting the medication, I decided on something a little extravagant. I decided to stay in the most expensive room in the most expensive hotel in the city.

I have a tendency to go to extremes. If I have money, I’ll use it up, and if not, I’ll revert to a simple lifestyle. Since I lead such an unstable life, of course I don’t really save up any money.

“What a huge room...! Amazing! What is this place?!”

By the way, there was an extra person staying with me this time around. To use her word, I had taken on some deadweight.

The suite had several rooms inside, typical for something of this price, including a bedroom, a bathroom, and a living room. It was less like a hotel room and more like a small apartment.

After running around and looking at everything, Matryoshka asked, “But is it *really* okay? Elaina, you’re paying for my stay.”

“It’s fine, I really don’t mind.”

“Little Matryoshka doesn’t mind camping outdoors or whatever.”

“I wanted to talk with you a bit more. There are some questions I’d like to ask you.”

Besides, it would be awkward to have an acquaintance choose homelessness to save on hotel charges.

“Questions?” She tilted her head from where she lay on the sofa.

Let’s get straight to the point.

“Why did you become ageless and immortal?”

“Hmm...” She turned around to face me and answered, “So it is bothering you?”

“Yeah, well—” It’s not that I wanted the secret for myself. But I didn’t understand how she was able to live without dying. Most importantly, I wasn’t able to comprehend why she was attempting suicide on a daily basis.

“It’s kind of a long story, is that all right?”

And then, little by little, she began recounting the tale.

Matryoshka had been born about a hundred years earlier, but even she didn’t really know the reason why she had become immortal.

The place where she was born was a small, remote village, but it was a commonplace, totally ordinary village, and she was raised there without wanting for anything.

She came from a family of mages, so as a matter of course, she learned magic and used it as anyone would and lived a normal life.

She never considered herself special or different.

She was sure that she would simply grow up and get married normally, have children normally, then grow old and die normally.

So she studied magic normally and chose to live her life as a normal mage.

However...

“...Matryoshka, you stay young no matter how much time passes.”

“You don’t change at all, do you...?”

She had just turned twenty when her father and mother said these things with smiles on their faces. Her outward appearance hadn’t changed in the slightest since she was about sixteen years old. However, there were plenty of people who maintained a youthful appearance even into their twenties, so she had figured she just had a baby face.

However, even as she turned twenty-five, and then thirty, she didn’t age visually at all. Her appearance was permanently stuck at sixteen. Not a single thing changed.

All the people around transitioned into adulthood. But she was forever in between, appearing to be neither an adult nor a child, watching as the country and the people around her changed with the years.

When she turned forty, her parents passed away.

But as always, she still looked sixteen years old.

“...Matryoshka, you stay young no matter how much time passes.”

“You don’t change at all, do you...?”

Just before their deaths, her parents looked her over and told her this again. But all the goodwill had left their words. She could tell that, in their eyes, she had become something alien.

And it wasn’t just her parents. The people in her village began to look at her differently, too.

“That’s Matryoshka over there.”

“I hear she’s forty years old, but she still looks so young.”

“She hasn’t changed at all in years...”

“I’m jealous... I wonder how she maintains her youth...”

Over time, other people had stopped seeing her as a fellow human. She could see that in their eyes.

“No question about it, she must be sapping the life energy from everyone around her.”

People even began coming up with wild accusations.

Nobody wanted to get close to her. She had already stopped being treated as human.

“...This is bad.”

When she noticed how the people in her village were looking at her, she fled her hometown.

After that, she traveled through all sorts of places.

At first, she was traveling to find a cure for her condition. She was on a journey to find someone who could fix her body and make her age normally. But to skip right to the conclusion, as was clear from looking at her present self, she hadn't run across anyone capable of curing immortality.

And not only that, in the countries she visited, the minute that it became clear that she was immortal, people would inevitably try to use her for their own ends.

“I want you to let me study you, so that I can cure your immortality.”

In one country, a mage conducted all sorts of experiments on her in the name of academic research. It started with drawing some of her blood, then cutting off her arm, then breaking her leg. Then the mage tried drinking her blood.

That was how Matryoshka discovered that any injuries she suffered, no matter how grave, healed immediately.

Each and every one of the mages who approached Matryoshka said they wanted to heal her, but what they actually wanted was to take her immortality for themselves.

Unfortunately for them, even if they stole Matryoshka's blood, not one of them managed to become immortal.

“Oh...! That must be the power of a god! It's only fitting that you should rule over our country...!” Sometimes people would be enthralled by her undying nature and would try to make her the head of their country.

“Why don't you become infected? Could it be, the plague is in you...?” Since being immortal also meant that Matryoshka didn't fall ill, some people saw that,

and in countries where sickness was spreading, rumors would spread as well that she was the carrier.

She passed through many different countries, but no matter where she went, being immortal meant that she could never stay long.

Once her immortality became public knowledge, she would be a target for bad people who wanted to use her, and if she tried to stay long, the people would begin to find the ageless girl creepy.

Eventually, she gave up on settling anywhere, and she decided to travel and leave everything to chance.

She grew to hate living and even threw herself into a river in an attempt to die. But as expected, she couldn't die, no matter what happened. The day after she had jumped into the river, she awoke as normal at the bottom of the cliff. She tried slitting her wrists, and hanging herself, but in the end, she was always called back to this world.

With no desire to live, yet unable to die, she continued to wander.

In the sixty years since she'd begun her travels, Matryoshka had rarely used magic. Even most of the spells that she had studied so extensively were entirely forgotten by now.

"Elaina, I lost my will to live a long time ago."

"....."

"I've got nothing. I've lived a long time, and I have nothing to show for it. Even if there are a lot of people suffering from disease, I've lived for a hundred years, but I don't have any knowledge that can cure them. I've spent a pointless hundred years alive and still lag behind you, a girl who hasn't been alive for even two decades. That's why I want to end it already, but I can't even do that...," Matryoshka murmured from the sofa.

She ought to have been able to learn something in her desperation. She ought to have been able to become a wiser and more powerful witch than any other. She had had an excess of time. If she had wanted to, she ought to have been able to do anything she desired.

But I suppose she hadn't been able to muster up the motivation.

Humans try so hard only because they know that there is an end after all.

And so she hadn't been able to muster the effort. There hadn't been anyone for her to compete against. No one had ever been able to understand her, and at the same time, she hadn't been able to understand other people, either.

"I just hate everything already." She laughed in a self-deprecating tone. "Little Matryoshka has no reason to live, Elaina."

No matter how cheerful she might have acted, she couldn't drown out the anxiety smoldering deep in her chest.

It seemed like an extremely unhappy way to live.

However—

"I can't possibly imagine that, in a hundred years, you haven't learned anything at all." I just shook my head at her. "I also can't imagine that you have no reason to live."

"....."

Matryoshka looked at me silently.

Her eyes were filled with insecurity.

"...All right then, what can I *do*, Elaina?" she inquired of me in a whining tone.

So I answered her, clearly and concisely.

"You can die."

I suggested something that she knew how to do perfectly well already.

"You just told me that you have no reason to live, but—you do have a reason to die."



The next morning, Matryoshka and I visited city hall again.

The cat came up to us and meowed, just as it had the day before. But in sharp contrast to our previous meeting, the government official greeted us with an extremely tired appearance.

“...Ah, Madam Witch. Welcome... I was just thinking of summoning you...”

The official’s face looked as if he had seen the end of the world.

“Is it all right if I hold this cat?” Matryoshka asked abruptly.

“Ha-ha-ha...go ahead... Hold him as much as you like...”

The official had completely lost his spirit. Just by looking at him, it was immediately clear what had happened during the day while we were heedlessly sightseeing around town.

“...This way, please.”

He showed us, two humans and one cat, into the reception room.

“...Thanks.”

I had come to city hall to find out if the medicine I’d brought was working. But there was no need to ask. The answer was obvious.

Because on the table of the reception room sat a huge quantity of as-yet-unused medicine.

“It’s truly unfortunate, but...this medication hasn’t shown any effect on the rare illness running rampant through our republic...”

“I see.”

“Apparently it’s a rather troublesome disease... It doesn’t seem possible to clear it up with only normal medicine. We had such high hopes, but...”

“.....”

The official let out an exaggerated sigh, then asked me, “Miss Witch...what can we do...? If this continues, we will lose many citizens...”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I am not a witch who specializes in disease, so it wasn’t easy for me to answer his hopeful inquiry.

“If the medicine doesn’t do anything, then I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do.”

So I shook my head and answered honestly.

“Oh no...”

Right now, there were probably many people suffering from this disease. It would be a terrible tragedy to lose so many.

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean that we can’t come up with some solution for the problem of this illness,” I said.

I had come here because I thought I might be able to make a breakthrough and help the situation. If I really thought it was impossible, I would have snuck out and escaped the city right away.

“...!” The official leaned forward eagerly. “C-can you really help?!”

“Sure, yeah.”

“But how...?”

I didn’t answer.

Instead, I took the cat that Matryoshka had been holding into my lap.

Since I had gone to the trouble of staying, I had decided to try out something here that I had always wanted to do at least once.

As I played with the cat’s two front paws, I said, “You can look forward to finding out once we go to the pond, meow!”

“.....” The government official was silent.

“.....” I was silent, too.

“.....” Matryoshka looked at me with a serious face.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“...Um, I just got carried away.”

Seriously, what am I doing?

I felt like crying, but the tears didn’t come out.

Neither did any sneezes.



Iris Pond was just as it had been the day before: filled with purple sludge. It was absolutely filthy. It looked like drinking from it would kill you instantly.

Standing before the pond, I realized something that I hadn’t noticed the day

before. There was a rotten, muddy stench hanging thickly in the air around the water.

“Ew...the smell is nauseating. How awful...,” Matryoshka said, frowning.

“It sure is. It’s really rotten, huh.”

“.....” She looked at me and fell silent. Her eyes seemed to be wondering, *Are we seriously going through with the thing you said yesterday?*

“.....” I also looked at her silently. With my eyes, I aimed to communicate, *Of course. We’ve come too far to complain now.*

“...Huh? Maybe you’re thinking that I don’t have to do it after all?”

“I’m not thinking that at all. Now, please get on with it.”

“Eh, but...”

“Do it.”

“I don’t want to... I’m scared.”

Before long, the official, who was watching our exchange from behind us, spoke up and asked, “Um...is everything all right?” but I totally ignored him.

“If you don’t do it, we can’t make any headway.”

“You say that, but... Look at it, it’s super dirty!”

“It sure is.”

“If I drink from it, I’ll die!”

“You sure will.”

“...Do I really have to drink it?”

“You sure do.”

I nodded decisively. “We went over this yesterday, didn’t we?”

“.....”

She continued protesting, “Umm, but...,” and, “Doing something like that is a little...,” and, “I don’t wanna...” She obviously wasn’t a fan of my plan and kept trying to come up with an excuse to back out.

I gave her a pat on the back and said, “You’ll be fine, so drink up.”

It still took about ten minutes after that for her to resolve herself to the task, though.

“I understand! Fine, yes, I understand! I should just go, should I! I should go!” With a complicated look on her face, Matryoshka headed toward the pond. “All right, here I go! Grrrah!” She jumped in.

“Oh.”

I wondered this when I first met her, too, but why is she so positive when she’s doing something negative?

The day before, I had asked her to please drink some of the pond water.

“...Um, Miss Witch, what is she doing...?” The official’s eyes were wide.

“...She jumped into the pond, didn’t she?”

She had sent up a splash of purple filth.

“...Um, I think she’ll die if she jumps in there.”

“I think so, too.”

“You asked her to jump into the pond and die...?”

“No, I asked her to drink some of the pond water.”

“Um, Madam Witch, drinking that water will certainly kill her...”

“...To tell you the truth, she has a death wish.”

“Um...a death wish...?” The official’s gaze was focused on the pond. “...But, Madam Witch, she’s clearly asking for help...”

Right in the center of the rippling water’s surface, Matryoshka was struggling to stay afloat. She was even crying and appealing to us for help. “Ah, I’m dying! Oh no...death...stench! Waaah...!”

“...Looks that way.”

“We don’t need to help her?”

“Let’s wait a bit longer.”

“But, Madam Witch...”

“Yes?”

“...She’s already gone under...”

“She sure has.”

Looking at the purple pond, we realized that Matryoshka was nowhere to be seen. Instead of a person, I could only see bubbles.

“...Um, I’m pretty sure that if we don’t hurry up and get her out, it’ll be too late.”

“No, let’s wait a bit longer.”

“But, Madam Witch...”

“Yes?”

“Something just floated to the surface. Is that...?”

When I looked, somebody was bobbing facedown in the pond.

“So she died, huh?”

“She really died, didn’t she?”

“All right, I’ll go get her.”

It seemed like it had been long enough, so I pulled out my wand, and with a levitation spell, I hauled Matryoshka over to us. Her arms and legs dangled loosely as she floated through the air, and I laid her on the ground. She had certainly done her best to gulp down as much water as she could.

After coming out of the pond, Matryoshka’s sodden corpse dried right before our eyes, and before long, the luster returned to her skin. In just a few seconds, her body, which had been befouled by the purple water, reverted to its original state.

And then...

“...I thought I was a goner!”

As expected, she’d returned to life. It was hard to tell whether she was joking or serious.

Pointing at the resurrected girl, I turned to the government official and said simply, “Your wonder drug is ready.”



The night before, I had made one request of Matryoshka.

“The first step is that when I give the signal, I want you to drink the pond water. Then this will all be over.”

It had become clear as soon as I saw the state of the pond that the medicine I brought probably wasn’t going to be effective, so as a backup plan, I went ahead and made this proposal to her.

“Huh? No way! Little Matryoshka will die, won’t she?”

Of course, she rejected the plan.

“But this is something that only you can do!”

“...What do you mean?”

“You’ve got a special power. So special, in fact, that your immortality is really only a side effect.”

“...?” Matryoshka didn’t quite seem to get it and just tilted her head quizzically. “I have a power more special than immortality?”

Let me show you.

“Take a look at this.” I waved my arms in the air. “Check out my arms and my face.”

“.....”

She fixed her eyes on me and stared hard. Her intense gaze scrutinized me, and she brought her face in close, but she didn’t seem to understand anything.

“...It’s just normal you, Elaina...,” she said uncertainly.

“That’s right.” I nodded. “It’s just normal me.” And then I said, “Just normal me, with none of the wounds that I ought to have on my face and arms.”

In the afternoon, when we had visited city hall, I had gotten scratched up by the cat on my face and arms, but there wasn’t a single trace of those injuries left. Not anywhere.

My skin was just as neat and clean as if I had never been marred in the first place.

Meaning...

“My wounds have healed. Of course, I didn’t use magic or anything to heal myself, and I wouldn’t have had the energy to do so anyway. And I don’t think I did anything special to treat the scratches, either.”

“...So what are you trying to say?”

“Your blood healed my wounds.”

Earlier in the afternoon, after she had wiped her blood on my handkerchief, I had applied it to the scratches on my arm.

That was when a mysterious phenomenon had taken place. The scratches that I was sure I had on the backs of my hands disappeared. As if they had never been there at all.

Bewildered by this mysterious phenomenon, next I tried wiping my face with the handkerchief soiled with Matryoshka’s blood, and when I did, the wounds on my cheeks also disappeared. In other words, her blood could magically heal injuries.

“Your blood will probably be effective against the illness,” I said. “After I wiped myself with the handkerchief that had your blood on it, two strange things happened. The first was that, as I just showed you, my wounds disappeared on their own. The second—my body’s strong allergic reaction whenever I touch cats—has also completely gone away.”

Before I knew it, both the crying and the sneezing were completely cured. It was as if I had never been allergic in the first place.

“I think it’s likely that your blood holds the power to cure any ailment that you have personally experienced.”

Surely Matryoshka had also been allergic to cats when she was young, just like me. But she had told me that as she forced herself to spend time with cats, her body had completely stopped reacting.

That wasn’t simply because her body had gotten used to cats. Just as any

wounds healed spontaneously, her body had cured even that predisposition.

“So this means, to put it a different way, that within your body lies the power to cure any type of deadly illness.”

My instruction to her to drink the pond water was, in short, a way to make use of that power. As long as we had her blood, we would be able to cure any and all diseases that she had personally experienced.

“So it’s not true that you’re not good for anything.”

Sure, she might have lived for a hundred years, and spent sixty of them wandering aimlessly. But...

Precisely because of that, it seemed to me that she could do anything.

“If you wanted to, you could cure any and all diseases. You could become a panacea, a medicine effective against all illness.”

She could become the very thing that Iris Pond had been meant to be.



Once Matryoshka had come back to life, we collected some of her blood and made our cure-all. As we had predicted, when we gave them a little bit of her blood, the people of the city immediately began to recover from their illness.

“Incredible...! How on earth did you do that...?! To me, it just looked like she had thrown herself into the pond, but...” The government official, watching us work from the sidelines, was surprised by the miraculous medicine that we’d suddenly produced.

“.....”

“.....”

I mean, she did actually just throw herself into the pond, but...

In the end, the people were completely cured, thanks to the medicine that Matryoshka made.

“Wow...how on earth can I ever show my appreciation...?! Thank you...! Thank you so much...!”

Thanks to Matryoshka’s efforts, the mysterious disease had vanished from the

city.

The people showered her with their gratitude.

“Thank you so much!”

“This isn’t much, but...as thanks.”

“Please accept this token!”

She received endless thanks and even gifts and money from the people.

“H-huh...this much? No, I can’t...heh-heh...”

She was bewildered but had a huge smile on her face.

...Though not a bit of that money is flowing in my direction...

In any case, we had cured the illness that arose from the pond, but we hadn’t fixed the pond itself. Even now, poison was seeping into the water.

“By the way, that statue is corrupting the magic medicine,” I told the city official. “It would be best to remove it right away so that the disease won’t be any further danger,” I recommended.

“Seriously?”

“There’s poison leaching out of that statue. If you don’t remove it, the pond will never go back to normal.”

“But...if we take the statue out, our country will lose its only landmark...”

“How about a statue of Matryoshka? There’s no question that she’s the one who saved the country this time, after all.”

“...!” The official’s eyes lit up. “That’s...a great idea!”

“Isn’t it?”

“I’ll go commission a sculptor right away.”

“While we’re at it, I’ll need you to pay the fee for rights to the usage of her likeness...”

“...How much?”

“Roughly this much should do it...”

.....

When it came down to it, Matryoshka had been the one to cure the disease caused by the poison pond, but there was no harm in adding to my own income.

Once the matter had come to a conclusion, we had less and less reason to stay in the city, so we were about to take our leave.

"Elaina. Thank you very much." Matryoshka bowed deeply. "It's been many years since I've been thanked by people..." When she raised her face again, I was surprised to see her smiling broadly.

No, no...

"I'm the one who should be thanking you," I said.

After all, I made bank...

"Oh? What for?"

She noticed my devious expression and looked back at me in confusion.

"It's nothing." I shook my head, driving away my wicked thoughts, and changed the subject. "Matryoshka, here, take this."

"...?" Tilting her head in bafflement, she accepted a memo sheet from me. "... What's this?"

"An address."

"Huh?" Matryoshka's face flushed.

.....

"It's not mine."

"What? Oh, I see... You surprised me..."

You're the one who surprised me... It's not as if I would suddenly hand you my own address after all this... Anyway, I'm a traveler, so I don't even have a fixed address.

"That memo has the address of someone who lives in a nearby country. She's an extremely long-lived old woman. Long ago, she was an extraordinarily

brilliant mage, so it's likely that she has a little bit of knowledge about your immortality. Even if you've found a purpose for your immortal body right now, traveling around forever helping people will probably be difficult, so...you might want to visit her when things get tough."

".....When you say extremely long-lived, how long do you mean?"

"About four times as long as you."

"Four times...?"

"She's four hundred years old."

"....." Matryoshka let out a sigh as she stared at the paper. "...The world is a big place. There's someone who has lived four times as long as me, and there's someone who's way smarter than me even though she hasn't lived one-fifth as long as me..."

Uh-oh, did I accidentally give her an inferiority complex?

"That's nothing to get depressed about." I snorted impertinently like the young person that I was. "Did you know? In this world, there is also a dragon who has lived four hundred years but spent most of that time asleep."

"...Meaning what?"

"Meaning that the world is even bigger than you think."

Of course, the world is much larger than even I have ever imagined and overflowing with things that I still don't understand.

That's why I can't stop traveling.

"Best of luck to you, Matryoshka," I said with a smile. "I'm sure that you'll find a cure for your condition someday."

To borrow her words from earlier, everything comes to an end. The bread did, and the statue of the witch Iris did, and so did the pond. Even the witch Iris's life ended. No matter what it might be, everything comes to an end someday.

Even those suffering from immortality.

"All right then—I'll try a little harder," Matryoshka said, smiling back at me.

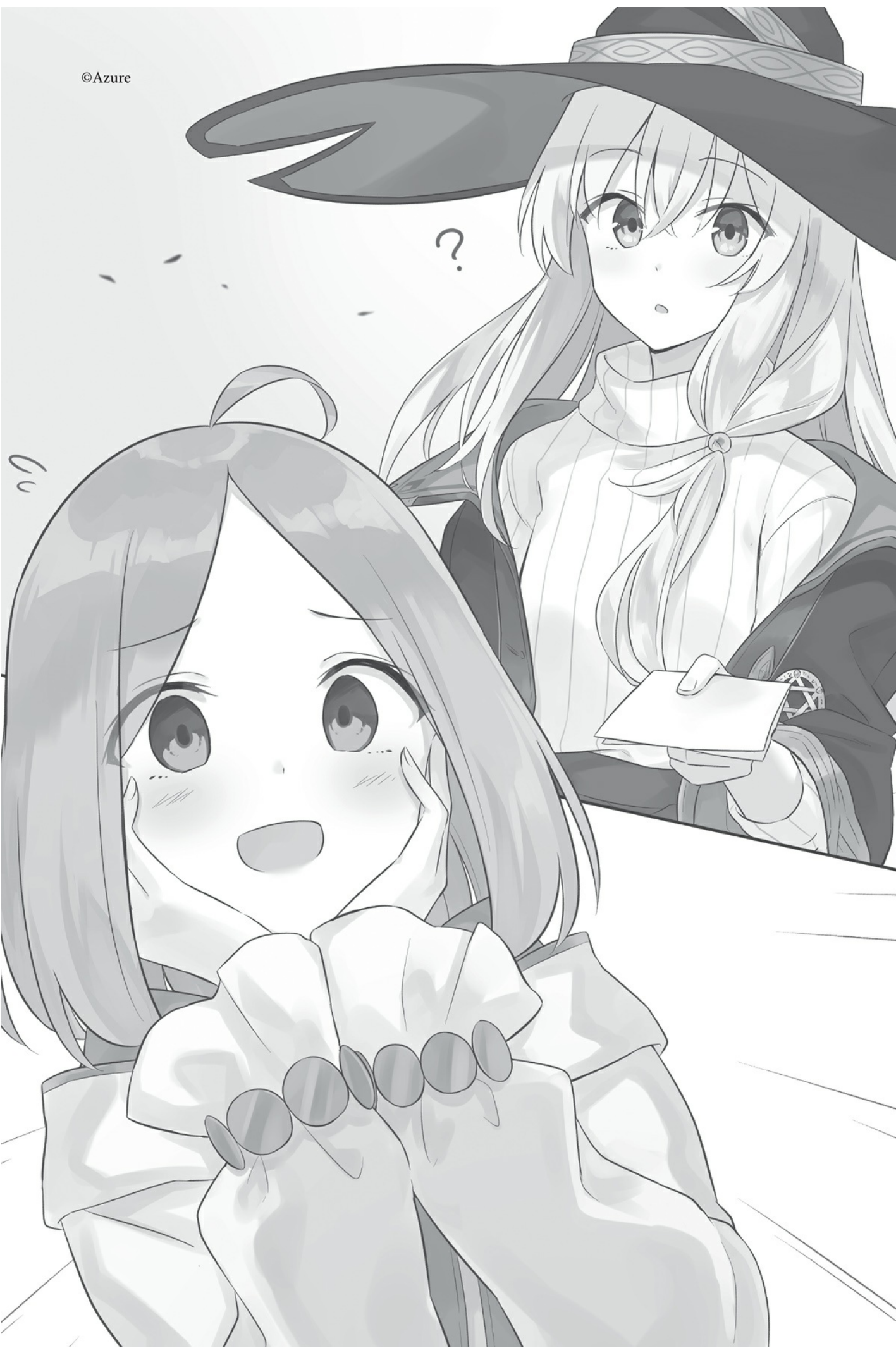
Humans try so hard only because they know that there is an end after all.

And then we passed through the gate and went our separate ways.

“So then, good-bye, Elaina.” Matryoshka waved.

“Yeah, see you again sometime.” I waved back and got on my broom.

The story of our time together came to a quiet end.





CHAPTER 3

That Is There, This Is Here

The city stood on the far end of a great plain.

Huge walls towered skyward, and a single guard stood at the gate. He saluted once after noticing me leisurely bringing my broom in, then he greeted me, “I bid you welcome, Madam Witch. This is the Western Capital.”

Then the guard took a pen and paper in hand and started a simple immigration inspection. “Have you come here today for sightseeing? For work?”

He questioned me on the purpose of my trip and asked for my age, my sex, my name, my occupation, and all sorts of other things. I dutifully answered each of the questions that he asked, one by one.

Finally, when the immigration questionnaire was over, the guard said, “Everything seems to be in order. By the way, Madam Witch, there are many things to be aware of in our city, so I’m required to give every foreign visitor this sheet.”

As he spoke, he handed me a piece of paper. It was densely packed with very small handwriting. There were so many dos and don’ts that any inclination I might have felt to read them instantly vanished.

“Please adhere to these guidelines as you enjoy your stay in our city.”

Then the guard stepped out of my way.

His body language said, *Right this way.*

“Thanks.”

After a short bow, I passed through the gate.

“Please enjoy seeing our highly advanced city, Lady Witch!” the guard called after me as I walked away.

“.....”

Did he just go out of his way to call this place a highly advanced city?

Since the guard had declared this place to be highly advanced, I somewhat expected, for example, to find some splendid metropolis unlike anything I had ever seen stretching out before me on the other side of the tall, imposing city walls.

But the buildings that lined the main avenue were monotone, with white walls and black roofs, and looked like they had been standing there since antiquity. The city didn't seem particularly highly developed to me.

If what the guard said was true, shouldn't I expect to see it reflected in the lives of the people?

My heart was filled with anticipation as I walked over the cobblestone streets, but the people coming and going along the main avenue seemed like totally normal citizens. I saw merchants pulling carts and roadside stalls displaying rows of fresh fish and meat, but such sights as these were generally no different from what could be seen in other cities.

In short, there was absolutely nothing unique about this place.

"...This is just a normal city, isn't it?"

There was nothing more to say.

I had entered the city, tempted by the guard's remarks, which suggested there was something in here I had to see to believe, but what met my eyes was a perfectly ordinary scene of everyday life.

"....."

Maybe there's something here that I can't understand just by walking down the main avenue; could that be it?

After that, I roamed here and there throughout the city. I had been told that I would understand once I got inside, but nothing was making sense. So out of stubbornness, I got desperate to try to find something to convince me that this Western Capital deserved to be called a highly advanced city.

The first thing I tried was going into a restaurant.

"Welcome! One witch?" I nodded, and the waitress said, "All of our seats are nonsmoking. We hope you understand." After adding that precaution, she

showed me into the restaurant.

Now, as for the food... Again, it was perfectly average.

“Well, what do you think? The food in this city is quite delicious, isn’t it?” It seemed less like the waitress was asking and more like she was trying to convince me, an obvious visitor, that the local cuisine was, in fact, delicious.

“We’re the only place around where you can eat such wonderful fare, you know,” she continued. “The food in other cities isn’t fit to eat. Do you know why that is?”

“No...why?” I tilted my head questioningly.

The waitress answered, “It’s because our dishes are all made using ingredients produced right here! So they’re all super delicious and healthy! Please, eat up!”

“Uh-huh...”

It’s a little difficult to eat with you watching me, though...

“By the way, the cooks in the nearby Eastern Capital only use ingredients imported from foreign countries, so the food there isn’t fit to eat! It’s awful!”

And then I tried to enjoy my meal while being subjected to jingoistic bragging.

By the way, the food at the restaurant was fairly tasty but nothing special. So when she asked me if I thought it was as delicious as I’d expected from such a highly advanced people, I didn’t know what to say.

Apparently, this city had a long-running feud with a nearby *undeveloped* city. Or maybe the people here simply hated their neighbors, because they seemed to relish every opportunity to compare their city to their allegedly undeveloped rival.

“Hello there, Madam Witch. What do you think of the product lineup at my bookstore?” For example, while I was killing some time at a bookstore, the older man who owned the place spoke to me. “In our city, sales of any kind of violent or sexual content are strictly prohibited. Those are harmful books, you see.”

Wondering what exactly that left to read, I took a look at the shelves and saw

only somewhat difficult-looking academic books and a variety of philosophy texts.

“Books are for studying, you know. It’s so vulgar to read books for amusement. Though I hear that in the east there’s a city that sells plenty of those types of books.”

And so on.

Apparently, this city had quite a few rules.

“Drinking alcohol is prohibited in our city!”

For example, a merchant who had been walking around with a drink in hand was now being lectured by a soldier on the side of the road.

“Alcohol is the drink of the devil! It causes a man to lose himself! I’ll be confiscating this!”

“W-wait, just wait a second, now!” The merchant refused to back down. “I never heard anything about there being a ban on bringing alcohol in...! They allowed it in other cities—”

“Other cities are other cities! Here in *our* city, alcoholic beverages are strictly prohibited! You must pay a fine of five copper pieces!”

The soldier didn’t listen to a word the merchant said. He just snatched away the alcohol and the money and left.

It was about this time when I remembered the sheet of paper that had been given to me by the gate guard. I had been in a hurry to enter the city, so I had hardly read it and just jammed it into my pocket, but...

...apparently, this city had quite a few restrictions.

Consumption of alcohol within the city is prohibited. It is prohibited to bring in meat, vegetables, fish, and other raw foodstuffs from outside sources. Walking while eating is prohibited. Street performances are prohibited. Possession of illicit books is prohibited. Live animals are prohibited. Smoking moonflowers is prohibited. Bringing in wurstams is prohibited.

And so on.

Not only was there the sheer number of rules to consider, but the fines for breaking any of them were quite steep as well. Five coppers for bringing in prohibited food or drink. From there it rose sharply, with fines of one silver, five silvers, and more for breaking other edicts.

There were two items for which even heavier fines were levied.

For the crimes of bringing in a wurstam or a moonflower, you would be made to pay five gold pieces for each infraction.

I had never heard of either such thing.

Let me see, what on earth could those two things be?

“Um, excuse me?” To find out, I stopped a person walking nearby and pointed to the rule sheet. “These two things written here, wurstams and moonflowers, what on earth are they?”

The man looked like he was probably out for a walk. He stopped when I held up my sheet. “Oh my, a traveler.” He smiled, “Which ones, now?” He peered at the paper. “Oh, wurstams are dangerous beasts that live in this area.”

“I see. And what kind of animal are they, exactly?”

“They’ve got eight legs, and their faces resemble that of wild pigs. In the local dialect, the word *wurstam* means ‘rotten bastard pig.’”

“What an awful name!”

“They’re awful creatures,” the man said. “Wurstams have voracious appetites, and they’ll eat pretty much anything. They lay waste to farmlands, and they eat up the pasture that’s meant for livestock, plus any rotten meat that’s lying around. They even bite the livestock. They’ve got poison in their tusks, so anything that gets bitten is more than likely a goner.”

“My goodness!”

I can see why they’re treated like dangerous beasts if they’re that vicious.

“...But in the undeveloped city to the east, these wurstams are apparently bought and sold for high prices, for some reason... Because of that, merchants sometimes make the mistake of bringing them here, thinking that we’ll buy them, too. Good grief, how much trouble do we have to put up with because of

that backward place...” The man went on and on, grumbling his complaints.

Having more or less grasped the situation with the wurstams, I asked, “And what about these moonflowers?”

When he heard my question, the man nodded. “Ah, those are moonflowers over there.” He pointed to the other side of the street.

“.....”

There was the merchant who had had his alcohol confiscated earlier.

As he vented his dissatisfaction, he leaned against his cart and put a burning cylinder to his mouth. “Damn it...I can’t take this kind of stress...jeez...”

Out came a plume of white smoke from between his lips.

The man I was talking with grumbled and frowned as he covered his own mouth with a handkerchief. “Unbelievable! That’s a cigarette made from dried moonflowers,” he muttered. “It’s an incredibly dangerous substance, so you should be careful not to inhale any of the smoke. Scientists in our city learned of its dangers. Those moonflowers are hallucinogenic and toxic. That means they’re a dangerous drug!”

“Hallucinogenic and toxic?”

What an awful flower.

I covered my own mouth. Mumbling just like the man, I summarized, “So put simply, moonflowers are a drug.”

“It’s more accurate to say they’re somewhere between a drug and tobacco,” the man said, mumbling. “By the way, the smoke rising from the end of the cigarette is much more dangerous than what he blows out of his mouth, so you should be careful. Moonflowers are more harmful to the people nearby than to the smokers themselves, so that’s why they’re strictly prohibited.”

So does that mean that the smoke causes bystanders to see hallucinations?

I covered my mouth even more carefully.

I hate cigarette smoke.

“What a stupid man he is. If you smoke moonflowers on a big street like

this...”

The man with me was about to say something else with a frown, when—

“You, there! What are you doing, smoking right in the middle of the street—
Wait, you again?!”

The soldier from earlier had returned, wearing a furious expression. He looked even more fired up than before.

“Huh? You’re joking, right? Moonflowers are banned?!”

Apparently, the merchant hadn’t really read the sheet he’d been given upon entry, either.

“A funny guy, huh? Get over here!”

The soldier snatched the moonflower cigarette away on the spot and grabbed the merchant by the scruff of his neck.

“Hey...! Wait a minute, now! Look, it was okay to smoke moonflowers in the city to the east, and you grow ’em here anyway, so—”

“Other cities are other cities! Here in our city, this is an illicit drug! Why, you...! What else are you hiding?” The soldier glanced over at the merchant’s cart. “Show me what’s inside!” As he spoke, he boarded the cart.

And inside, he found...

“You bastard! This is a wurstam, isn’t it?! So you weren’t satisfied with importing forbidden drugs; you entered this city with prohibited animals as well?! This is outrageous! You’re coming with me!”

Yanking the merchant along behind him, the soldier disappeared down the street.

“.....” I quietly tucked my sheet of paper away as I watched this sequence of events. “...I think I understand. Thank you.”

It had all unfolded so suddenly, but there seemed to be a clear reason why certain things were prohibited.

“That man just now said as much, but I’ve heard that cultivation of the moonflowers is permitted in the nearby Eastern Capital. Unbelievable...,” the

man beside me said with a grimace. “Undeveloped cities are like that, so it causes problems. It’s because they keep on using that flower for fun, without realizing how dangerous it is.”

What it boiled down to was that this place calling itself a highly advanced city all hinged on just that one factor—on there being *another* city that lagged behind by comparison.

After I had spent some time sightseeing, it came time for me to leave the Western Capital.

When I went to leave, I met the same gate guard whom I had seen when I’d entered.

“Oh, Madam Witch! How did you like this city of ours?”

As he was going through the departure procedures, the guard looked me over. “Thanks to vigilant enforcement of our rules, the citizens here are promised a peaceful and secure life, so it’s only fitting to call this a highly advanced city. Don’t you think so?”

“.....”

Well, it’s not impossible to see that point of view, but...

In other words, what it comes down to is...

“It looked to me like you literally just put a lid on anything that stinks, but...”

The guard laughed at my words. “Isn’t that wonderful? It saves us from smelling the foul odor.”



After leaving the Western Capital, I immediately turned my broom to the east.

Since everyone had been so insistent on comparing the two cities, I was curious, as anyone would be, so I wanted to see just how backward the Eastern Capital was—this place that the people in the Western Capital seemed to despise for being so undeveloped.

After all, it’s in a traveler’s nature to be drawn toward excitement and captivated by anything intriguing.

I pointed myself east and spurred my broom onward. I hadn’t really looked up

the exact location, but after several hours, and after flying my broom a fairly long way, the silhouette of a city came into view in the distance.

At the same time, I could see many fields being farmed outside the city's walls. They were really beautiful flower fields. The pure white flowers stretched on and on into the distance. The ground was buried in flowers, which waved their blooms in the stream of wind caused by my broom.

“.....”

I daresay that the city up ahead is the Eastern Capital.

The faint fragrance drifting up from the carpet of white flowers was such a lovely scent, it seemed like one could get addicted to it.

When I got to the gate, I didn't see any sign of a gate guard. Instead, there was a government official standing there.

I guess officials conduct the entry procedures in this country?

I got down off my broom and bowed once to the official.

“Good day. I'm the Ashen Witch, Elaina.”

I'd like to enter your city, but what do I need to do?

I tilted my head quizzically, signaling my confusion.

The official returned my bow casually. “Oh, thanks for coming. We don't conduct any kind of entry inspection here. You're free to enter as you please,” he told her.

My, my, no entry inspection, you say?

“These days, having you stand here and go through an entry inspection is behind the times. The soldiers watch over our city from on top of the ramparts, so if you made it this far, it means you've been judged not to be a threat.”

As he spoke, the official looked up at the gate. I could see a soldier waving down at us from on top.

I see, I see. But...

I tilted my head again. “In that case, what are you doing?”

It seemed like this official was only going through the motions of his outdated job.

He answered me matter-of-factly, "I'm waiting for a merchant. He had arranged to deliver some wurstams today, but...apparently he's running late."

Wurstams.

"If I'm not mistaken, those are dangerous beasts, right?"

Come to think of it, the merchant who brought wurstams into the Western Capital was dragged away by that soldier, so...

Could he be the one?

"Oh!" The official looked me over with a slightly surprised expression. "Miss Traveler, by any chance did you come here today from the Western Capital?"

"...That's a good guess."

"I ask because over there they consider wurstams dangerous creatures."

".....?"

From the way he was talking, it was clear that he did not consider wurstams to be a threat.

What's going on here...?

"I mean, they are unsightly, have violent tempers, and store venom in their fangs, but their livers are quite tasty, and they're coveted as a delicacy in our country. The dummies over there don't know that, and they've taken to exterminating them as dangerous pests, though..."

"....."

He went on to tell me about how here, in the Eastern Capital, wurstams sold for a fairly high price, despite being dangerous, and how in the Western Capital, they didn't understand that line of thinking.

I see, so it seems there's a good reason why they fetch a high price.

"By the way, Madam Witch, is it still prohibited to take moonflowers into that city?" As he spoke, the official pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket.

It was the same item that the merchant had been holding—it must have been moonflowers.

“Yes, well...” As he lit the cigarette, I took one step back.

“Oh...I’m sorry. I don’t have many chances to smoke these inside. Smoking bans are popular right now, so I never have a chance to smoke freely except for outside the city gates.”

The official exhaled a plume of smoke as he spoke.

“.....?” But that contradicted what the merchant had said. “I thought that moonflowers weren’t prohibited in your country.”

“Oh, is that what they said in the Western Capital?” The official laughed. “These cigarettes packed with dried moonflowers are a popular vice, so they’re regulated in our country, too. The places and times you can smoke are regulated, to keep smokers from bothering anyone. Like this.” He continued, “But the moonflowers themselves aren’t harmful.”

Gazing at the flower fields behind me, he asked, “Did you know? If you handle moonflowers just right, they can become a potent medicine for certain otherwise-incurable illnesses. If you dry them, they become a drug similar to tobacco, but if you grind up fresh moonflowers, apparently you can use them to help with recovery from illnesses that were thought to be incurable until now. Scientists in our city have made many such discoveries recently.”

“.....”

So that’s why they’re being cultivated so widely? And here I thought this was nothing but a dangerous city overrun by people in the throes of moonflower addiction.

“In other words, the moonflower has limitless potential. It can become either a poison or a medicine. And the fools in the Western Capital have banned its import, not knowing the truth.”

The people of the Western Capital did not hesitate to ban or restrict anything unpleasant, so it would likely take some time yet before they learned that the moonflower had an important use.

No, not just the moonflower—the fact about the livers of wurstams being delicious was another thing. At the end of the day, by just banning things and then ignoring them, they ensured that they would miss out on many useful discoveries.

That seemed like a sad and regrettable state of affairs.

“And you won’t go and tell the people who live there?”

When I asked, the official smiled and said, “We wouldn’t dream of it. That is there and this is here, you know.”



CHAPTER 4

Welcome to the Den of Crime

“A criminal enterprise eradication campaign?”

Saya had been summoned quite suddenly to the United Magic Association branch office in Merchant City Triones.

Waiting for her was her instructor, the Midnight Witch, Sheila. She stood in front of a poster, puffing on her pipe. The poster featured an image of a witch wearing a smug grin and the inauspicious slogan THE CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE ERADICATION CAMPAIGN IS UNDERWAY! LET’S SNUFF OUT MEMBERS OF CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS UNTIL NOT A SINGLE ONE REMAINS!

Saya’s former instructor exhaled a plume of smoke. “That’s right, these are dangerous times we’re living in, so the United Magic Association leadership has decided to do something about it.”

Saya waved a hand in front of her face to avoid inhaling the toxic fumes. “So more specifically, what do we do for this campaign?”

“Good question.” Sheila nodded. “Like it says on the poster, the United Magic Association is going to be rooting out the criminal elements operating in every city and country and working behind the scenes to eradicate them.”

“I see.”

“By the way, this poster has already been put up all over the place.”

“That really doesn’t seem like working behind the scenes, does it?”

“Well anyway, the campaign is already underway.”

“And why exactly is your photo on the poster?”

Behind Sheila, who was wearing a smug face as she stood in front of the poster, was another image of her on the poster itself, also wearing a smug grin and holding her pipe in her mouth. The concentration of smugness was so high, it made Saya’s eyes hurt.



“Why, you ask? Obviously, it’s because I’m the most fitting person to eradicate said criminal enterprises.”

“.....”

“What?”

Saya’s teacher narrowed her eyes sharply. She was the very image of a scoundrel, practically oozing bad attitude. Perhaps she had been selected as the face of the campaign because she looked like the type of person who might run a criminal enterprise.

That’s what Saya was thinking, but she knew better than to say that to her teacher, so she looked away and said, “Nothing at all.”

Sheila looked Saya up and down. “Well, that’s what’s going on. You’re not busy, right? Come with me to crush one of these criminal enterprises.”

Her tone was very casual as she asked Saya to join her on this errand.

“Are you serious?”

“Very serious. Here, take this.” Sheila waved a piece of paper in Saya’s face. “The first step is to go investigate this place.”

It was a map.

The name of a café was circled.

Sheila said to Saya, who was staring at the map, “The organization that I want you to investigate runs a café that appears to be a legitimate business. Obviously, it only appears that way—really, it’s a front for the organization’s criminal operations.”

According to Sheila, hardly any normal customers ever went to the café, and most of the people who did go in looked like they were there to buy drugs or hire an assassin or something. It made her wonder just what kind of business was being done inside. Unfortunately, she hadn’t yet been able to gather any evidence proving that the café was truly a hotbed of crime.

That meant that she wanted her to go undercover as a customer, gather evidence of any crimes being committed in the café, and bust up the

organization behind it.

Uh-huh, I see...

Saya nodded.

“And can I turn you down?”

“Of course not.”

Her teacher cut her down ruthlessly and puffed on her pipe again.

Saya tried to indicate her displeasure by waving a hand in front of her face to clear the smoke, but her teacher didn't seem to notice.



The girl felt pride in the fact that all the locals knew about Yuuri the Traveler.

Her light brown hair was lovely, tied up behind her head in two pigtails. When this cool beauty walked through town, she inevitably attracted a lot of attention.

Today was no different. As she walked through the center of town, its residents whispered and pointed at her—at Yuuri, who could hear them talking about her.

Ah, I'm sure they can't help but be amazed at the sight of my beauty, at how cool and beautiful I am, right? Heh-heh-heh! As I thought, I'm seriously hard-boiled.

Dressing herself up in unearned confidence, the girl walked right past the ignorant masses.

“Hey, that girl there...”

“No question about it...she's that bothersome customer who used to drink coffee at that one café around here until she was covered in puke...”

“It's puke girl...”

“Hey, make sure you don't let her into your shop...”

The people definitely weren't whispering about how amazing or beautiful she was, but that part didn't make it to her ears.

This girl would try to act cool and drink coffee, but she always ended up puking all over herself. She had already been banned from several establishments, but every time it happened, she came up with a convenient excuse to tell herself. For example, she was sure that the only reason she'd been banned from so many cafés was because of her tough image as an outlaw. The truth of the matter was, unfortunately, entirely lost on her. Nothing could shake her unearned confidence. The girl seemed to have a few screws loose.

But there was a reason why this girl, who was nothing more than an ordinary mage, was so enamored with words like *hard-boiled* and *outlaw*.

Although Yuuri was now a simple traveler, she had previously been a member of the Mafia and still craved the excitement of a life of crime. Even now that she had made up her mind to become a great witch, her feelings on the matter hadn't changed much.

“.....”

In the course of her travels, Yuuri had learned of a place called the Country of Mages, which only admitted magic users. Figuring that that was the best place to develop her magical talents, she'd decided to make her way there.

But she had plenty of time to travel and didn't need to rush. So while she made her way to the Country of Mages, Yuuri spent plenty of time taking in the sights.

“...Hmm. How interesting.”

In this country, too, she was enjoying some sightseeing.

As she walked, Yuuri spread open a piece of paper.

It was a map that marked the location of a particular café. Yuuri had heard that here, in the Merchant City Triones, there was a café run by a gang of criminals that used it as a front for all sorts of unspeakable crimes...or at least that was the convoluted concept for what was apparently a very gimmicky new theme restaurant.

“Apparently, there's actually another café around here somewhere that really is a front for some kind of criminal organization, but...”

But the place where she was heading was just an ordinary theme restaurant. This city had seen a sudden surge of new theme restaurants lately.

Come to think of it, that café I went to before had maids wearing cat ears or something, meowing as they drew ketchup hearts on omelets.

Yuuri cast her memory back on the scene.

“A hard-boiled girl like me would never grovel like that,” she had scoffed as she drank her coffee. Then she’d promptly thrown up, and they’d banned her from the premises.

At any rate, setting all that aside, she was currently heading for the café that was set up to seem like a criminal enterprise was running it.

If Yuuri’s goal was to become a witch, she couldn’t afford to be afraid of something so mundane as organized crime. If she wanted to be truly hard-boiled, she first needed to experience some fake crimes to build up her courage.

“...Well, since I used to work at a place that was sort of run by criminals, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said to herself.

“Hmph...yeah, there’s nothing to it.” With a flip of her hair, she walked on.

Then, *bam!*

“Kyah!”

Apparently, reading a map while walking had been the wrong thing to do. Yuuri had promptly crashed into a person walking in the other direction.

The sudden impact sent Yuuri sprawling. Two pieces of paper fluttered through the air, then fell to the ground. Across from Yuuri was another girl, who had also landed hard on her backside.

Yuuri stood up in a fluster. “S-sorry...! I got a little distracted looking at my map...” She picked up her map as she apologized in a panic, which wasn’t very *hard-boiled* of her.

“No, no! I’m sorry. I’m the one who was just looking at my map, and not where I was going...” The other girl stood up at about the same time and picked up her paper, too.

I see, so apparently she was absorbed in her map just like me, Yuuri thought.

“.....”

But when she looked at the girl’s chest, she immediately recognized that the two of them were very different. A star-shaped brooch and a moon-shaped brooch were displayed with pride upon the girl’s robe.

In other words, the girl before her eyes was a witch, and what’s more, she was working for the United Magic Association.

She’s not a normal mage like me. She’s a witch, with an official position and everything. Even though we’re around the same age.

“Grrr...” Bitterness and jealousy accumulated in Yuuri’s cheeks as she puffed them out.

“Huh? What is it? Why are you glaring at me...?” The witch was looking about in surprise. She wore a black robe and a black triangular hat. Judging by her features, she appeared to be from the east, and she had hair as black as coal and jet-black eyes. She was all black, from head to toe.

Yuuri tilted her head quizzically.

Huh...I feel like I’ve seen the triangular hat that this girl is wearing somewhere before...? Where could it have been?

“Well, whatever, it doesn’t matter,” Yuuri muttered quickly, dismissing any further questions. She was someone who lived every day sloppily and without much care.

“Well, um...anyway, sorry... You’re not hurt, are you?” the unnamed witch asked awkwardly.

“Oh, no! I’m the one who should say sorry! I wasn’t looking where I was going...” Yuuri lowered her head and bowed to the witch. It was a surprisingly normal bow for someone who was aiming to become a hard-boiled woman.

The two girls spent a few more moments apologizing to each other before eventually going their separate ways, staring at their maps again.

The café was closer than Yuuri had expected.

“...Here, huh?”

She stood before the shop, looked up at the sign, then opened the door.

What she failed to notice was that the paper in her hand did not, in fact, direct her to a gimmicky new theme restaurant, but to an actual, for-real front for organized crime.

She hadn't noticed that she and the witch had swapped maps when they collided.

○ Gimmicky New Theme Restaurant

“Welcome! I'm terribly sorry, but we're currently quite crowded... Do you mind sharing a table?”

After bumping into a girl she had never seen before, Saya finally arrived at the café that was supposedly being used as a front for a criminal organization.

When she opened the door, a bell chimed, and a waitress appeared from the back wearing an apologetic smile.

The interior of the café was divided into smaller private rooms, set up in such a way that made it difficult to see how crowded it really was. That wasn't enough to arouse her suspicions on its own, though it would be difficult to snoop if she was stuck sharing a table. Still, it would attract too much attention if she pitched a fit and demanded a table to herself, so instead Saya just nodded and answered, “That's fine.”

“Right, then. This way, please.”

After bowing politely, the waitress led Saya into the café. Though it was the middle of the day, no sunlight penetrated to the interior, which was enveloped in a gloomy atmosphere. The lighting fixtures hanging from the ceiling gave off a dull glow. Overall, the whole place was suspicious. It seemed like something shady might be going down at that very moment.

It was enough to make Saya wonder whether she might be able to stop a backroom deal on the spot if she opened one of the doors to a private room.

The waitress proceeded a short distance into the restaurant, opened one of the doors, said a few words to the customer inside, then urged Saya in. "Please go ahead."

Apparently, a staff member had already spoken to the person inside.

After Saya said, "Thanks," and returned the waitress's bow, she stepped inside the private room.

"Hello."

The customer in the room nodded in greeting.

She was a pretty girl, with white hair cut short, held in place by a wide headband. Her green eyes looked up at Saya, and she smiled gently.

"I am Amnesia. And you are?"

● Actual Den of Crime and Iniquity

Inside, the café was divided into several private rooms. The whole place had an incredibly suspicious atmosphere.

The host certainly looked wild, with buzz cut hair and a scar over his eye. "... Hey." The man was terribly blunt. "Sorry, missy, we're all full up. You mind sharing?" He scowled at Yuuri. His eyes were clearly dangerous, like the eyes of a predator that had its prey in its sights.

Even though it was obvious that he wanted the girl to hurry up and leave, Yuuri had quite a few screws loose. "Hmph...no problem!" she answered with another flip of her hair. She was an idiot.

"...Tch." The host clicked his tongue once, then led her deeper into the restaurant.

Usually, one little mage wouldn't concern the hardened criminals that ran this place. But recently, the United Magic Association had implemented their Criminal Enterprise Eradication Campaign, and although nobody was sure what exactly that was supposed to mean, this den of crime was still on high alert.

Arriving at a room deeper inside the restaurant, the host exchanged a few

words with the customer already occupying the private room, then urged Yuuri inside.

“Heya.” With a perfunctory greeting, she set foot into the small room.

“Hi.”

Inside was a single witch. She was dressed in a lavishly decorated blue robe and wore a star-shaped brooch on her breast. Her hair was the same blue color and came down to about her shoulders. She gave it a dramatic toss, and in that gesture, Yuuri could practically see that the woman considered sharing a table beneath her.

“My name is Sharon,” she said confidently. “As you can see, I am a traveling witch. And you are?”

Something about her made Yuuri feel like she ought to address her respectfully.

“I’m Yuuri.” Putting on her best manners, Yuuri sat down across from Miss Sharon.

The host with the buzz cut and the bad attitude set some water down on the table. “Enjoy,” he said, and left without taking their order.

Yuuri could see that Sharon also had an empty water glass in front of her. Apparently, she, too, had only just arrived.

“I see you are a mage, too.” Sharon poured more water into her empty glass as she spoke. “I never expected to meet another magic user in a place like this... By any chance, were you also approached and asked to help with the effort to eradicate organized crime?”

Sharon recalled arriving at the Merchant City Triones. She’d spent the whole day walking around with a smug look on her face. But it is the fate of travelers dressed as witches to always get caught up in some troublesome business or other.

That day, she had been approached by the distinguished leaders of the city. “Recently, criminal enterprises have started using ordinary cafés as fronts to deal drugs or set up contract killings. Madam Witch, would you please stamp

them out somehow?”

Sharon thought that they would be better off asking the United Magic Association for something like that, but they told her, “Well, recently, that organization has launched a Criminal Enterprise Eradication Campaign, whatever that’s supposed to mean. Apparently, while this campaign is going on, their fees have gone up.”

In other words, it was a waste of money to go to the United Magic Association, so they wanted to leave it up to amateurs and pocket the difference.

Sharon definitely should have turned them down. She was not a real witch at all, just an ordinary girl who liked to dress up like one.

...No way, I don't want to die yet.

Naturally, she felt weak-kneed as she listened to their pleas, and she knew that she should find any reason to refuse.

But Sharon said, “Heh-heh! Leave it to me. I’ll demolish those criminal enterprises!”

She had gotten carried away and accepted the commission. Sharon was, by nature, very easy to manipulate and couldn’t say no if someone flattered her.

And so today, she had infiltrated one of the cafés being used as a front.

Eee...what do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do...? Now an actual mage has shown up, thank goodness... Now everything will probably be all right, right? Right? I'll be okay, right?

But owing to her extreme nervousness, she hadn’t even been able to bring herself to order and had been sitting there continuing to drink water since she’d arrived. Her stomach was already sloshy with liquid. If someone were to punch her in the gut, there would be no avoiding a future in which she was covered in vomit. Actually, that was a possibility even if she didn’t get punched, because of her nerves.

She was certain that the mage, Yuuri, sitting before her had also arrived here through a similar course of events. Sharon was overjoyed to have found a

partner. She was so happy that she was even thinking about how she could pawn the whole job off on Yuuri.

Sharon gazed at Yuuri, waiting to be saved.

Yuuri was staring at the menu. “You know, it’s my dream to become a great witch one day,” she said, “and in order to become a great witch, you have to be able to deal with a few criminals, right? That is the reason I came here today.” For some reason, she seemed awfully pleased with herself.

If Sharon had been in her right mind, she would have wondered what the heck the strange girl was going on about. Unfortunately, she was not even close to being in her right mind. Fear and anxiety clouded her thoughts.

“Oh, that’s promising...,” she whispered, low enough that Yuuri couldn’t hear. She looked at the other girl with an envious gaze. Then she batted her lashes in a girly way at this mage whom she had just met, whom she thought she could rely on.

“Say, Sharon?” Yuuri looked up at her after studying the menu for a while. “Have you decided what to order?” In this café, there was a bell on each table that would summon a staff member when rung.

“Huh?”

But wouldn’t ringing the bell mean that we wanted to take part in something illegal...?

“No, I haven’t decided, but...”

I haven’t prepared myself...

“Oh, sorry, I already rang the bell.”

“.....”

But I haven’t...prepared myself...

Sharon puffed out her cheeks, indignant that Yuuri would do such a thing.

The fierce-looking host with the buzz cut came right away.

“Whaddaya want?”

“What’s my order, you ask? Surely you must know?” Yuuri pointed to the

menu as she spoke.

Coffee.

Incidentally, in this café, *coffee* was a code word for *narcotics*, but Sharon didn't know that, and neither did Yuuri. She had no idea what she was ordering.

"....." Sharon didn't really understand what was going on but decided she had better copy the mage for now. "And I'm sure you know what I'm going to ask for as well?"

In a word...coffee.

"Sure, two coffees."

The fierce-looking host collected their menus and left the room.



“Heh-heh-heh...” Yuuri stared at his retreating back with a bold smile. The smile didn’t have any particular meaning behind it.

“Hmm-hmm!” With a triumphant expression on her face, Sharon watched the host leave. Of course, there was no particular reason for her smile, either.

Neither the reckless mage who had come to visit this café nor the careless girl who was dressed up as a witch had any idea what was going on.

Watching the two girls from a distance, the café staff trembled with fear.

“Hey...there’s no doubt about it... Those two musta been put up to it by the United Magic Association...,” Part-Timer A cried. “Just look at ’em... Look at those faces... They’re definitely here to take us out...”

“It’s all over...,” Part-Timer B despaired. “The Association figured out our shop’s secret...”

“Unbelievable...” Part-Timer C hung his head. “They ordered two coffees... They’re planning to nail us for dealing drugs...”

“Don’t lose your heads.” The manager appeared. It was the intimidating-looking guy with the buzz cut. He had been pretending to be a host while serving the two customers.

“Ah, big bro!” The three part-timers looked at him with envy. Everyone called the manager “big bro” around the café.

“It’s fine... The fact that those two haven’t gotten violent tells me that they’re still trying to gather evidence. Be courteous and tell them to come back some other time...”

And so a silent battle pitting a den of criminals against a mage with a screw loose and a girl who was only cosplaying began.

○ Gimmicky New Theme Restaurant

“Wow...so you travel for work, is that right, Saya? How cool!”

Even though they were in a private room, it was easy to tell through the walls that the café was booming. Amid the noisy chatter, Amnesia maintained an

extremely calm demeanor, nodding and enjoying Saya's story.

Long ago, in a place called the Country of Mages, Saya had learned magic from a witch with ashen hair and then worked hard to become like her. To make a long story short, that whole sequence of events was the reason that Saya was now traveling as a wandering witch.

Saya was delighted to recount how she would never have had her happy present-day life without meeting that witch. For some reason, she also shared that she was in love with that witch. She added that the other witch was probably in love with her, too.

Privately, Amnesia thought that the girl was kind of speaking nonsense.

"I also suffered some hardships in the past."

After listening to Saya talk for a while, Amnesia also launched into her own life story, telling it in fits and starts.

She told the sad story of a lonely girl who lost her memory every day.

Coincidentally, she had also been saved by a traveling witch, and they had returned together to her hometown, flirting all the while. That was more or less how she told her story. Amnesia tried to use a little humor to keep the tale from getting too heavy.

She went on to talk about how now she was just an ordinary traveler, searching out a new hometown with her little sister.

But apparently the two of them had not actually been able to leave any of their worries or hardships behind, even since starting their travels. The clothing she was wearing was the uniform of an Order of Holy Knights from her hometown. Amnesia said, "We didn't have any money saved up, so we've been traveling on the cheap...and we don't really have any proper clothing..." She averted her eyes awkwardly.

Saya wanted to tell her that the uniform suited her, but since the person wearing it didn't seem to think so, she just replied, "...I see... That sounds rough..." She nodded with sympathy for the other girl's difficulties.

"....."

“.....”

After the two of them had revealed their pasts, the conversation broke off for a moment. Both of their stories had one particular thing in common.

A witch with ashen hair, huh...?

Amnesia was sure she knew that witch from somewhere.

A witch with ashen hair, she says...?

Saya, too, felt sure she knew that witch from somewhere.

“.....”

“.....”

“What would we do if she was the same person? Oh-hoh-hoh...”

“Really, I wonder what we would do? Eh-heh-heh...”

A strange air of tension gripped the table.

In any case, Saya’s reasons for visiting this café did not include confirming her suspicions that her acquaintance Elaina had been amassing secret girlfriends all over the place without her knowledge. She was a little curious about the witch who had saved the girl sitting before her, but Saya stopped herself from prying any further.

Anyway, she could tell that Amnesia had finished her story, so she perused the menu.

“.....”

I guess I’d better get on with doing my job, Saya thought as she opened her menu. First of all, I need to pin down whether this shop is the site of these backroom dealings... I need to choose my order carefully here...

“Ah!” Amnesia showed Saya her own menu, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Look, Saya! Look at this! They’ve got ‘drunken hotpot’! That sounds like it’s got some drugs in it. How fun!”

That’s not fun!

It was enough to make Saya want to scream. What was this girl saying? And

also, what was the deal with a café serving hotpot?

“And the drinks are all fun, too. ‘Drowned melon soda’ and ‘hanged coffee’ and ‘poison tea.’ Looks like the drink menu is all themed around ways to kill someone.”

Amnesia had come to the café in search of a part-time job. She had nowhere to go and no money and thought that working in a theme restaurant sounded interesting.

“Isn’t this café amazing? The names of the food and drinks all use such dangerous words. It’s almost like they’re doing dangerous things behind the scenes—”

“Shh!”

Amnesia was about to say that they’d done a good job on the setup, but Saya forcefully pressed a hand against Amnesia’s lips and shushed her. Amnesia struggled, but Saya whispered urgently, “You mustn’t say such dangerous things out loud! What do you think this place is?! I came here on an undercover investigation!”

Saya had stealthily penetrated the criminals’ hideout. She was very obviously dressed as a witch, but somehow, she still thought that she hadn’t been noticed yet. So she wanted to avoid making a big fuss for no reason.

Saya expressed her anger with a grunt.

Amnesia struggled again and wondered what the girl across from her was thinking.

She’s really acting like this place is run by criminals!

“Anyway, please don’t act like you suspect anything! Jeez!” Saya was really mad.

This girl is a little hard to understand, Amnesia thought to herself again.

● Actual Den of Crime and Iniquity

The employees were in an uproar over the table that had ordered nothing but

two coffees. That was because *coffee* was a code word for *narcotic drugs*, and the two people purchasing it were none other than two mages.

“If we serve them drugs, we’ll definitely get arrested... This is bad...,” Part-Timer A cried.

“It’s all over... I’m changing careers...,” Part-Timer B despaired.

“Don’t lose your heads, you guys.” The manager had brewed some normal coffees. “You ready? For now, take them these coffees like everything’s normal, then come right back.”

“B-big bro!” Part-Timers A and B made bitter faces. “But what if, when we give them the coffees, they yell at us and say, ‘This isn’t what we ordered! Give us some drugs!’”

“Don’t worry. First of all, I think those two are probably not here on behalf of the United Magic Association. Don’t you think so, too? I’m sure it’s just our imaginations. Right. Those are just normal customers.”

As the manager said, Sharon and Yuuri were just normal people with no connection to the United Magic Association, but still his hand shook as he poured their coffees, and the dark liquid spilled from the cups, undercutting his attempt at seeming confident.

“A-all right...for now, someone go and deliver their coffees...”

The two cups of coffee were ready, poured almost to overflowing.

Both Part-Timers A and B thought that they would rather not carry such hazardous cups.

That’s when it happened.

“Wait a minute, big bro.” Part-Timer C appeared all of a sudden. “Shouldn’t we mix some poison into the coffee?”

As he spoke, Part-Timer C poured some powdered poison into the cups and stirred them up. This was a type of poison meant for injections. He had done it so quickly that no one had had the chance to stop him.

“You...!” The manager stared at C, dumbfounded. “What do you think you’re doing?! That poison is strong stuff... It could kill them!”

“It’s coffee. The aroma is strong so they probably won’t notice.”

“That’s not the problem!”

“Well, if they do notice, I’ll thank you to take the blame, Mr. Manager.”

“Are you some kind of demon?”

Ignoring the manager’s rebukes, Part-Timer C grabbed the tray from him and said, “All right, I’m taking these over,” and headed for the private room where Sharon and Yuuri were waiting.

Heh-heh-heh...I don’t have any specific grudge with you two, but...I do hate mages, so...the two of you can do me a favor and die!

Part-Timer C despised witches from the very bottom of his heart.

He hadn’t always been like that, of course. Actually, he had been a normal guy whose heart pounded fast at the sight of a girl dressed in witches’ robes. All men like a girl in a robe, after all. Before, when he had been living in a different city, he had fallen head over heels in love with a traveling witch who had ashen hair. Being a healthy young man, he’d asked her on a date several times.

“Um, so I was wondering, do you, like, have a boyfriend, or anything? If you like, I could—”

“Impossible.” She had turned him down normally the first time.

“No way.” The second time, she spat as she rejected him.

“Do you know what a mirror is?” The third time, she had told him indirectly that they weren’t a good match.

“.....” From the fourth time on, she had silently looked at him like he was a piece of garbage.

“Would you cut it out already?” Around the tenth time he asked her, he nearly got himself killed.

Ever since then, he had harbored a deep hatred for mages.

Most people would just call it unjustified resentment.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s your coffee.”

And so Part-Timer C carried two brimming cups of coffee over to the private room.

Now you can drop dead! You evil mages!

He set the cups down with a clatter in front of the two girls.

The poison that Part-Timer C had mixed into the coffee had a pretty strong smell. The odor of the poison mixed with the rich aroma of the coffee and produced an even more nauseating stench.

The thick smell permeated the small room.

“Thank y—bleeeeeehhh!” Yuuri inhaled just the slightest bit of the smell and puked immediately.

“Bleeeeeech!” Sharon puked in sympathy, thanks to her severe nervousness.

Part-Timer C went back wearing an expression that said he had accomplished the job.

“Big bro, I did it.”

“But they didn’t even drink any...”

○ Gimmicky New Theme Restaurant

“Anyway! Are you listening? I came here today for work, get it? This is an undercover investigation! I’m undercover! So it would be really bad if anyone realized that I’m from the United Magic Association. Please be very careful,” Saya insisted sullenly.

Across from her, Amnesia was nodding pleasantly and chuckling to herself. “Yes, yes, I see, an undercover investigation, yes. I’m sorry.”

She’s looking at me like I’m a child..., Saya thought to herself. *I’m just doing my job as seriously as I can, so why do I have to get treated like this?*

The reason for it was completely lost on Saya.

“...Miss?”

Also completely lost on Saya was the fact that the waitress had suddenly

reappeared in their private room despite their not having ordered anything yet. “.....” Standing in front of their table, the waitress looked around, then stealthily slipped small baggies into each of their hands. “...It’s what you asked for.”

“Um, what’s this...?” The baggies were suspicious-looking.

“My, my, what strange customers you are.” The waitress chuckled, making Saya’s hair stand on end. “You came to our shop because you wanted this... right? Or else...did you have some other reason for coming here?”

“.....”

Saya opened her baggie and shuddered. Inside was some kind of powder.



Huh? I thought that this place was pretending to be an ordinary café, but... isn't this kind of obvious? I mean, it's like they're not even trying to hide it.

Saya was, of course, actually holding ordinary sugar. As part of the presentation, the staff at the café handed its customers sugar as if they were conducting a backroom drug deal.

“Yes, that, and...take this, too...” After the sugar, the waitress set several pieces of candy on the table with suspicious movements.

“Um, what's this...?”

“Heh-heh-heh...this is...a special little something, you know...made right here in the shop. You can do as you like with it. Consume it here, or take it home and sell it for a high price...heh-heh-heh...”

These are definitely drugs!

It was, of course, ordinary candy.

“Relax and enjoy...”

Then the waitress left the private room, wearing a satisfied expression.

Amnesia stared at the menu, looking somewhat crestfallen. “...We lost our chance to order, huh?”

“Go ahead and choose some food,” Saya said, the surprise on her face changing quickly into determination. “I've got work to do.”

She poked her head out of the private room and looked around the shop.

Something was strange about this café. From the next table over, she could hear an exchange unfolding, “Oh, you are evil indeed!” (It was just someone paying the bill.) And one table farther away, two people were having a discussion. “So then...which one of them do you want to take out?” “This one.” (It was someone ordering food to take home.)

Let me see... Wasn't this place supposed to be posing as an ordinary café? Saya wondered to herself. *This isn't at all what I expected...*

Suddenly, a scream came from deeper within the shop.

● Actual Den of Crime and Iniquity

“Heh-heh-heh...”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh...”

Sharon and Yuuri faced each other across the table, each laughing a bit too hard, like they were both thinking of some sinister plot.

They were crying as they laughed, wiping down the table that was covered in their vomit.

“This is bad...they’re bad news...”

Watching them from a distance, the manager shuddered with fear.

“What do we do, boss? Kill ‘em?”

On the other hand, Part-Timer C was still spoiling for a fight.

“Heh-heh-heh...”

The coffee they just served us was definitely poisoned, right? There’s no doubt about it... They’ve figured out why I’m here... Waaah...I want to go home...

Sharon was panicking to herself even as she laughed.

“Hoh-hoh-hoh...”

.....*I puked again.*

On the other hand, Yuuri was just feeling disheartened.

The two of them took a breather after cleaning up their own puke, and then...

“Excuse me, waiter?”

“Waiter, over here, please.”

...they called for the staff.

They had humiliated themselves beyond redemption, but Sharon rang the call bell repeatedly, trying to look as calm as possible, while Yuuri let loose with a jeer.

“Hurry up and get over here!”

Part-Timer C appeared immediately.

“What can I do for you, ladies?”

“We don’t need any more of what you gave us before. Hurry up and show us the good stuff,” Yuuri said with a snap of her fingers. She was still under the impression that this den of crime was actually a theme restaurant.

Incredible...what a confident attitude...! I’ve got to learn from her...

Sharon, finger still on the call button, looked at Yuuri with envy in her eyes. No matter how far she traveled, she was still an ordinary girl who felt a thrill in her heart when she was around magic users.

“How were they?” the manager asked Part-Timer C quietly once he had returned to the back of the shop. The manager had already completely lost any air of authority that he might have once had.

“They told me to bring out the ‘good stuff.’”

“...They’ll ruin us... They’re planning to get proof that we sell drugs so they can shut us down...”

“What should we do?”

“For now, let’s be evasive and give them some normal coffee this time.”

Part-Timer C hurriedly poured two normal coffees and returned to the girls’ private room.

But when he set the coffees down on the table, both of them let out exaggerated sighs.

“Hey, man. Are you making fun of me here?” Sharon demanded. “Do you really expect me to believe that this is all your café has to offer?” She was wearing a triumphant expression, obviously getting carried away with herself again. “Bring us the stuff you’re making in the back. Want me to blast you with a spell? Huh? Is that what you want? Sheesh.”

Yuuri was just really hoping not to puke again.

In the end, they sent the two coffees back without touching them.

“Big bro, this is no good.”

Part-Timer C gave up. Being harassed by that witch once had led him to the realization that surrender is the first step to enlightenment.

“Fine, then let’s run away.”

Figuring that if Part-Timer C said it was impossible, then it really was impossible, the manager was ready to give up on the café. So the criminals that ran this den of iniquity prepared to make their escape, lest they be discovered by Sharon and Yuuri.

○ Gimmicky New Theme Restaurant

“What do you mean, you don’t have any money? Huh?”

“P-please forgive me...!”

When Saya peeked out of the private room to look around the inside of the shop, she saw a quarrel taking place at a table farther in. A male staff member had grabbed a customer by the lapel and was glaring harshly at him. “Hey, buddy, no one buys drugs in my café without paying!”

“B-but...the price has gone up so much, and I—”

“Don’t give me excuses!”

The man pounded on the table.

“Eeek!”

The customer shriveled even more.

It was obvious that this thug was happy to pick on someone weaker. The whole café had fallen silent at the spectacle. Most of the doors to the private rooms were open, and most of the other customers were watching what was happening.

“How awful...!”

Of course, Saya was watching, too.

“My goodness!”

Amnesia was doing the same.

But the two men who were attracting all the attention acted just like no one was looking at them and carried on with their shouting and cowering.

Not one person made a move to save the man who was being attacked, and not one person made a move to stop the man who was attacking him.

Everyone watching just mumbled to themselves, content to remain nothing more than bystanders.

“If you can’t pay with money, then there’s no helping it.” The staff member tugged on the customer’s arm and said, “There’s nothing to do but to get you to pay with your body.”

“M-my body...?”

“You’ll sell me your organs.”

“...!” The customer shook with fear. “W-wait, please! Not that! Anything but that—”

“Quit complaining! Come on, hurry up!”

Then the staff member, dragging the reluctant customer behind him, started walking deeper into the shop. But as before, no one stopped him, and no one helped the other man.

It was little wonder, for as far as anyone could tell by listening, the man being dragged away was getting his just deserts, and there was no good reason why any of them should stick their necks out for him.

Well, actually—

“Wait right there!”

Someone was blocking the way, with both arms spread wide. Wearing a black robe and a black triangular hat, with hair the color of charcoal, she was a witch and a traveler. And...

“My name is Saya, and I work for the United Magic Association. I’ve seen the whole thing. Unhand that customer immediately!”

She readied her wand.

Whether she had lost her patience with no one helping, or whether she had

felt a burning sense of duty to stop the evil unfolding before her, there was no hesitation in her eyes.

“.....” For a moment, the employee looked utterly bewildered, then he said, “...What’s your deal? Are you trying to rescue this man?”

“I don’t think it’s nice to bully weaker people!” Saya asserted bluntly.

“.....” “.....”

The employee gave her an incredulous look.

Actually, so did the customer.

“My goodness.”

Amnesia, on the other hand, was absentmindedly rolling a piece of candy around in her mouth, watching from afar as her tablemate, Saya, stuck her nose into someone else’s business.

“Um, miss...” That was exactly the moment when the waitress appeared at Amnesia’s side. “Exactly what is the other young lady doing?”

Amnesia wasn’t sure how to answer that. After all, she had met Saya only a little while ago. “I don’t really know, but I think she’s going to stop the quarrel probably?” Amnesia answered quickly.

“But that’s just one of our regular performances...”

This café paid members of a nearby theater troupe to act out scenes of dangerous criminal activity, in order to give the customers a more exciting experience. It was all part of the restaurant’s theme.

Of course, in the original skit, an actor playing the part of a noble bystander was supposed to intervene. That was the reason that none of the other customers had intervened. But since Saya had jumped in, he had nothing to do and was standing around awkwardly next to the waitress. “This certainly isn’t going as planned...,” he remarked.

“Ah, is that so?” Amnesia released her grip on the saber that she had been about to draw. If the waitress hadn’t spoken to her, she’d intended to go back Saya up.

“Miss, is that other girl...all right...?” The waitress looked at Amnesia. “I mean... she looks like a mage, and our shop would be liable if she were to injure any of the actors...”

“Mmm...”

The waitress seemed to be worried that Saya might do something reckless.

“She’s probably not all right. In fact, she’s just the kind of dummy who might start firing off magic spells in a place like this, mistakenly thinking that we’re all in grave danger. Besides, I only just met that girl a little while ago, but...” Amnesia looked at Saya again and said, “She definitely seems like the type to take things too seriously.”

“Graah!”

No sooner had Amnesia said that than Saya blasted a spell at the actor pretending to be a criminal. Fortunately, she missed the man in question and succeeded only in blowing an enormous hole in one wall of the café.

“Miss!”

“Just as I thought, she is incredibly stupid after all...”

● Actual Den of Crime and Iniquity

Baaam!

Yuuri and Sharon were just in the middle of complaining to each other about how slow the service was when the sound of an explosion reverberated through the café.

“Huh? What happened?” Yuuri leaped out of their private room and looked around the shop.

“Waaah!” Sharon fled from the private room, convinced that the gangsters working at this café had finally launched an attack to deal with her and Yuuri.

“.....”

“.....”

When the two of them emerged from the room, the state of the café had changed completely. Timber and bricks were scattered everywhere. The wreckage of chairs and tables was strewn about everywhere. It looked like something had punched a huge hole in the wall and trampled through the place.

“...What happened...?”

“Waaah!”

The two girls could see the bodies of the restaurant staff scattered around the gaping hole in the wall. All of them were pinned down under the rubble, and their moaning filled the ruined café.

Yuuri wasn't really sure what had happened but had finally realized that at least something was going on. She touched the shoulder of the manager, who was lying nearby. “Um, are you all right?”

“Guh...hah...” The café manager was clearly already at death's door.

“...Are you all right?” It was obvious that the man was *not* all right, but for now, Yuuri repeated her question.

“Feh...you, huh...?” The manager spoke to Yuuri in a trembling voice. “N-nice... moves...”

“Huh?”

What is this guy talking about?

“To think...you knew that we were going to make a run for it and placed your associates outside the shop...guh...you were playing us the whole time...”

“I, um, I really don't know what you're talking about.”

Is this all...part of the act?

“Fah...I knew we wouldn't be a match...for magic users...ah...”

“Seriously, I have no idea what you mean.”

“Go on, you can arrest us...” The manager held out both hands. “We're through...”

Yuuri looked over at Sharon, perplexed.

What on earth should I do here?

Sharon stared back at her. She looked impressed and frightened. "So that's why you were so confident, huh? But finishing an enemy off even when they're trying to retreat...that's pretty brutal..."

It was at about this juncture that Yuuri, who was still certain she had gone into a theme restaurant, was starting to get the impression that she and Sharon were on different wavelengths.

"But I'm telling you, I still don't understand what any of you people are talking about...", she said.

"Huh? Wasn't this all part of your plan?" Sharon tilted her head quizzically.

"Huh? My plan...?"

Plan for what?

"...Hmm?"

"...Hmm?"

They both tilted their heads in charming fashion and stared at each other for a moment or two.

Finally, Sharon said, "Well, whatever," and gave up thinking about it. "For now, let's arrest these people. If we do that, our job will be finished here," she said.

"Arrest them...? Isn't this place just a theme restaurant? I don't think we have any reason to arrest them."

Shouldn't we get them medical treatment instead?

"Huh? What are you talking about? These people are run-of-the-mill criminals."

"What?"

"Yeah, look, these guys belong to a gang. They've been dealing drugs in the back the whole time."

"...So it's not a theme restaurant?"

“Theme restaurant...?” Sharon cocked her head. “That’s next door.”

She pointed through the hole that had just been opened in the wall.

“.....”

“...Seriously?” Yuuri said after a moment of silence.

That was when she finally realized that she’d gone to the wrong café.

After that, Sharon and Yuuri worked together to arrest the criminals. They accepted a modest reward from the city, and each returned to her travels once again.

After it was done, Sharon reflected on the events of the day.

“Well, that’s what happens to any criminal enterprise that tries to mix it up with me!”

It was because she was always saying things like that that she frequently got caught up in troublesome incidents like this wherever she went. The girl never learned. That was Sharon.

Yuuri also reflected on everything that had occurred.

“I did think that something strange was going on, you know. I mean, the guys running the café didn’t ban me from entering or anything.”

Perhaps the day had finally come when she realized that puking all over herself whenever she drank coffee was not, in fact, a normal thing to do.

○ Gimmicky New Theme Restaurant

Saya was taken to task by the owner of the café, whose wall she had demolished. She objected, saying that it didn’t make any sense for a café that pretended to be a front for organized crime to operate right next door to a café that actually was a front for organized crime. Wasn’t that like a trick question or something?

But unfortunately, no one was inclined to listen to her excuses, and the owner of the café was genuinely angry with her. “Look, you... Everyone else understood what was going on, right? It was obviously all an act. It’s not our

fault that a place like that is allowed to exist for real, is it? Seriously, are you listening to yourself?”

In the end, Saya had gone on an unprovoked rampage. She was stuck repairing the wall. The owner of the café set her to work washing dishes in the kitchen to pay off her debt.

How on earth had she ended up washing dishes? And just where was the real criminal enterprise? Saya washed and washed, still not understanding all sorts of things.

“Tough break, huh?”

“.....”

The thing she understood least of all was why Amnesia, the girl she had shared a table with, was also stuck washing dishes alongside her.

“...Um, what are you doing?”

“Hmm?” Amnesia answered Saya with a grin. “I was sitting with you, so I thought I would help you wash the dishes, out of a sense of collective responsibility.”

“.....” Saya didn’t know how to respond to that. “I’m the one who busted up the café, so it’s my responsibility. You don’t really need to help, you know?”

“But I thought about stepping in to stop you,” Amnesia said matter-of-factly. “I knew that this café was one of those theme restaurants, but I didn’t know they did performances like that. That was a little unexpected, huh? No wonder you got confused.”

“I know, right?! It is confusing! Totally!” Saya puffed out her cheeks. “This café makes no sense! Good grief!” she sulked as she continued washing dishes.

“.....”

After a short while, Saya looked over at Amnesia, who was humming a tune as she washed dishes beside her.

She must have felt bad for Saya, bearing all the liability by herself, and gone out of her way to come help.

“...Amnesia.” Saya turned her face away and, still washing dishes, said, “Thank you.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” It was clear that Amnesia was smiling by Saya’s side. “I’m sure that the witch who helped me would probably do the same in this situation —”

“.....”

The witch who had helped Amnesia.

“If I’m not mistaken, she was a witch with ash-colored hair, wasn’t she?”

“Sure was. Ash-colored hair and lapis-blue eyes, wearing a black robe and a triangular hat.”

“Huh. She sounds just like an acquaintance of mine.”

“A witch who’s acquainted with Saya... If I’m not mistaken, do you mean the one you’re in love with?”

“That’s right.”

“The one who is probably in love with you?”

“That’s right.”

“.....”

“.....”

“What would we do if they were the same person? Oh-hoh-hoh...”

“Indeed, what would we do? Heh-heh-heh...”

A strange feeling of tension took over the kitchen.

After washing dishes until sunset, Saya and Amnesia parted ways, still laughing suspiciously to themselves.

The following day.

Saya was summoned to the Merchant City Triones branch office of the United Magic Association. Waiting there for her was her instructor, the Midnight Witch, Sheila.

Sheila was wearing a triumphant expression, puffing on her pipe in front of

the same Criminal Enterprise Eradication Campaign poster from the day before.

Saya had actually asked another member of the Magic Association about Sheila being chosen to be the face on the campaign poster. And while Sheila was certainly a powerful and experienced witch, it turned out that the real reason that she had been selected as the face of the campaign was because she herself looked like the type of person who might run a criminal enterprise.

The official had forbidden Saya to speak about it, because if word had gotten around to Sheila, she would not have taken it well.

When Sheila noticed Saya, who had arrived late, she said, “Hey,” and blew out a puff of smoke.

“Hello.”

“How did it go yesterday with the criminal enterprise?”

Saya wasn’t sure how to answer the question.

“I washed their dishes.”

“...What?”



CHAPTER 5

Welcome to the Cat Ears Café

Merchant City Triones.

Brick buildings lined the avenue, and crowds of people came and went over the smooth cobblestones. There were people delivering mail, housewives wandering through the street stalls doing their shopping, people heading to work, and merchants driving carts laden with goods. The main avenue on a weekday afternoon was generally like that, filled with people going with the flow of the daily cycles of life.

On the other hand, there was also one person who was just walking around aimlessly, with no job to speak of, and no responsibilities to worry about.

She was a single young woman, rather beautiful, dressed like a mage. Her hair was ash-colored, her eyes lapis-colored, and she was dressed in a robe and triangular hat. She was a witch, and a traveler.

She seemed rather distant from the city residents in the middle of their daily routines as she strolled around idly, looking around at the buildings on the avenue. To all appearances, she looked like she was simply wandering aimlessly, or maybe searching for something.

“Heh-heh-heh...cat café...cat...café...”

In her hand, she held a flyer that read, COCO’S CAT CAFÉ. This witch was actually searching for a cat café.

And this witch, who was scurrying around and acting suspicious, who on earth could she be?

That’s right, she’s me.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh...”

I let out another weird laugh.

Sometime earlier, I had, entirely by chance, been cured of my cat allergy. And today, I was feeling a little festive. No longer would I have to assiduously avoid

any and all feline company. Why, I could even play with them if I wanted.

And as it just so happened, I'd found myself in a city gripped by a very peculiar fad—gimmicky theme restaurants. I'd heard that a cat-themed café had just opened.

A cat café.

Cat! Café!

In other words, a place where I can drink coffee and play with cats. I have to go, right? No, no, there's no need to think about it any further. I have no choice but to go.

And so by that sequence of events, I was currently headed for a cat café.

"...Must be here."

I came to an abrupt stop. Looking up, I saw a gaudy sign hanging over the entrance, reading, COCO'S CAT CAFÉ.

Without hesitation, with no sense of caution, I placed my hand on the door. At this point, my heart was pounding with excitement. I was certain that the shop would be filled with all kinds of cats. I was convinced that I would spend my day relaxing, sipping coffee with a cat sitting on my lap. I just knew that when I pet it, it would be delighted and purr.

Anyway, I couldn't help but be excited.

My amazing day with the delightful cats begins now!

"Welcome back, master! Thank you for visiting us here at Coco's Cat Café, meow!"

Standing before me was a maid who had sprouted cat ears.

I closed the door.

I looked at the sign.

It says, COCO'S CAT CAFÉ. I see.

I looked at the flyer.

It says, COCO'S CAT CAFÉ. There's no mistake.

Could it have been a hallucination? Might I be dreaming?

I opened the door again.

“Welcome back, master! Thank you for visiting us here at Coco’s Cat Café, meow!”

“.....”

Ah, it’s not...a dream...

No matter how many times I rubbed my eyes, standing there before me was a young lady dressed up like a French maid. But she was no ordinary woman, even beyond her maid costume—a pair of catlike ears sprouted from her head, and she was sporting a feline tail. At first, I thought it was part of the costume, but to my surprise, both the ears and the tail twitched enthusiastically, as though they were alive.

Ohhh, a cat café, like...

“Goodness! Welcome! We’ve been waiting! You’re the new girl, right?”

As I was standing there dumbfounded and despairing, another cat-eared maid appeared from deeper inside the shop.

Her eyes were lit up with excitement. “Ahh! Soo cuuute! No question, you can definitely become number one!” As she spoke, she tugged at my arm.

Long, smooth, light gray hair. Blue eyes. Refined features. At a glance, she was an obvious beauty—but still, she was a cat-eared maid.

“Um...?”

I was bewildered by this sudden turn of events, but the new maid said, “Oh, I haven’t introduced myself, have I? I’m the manager, Coco! Nice to meet you!” As she said that, she escorted me into the café.

“Huh? Um, um...”

Now, I suppose in some sense my wish was being fulfilled. I was getting to spend time with a *cat*...but the *cat* in question was not at all what I had expected. And she was pushy, too.

Without giving me time to object, Coco dragged me deeper into the

restaurant.

As I was being dragged away, I was still puzzling over what exactly *cat café* meant when Coco, as if reading my mind, started to explain.

“I’m a half-human, half-cat, you see, so I decided to try running a maid café. And this is it!” She divulged the details with a very lighthearted attitude. “This café is a way for me and other cat people to make a living. Cat people are neither people nor cats; we’re a species halfway in between, you know. Unfortunately, we have a hard time finding work. That’s why I want to create opportunities for my brothers and sisters, you see?”

This so-called cat café seemed to be doing relatively good business, for inside, there were already quite a few customers packing the tables.

All the employees going from table to table were dressed in cute, frilly maid outfits, and all of them, without exception, were sporting cat ears and tails. As they worked, they called out to their customers using cutesy nonsense phrases like, “Please enjoy, meow ♥,” and, “Meow, meow ♥,” and, “Oh, master, you haven’t visited for a while, I was lonely, meow. ♥”

“Coco, why are they talking like that?”

“That’s how we treat our customers here.”

“I see, I see.”

I don’t get it.

“In our café, adding ‘meow’ to the ends of words is quite popular.”

“I see, I see.”

I really don’t understand, meow.

“By the way, the girl over there is our current number one employee. Her name is Misty.”

Coco was pointing at a cat-eared maid with sandy-colored hair that hung down to her shoulders. She was right in the middle of serving a customer, telling him, “Thank you, meow ♥,” in a flirtatious tone of voice. It almost made my stomach turn.

We passed through the dining room, painful to watch, without stopping, then on through the kitchen, and finally we arrived at an office in the back.

...From the looks of the kitchen, there's not a single bit of cookware in the place. How do they serve food?

As before, as though anticipating my question, Coco quickly told me, "All the dishes our café serves are ready-made and just need to be heated up." She proudly placed a ready-made omelet on the office table. "By the way, a single dish costs one gold piece."

As she spoke, she wrote NEW GIRL ♥ on the omelet with ketchup.

"Whoa, that's expensive."

Isn't that a rip-off?

"Here the employees write on the food in ketchup, so the price jumps right up."

"Isn't that a rip-off?"

"Well, it certainly sells, so...we're not going to stop..." Coco smiled faintly, with a faraway look. She was obviously obsessed with money.

Coco told me all sorts of things about her cat café as I consumed my omelet. For example, she told me that the more the cat-eared maids flirted with the customers, the busier the café got. She also told me that recently they had been troubled by a shortage of workers. They really had their paws full and were looking for help.

"And that's why I put up advertisements for part-timers."

That's what she said.

But isn't this supposed to be a place for cat people to find work?

Coco smiled broadly. "Everyone working here is a cat girl. So you can relax," she said. "...You must have had a hard life out there, to resort to disguising yourself as a mage..."

"....."

Disguising myself? I am a mage. In fact, I'm a witch!

“You’ve got cat ears hidden under that triangular hat of yours, right?” Coco continued. “The world can be a scary place for people like us, huh? Since we have to live our lives concealing any evidence that we’re cat people.”

“...No, um—”

The only thing under my hat is a normal head and some slightly messy hair—

“No, it’s fine! Don’t say a thing! I understand...”

“.....”

No, I really don’t think you do...

“It’s all right...if you work here in this café, I’m sure you’ll find happiness...!”

Coco beamed with a smile as she clapped a hand down on my shoulder.

“.....”

It kind of seems like this is less of an interview and more of an invitation.

In Coco’s mind, I was probably already all set to start working here. But, of course, I had no inclination toward doing so, and anyway, I wasn’t a cat person.

“Um...”

I had every intention of politely declining Coco’s generous offer, when suddenly—

“I’m sorry! I’m late!”

I was interrupted by the door being thrown open.

Something rather important occurred to me just then: Coco had mistaken me for her new part-timer and dragged me to the back of the café. Which meant she had been expecting someone else for an interview.

And here she was now.

The girl standing in the doorway was obviously a mage. She had white hair that hung sleekly down to about her hips. Her eyes were a lovely jade-green color, and she was probably about one or two years younger than I was. She was dressed in a robe and cloak that were mostly white.

She had a very familiar face. But she also possessed some unfamiliar features.

She had cat ears atop her head and was sporting a tail.

Maybe it just looks like her?

No, no, there's no way.

"I'm Avelia, I've come for my part-time job interview! Thank you for taking the time to see me-ow!"

Though she spoke with the strange cutesy affectation that was characteristic of this café, I couldn't help but recognize her by name.



Avelia.

The affectionate little sister who had once awaited her older sister's return to the Holy City Esto. This acquaintance of mine was now an ordinary traveler, journeying with her sister, Amnesia, to seek out a new hometown, and as far as I knew, she was not a cat girl.

I was sure that she hadn't had cat ears and a tail before, but...

"Um, what are you doing, Avelia?"

But the girl in front of me did have ears and a tail that were undeniably feline.

My, my, how strange this is! What on earth is going on here?

"....."

She stared at my face in silence for a moment. Then...

"...Wrong person."

Her cheeks flushed as she said it, and she turned her face away.

Wrong person?

"Wait, you are Avelia, aren't you?"

"You're mistaken."

"Didn't you just introduce yourself as—"

"I am not the Avelia that you know. I am the new employee Avelia, the cat girl who has come to work part-time in this café. I am definitely not the mage Avelia."

“You’re forgetting your ‘meows.’”

“I am a cat person...meow.”

“.....”

I really didn’t understand what was going on, but apparently, for some reason, Avelia had decided to become a member of the cat person species.

What happened? Did someone take Amnesia hostage and say they would kill her unless Avelia became a cat person?

“Oh, oh, oh? How strange... My new part-timer is already here...” Coco seemed rather suspicious of the new girl who had just barged in to her office. “Who are you?” she demanded.

“I am Avelia, your newest employee, meow,” she asserted. “Avelia, the cat girl, coming to work in your café, meow.”

She really wants Coco to believe that she’s a cat person...

“Huh?” Coco frowned at Avelia and tilted her head, then she pulled out a piece of paper and looked back and forth between it and me. It was probably a résumé or something.

“But my new part-time girl is right here?”

Coco strained her eyes as she peered at the paper. “Her hair is white, and she’s a mage...”

Sure, if that’s all you have to go on, then I suppose we’re not entirely dissimilar, but...

“She is the wrong person, meow.”

Avelia dashed over to stand beside me. “See for yourself, boss. This girl’s hair isn’t white at all. See, it’s all dingy, right?” Then suddenly she was stroking my hair.

“Do you want to get knocked out?” I slapped her hand down.

“.....”

Now that the physical distance between us had closed, finally Avelia seemed inclined to pay serious attention to me. Rubbing the hand that I had slapped,

she brought her face up close to mine. Coco still didn't seem to know what exactly was going on. She watched in confusion as Avelia leaned in close to me and whispered, "...Why are you here?"

That's my line!

"I should be asking you that! What's going on?" I hissed. "Are you planning to settle down here? You ought to think about a different career path."

Avelia glared at me. "...I just needed a little money, so I came here to work. I have no intention of settling down."

"I see. Even so, you really ought to choose your jobs more carefully."

"You've got the wrong idea," Avelia insisted. "It's not like I actually want to be working in a place like this. I am definitely not interested in this kind of thing..."

"Is that so? But it suits you so well," I teased.

"Are you making fun of me?" Avelia quickly turned away, but she muttered, "I'd be happier to hear my sister say that..."

So you don't actually hate it that much.

As I was giving Avelia disapproving looks, Coco finally glanced up from the résumé she was still holding. "Ah, come to think of it, I haven't asked your name yet, have I? What's your name?"

"I'm Elaina."

"Goodness..." Coco's shoulders slumped. "That certainly is the wrong name... My goodness! So I brought a complete stranger back here..."

Well, the most important thing is that we've sorted the misunderstanding out.

"That's right!" Avelia interjected. "In other words, I am actually your new part-time employee, Avelia!" She puffed out her chest self-importantly. Apparently, she was still feeling good about her chances.

.....

As I suspected, you don't hate it nearly as much as you want me to believe.



Finally, I was released from the confines of Coco's office. As a way of

apologizing for the mix-up, she told me, “Go eat something in the café!”

After I moved to one of the café tables, I chowed down on the ready-made omelet that had NEW GIRL ♥ written on it. When it came down to it, the fact that I had been released meant that Avelia was starting her interview for the part-time job.

But it was clear that the café was really desperate for new employees, and Avelia faced an interview in name only. It was only a little while before she burst out of Coco’s office wearing a maid costume, chest puffed out with obvious pride.

“How about that? I got the job on the spot.”

Then for some reason, she came over to my table.

“Then how about doing your job?” I glared up at her.

“I am. One maid attends to each table in this café.”

I see... That means that Avelia will be sharing my table.

Uh-huh. Right...

“I want a new maid,” I insisted.

“You’re so mean...”

“I don’t want to see someone I know dressed up like a cat-eared maid... I mean, really... And what are you doing working in a place like this anyway?”

I had missed my chance to ask her before, but it was obvious that she wasn’t here because she actually wanted to work in a café while pretending to be a cat person. I was sure she had some ulterior motive.

“To answer your question, here is my reason.”

As she spoke, Avelia pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and held it out to me. I set down the spoon I had used to demolish my omelet and took the paper from her hand.

It was a pamphlet.

CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE ERADICATION CAMPAIGN NOW UNDERWAY! it read.

According to the pamphlet, the United Magic Association had recently begun offering cash rewards in exchange for any help discovering and dismantling organized crime. They were supposed to be carrying out clandestine operations in cities all over the world. While they were at it, they'd stuck this exact poster up all over the place. Apparently, they were a little fuzzy on the definition of *clandestine*.

Also, I absolutely could not fathom why they'd chosen to use a picture of the Midnight Witch, Sheila, as the face of this Criminal Enterprise Eradication Campaign or whatever, but there she was, right on the front of the pamphlet.

"The rewards can be claimed by regular mages, too. In short, if you capture a criminal and hand them over to the United Magic Association, you get money. In other words, I can get funds for my travels this way," Avelia told me as I frowned at her.

But if this pamphlet had led Avelia to this café, if that was the case, I couldn't help but wonder.

"...So you're saying that this café is run by a bunch of criminals?"

I tilted my head in confusion. From what I had seen, this place seemed like an ordinary, if rather flirtatious, maid café.

Avelia shook her head at me. "This café itself isn't part of any criminal enterprise. But rumor has it that certain regulars here are bringing in dangerous drugs and trying to get the cat girls hooked."

"Oh?"

"It's called catnip powder, and it's a pretty dangerous drug. I don't know where they're getting it from, but...anyway, rumor says you can buy it around here somewhere...meow."

"I see, so you've infiltrated the café in order to search out the source."

"Indeed."

"And if possible, you're also going to try to suck up to the United Magic Association."

"Meow, meow."

“Okay, so what does this stuff look like?”

“Meow, meow, meow.”

“I see, I see.”

You have no idea. Got it.

“Well, going off the name, I think it might be something like a love potion,” Avelia speculated. “Since it’s ‘catnip’ and all.”

“So your motives are questionable and your methods are a mess...”

I was skeptical, but Avelia seemed quite proud of herself for some reason.

“You just watch, Elaina. I’m going to use the customers who come through this café to get my hands on the source of the catnip powder. Hmph!”

She puffed out her chest again.

I didn’t have any particular desire to suck up to the United Magic Association like Avelia did, so for the time being, I just waved her off and said, “All right, well, good luck, I guess.”

After that, I could tell just from the ambient sounds how Avelia’s job was going, without even having to look.

“Aah! There’s some parfait on your face! I’m so sorry! No, wait! I’m so sorry, meow!”

I could hear her familiar voice shouting somewhere in the café. I kept my head down and ate my omelet.

Not long after that...

“I’m terribly sorry about earlier! Here’s a meat pie to make up for—aaah! I’m so sorry! Your face is covered in meat pie!”

Another scream from somewhere in the café. I had already finished eating my omelet, so I spread the pamphlet out in front of me and tried to ignore all the screaming.

“.....”

I could see that, just as Avelia had explained, the campaign outlined in the

pamphlet was, in fact, open to ordinary magic users. And apparently, the reward for taking down one of these criminal enterprises could be quite substantial.

“Thank you for waiting! Here is your omelet, our specialty—aah! I’m sorry! You’re all over the omelet’s face!”

You’ve got it backward.

Paying no attention to how Avelia’s job was going, I continued staring at the pamphlet.

After turning several pages, my hand stopped.

Rewards will be paid not only for the eradication of criminal enterprises. In cases where drugs or dangerous medications are seized, the reward will increase based on the amount recovered. That’s what was written there.

Oh-hoh, what’s this? A chance to rake in a lot of easy money, perhaps? If I could pass this catnip powder off as a “super-dangerous drug” to the United Magic Association, I could make quite a pretty penny...

.....

This is no time to be eating ready-made omelets...!

“Uuuggghhh...I’m not fit for this kind of job... I can’t do it anymore... Oh, whoops, I mean, I can’t do it any-meow.”

After many repeated blunders, Avelia had shut herself inside a nearby crate. Sobbing was coming from inside, and her tail was sticking out. She had hidden her head without hiding her rear.

I walked over and lifted the crate off Avelia.

“Ah!” She was even more teary-eyed than I was when I still suffered from a cat allergy. “Hey, I was hiding in there!”

I don’t think that’s something you’re supposed to do while you’re working...

But anyway...

I tossed her crate to the side and touched Avelia lightly on the shoulder.

Then I smiled broadly and said, “Avelia, do you have a spare set of ears and

tail?”

I was full of nasty thoughts, lured in by the prospect of easy money.



I had no intention of working for chump change, but now that there was real money involved, I was suddenly full of enthusiasm.

So all I have to do is round up some of this catnip powder or whatever it is that's making the rounds at this café, and I'll be headed full speed toward fabulous riches, right? How nice to have such a delicious prospect before me!

“...Elaina, if you also start working here, my share of the tips will be smaller. I do have a spare set of cat's ears and tail, but if possible, I'd prefer not to lend them to you.”

Avelia voiced her disapproval of my proposal. She puffed out her cheeks and turned away, but...

“I could let the manager know that you're hardly working at all...”

“I'll get them right away.”

Sure enough, just as she'd said, Avelia provided the ears and tail right away. I put them on in secret, so as not to be found out by anyone in the café, then sidled up to Coco and said, “Wow, what a super-wonderful café this is! I think I would really love to work here, too!” If I had actually been a cat girl, I probably would have been purring.

“My goodness! Really? I'm so happy! We've been getting so many new customers, you see, so I'm happy to have anyone—as long as they're a cat person!”

Luckily, Coco was understaffed and so busy that she would take any help she could get. So she happily allowed me to join her crew.

“...But isn't the color of your ears a bit off?” Coco pointed out immediately.

I had a plan, of course.

“Actually, I have a complex about my ears... That's why I wear the hat...,” I said sadly. Of course, this was a lie. The ears were fake anyway.

“My...is that so...?”

Coco seemed to accept that it was a touchy subject. She didn't mention my ears or tail again.

After that, Coco gave me an overview of my job, but experience is the best teacher anyway. "Our job is to flirt with the customers, keep them happy, and then take their money away from them," she said, and my training was finished.

Avelia puffed out her chest proudly. "If there's anything you're not clear on, you can ask me, your senior."

"Um...that's all right."

After turning her down flatly, I tied my long hair up into one bunch behind my head and slipped into my maid costume.

Well then, let's have a look at how the promising new employee did at her job.

"I broke another plate... I can't do this... Oh, whoops. I mean, I...um, can't do this, meow."

Well, at least I wasn't hiding in a crate.

The promising new employee had ashen hair and lapis-colored eyes. And she was a traveler and a witch, and also a beautiful young woman. No one had ever worn the maid outfit better.

"Heh-heh-heh... So cute. You must be the new girl who just started here today, right?"

And that beautiful young woman was currently standing in front of a man with an extremely lewd look on his face.

By the way, who could she be?

"That's right."

She's me.

Business in the café was booming, so even a new employee like me was getting plenty of customers.

"Welcome back, master," I recited in a monotone as I bowed my head. "What would you like to order?"

“Let me see... I think I’ll have an omelet for now.”

“Yes sir.”

I walked briskly into the kitchen. I heated up a ready-made omelet. I returned to the customer with it.

“Here you are. A homemade omelet.”

I tossed the homemade (ready-made) omelet down on the table with a bang.

The customer was delighted.

“Say, miss. Could you cast a spell on this omelet for me?”

“Huh?”

I don’t really understand what you’re asking...

“Well, I mean...like, say a few magic words while you write something on it in ketchup, and draw a heart around it...”

“What sort of thing should I write? Sorry, but I’m new here, so I don’t really know. Do you think you could write it for me?”

Bang!

I slammed the ketchup bottle down on the table.

“G-guess it can’t be helped... All right then, watch your master’s work carefully, now!” The self-proclaimed “master,” in high spirits despite my obviously dismissive attitude, drew a heart shape on the omelet with the ketchup. “Please enjoy, meow ♥,” he said.

I nodded.

I see, I see. So that’s what I need to do. Mm-hmm...

The customer returned the omelet to me and said, “All right, you try,” but...

“Ah, looks like there’s no space left on this one.”

“.....”

“See you again next time!”

Of course, I tried to take the job seriously, at least at first. But flirting with

random people is clearly not my strong suit, and my attitude toward the customers was sometimes really hostile. There truly was no excusing my terrible performance, but somehow most of my clients seemed happy to overlook my poor attitude, calling me a “hot-and-cold type” or whatever.

Well, at least I didn’t hide in a crate and cry.

The café’s popularity showed no signs of waning, and I ended up serving many more tables after that. Of course, considering the type of establishment it was, I got some pretty strange requests.

“I want you to watch me eat.”

Speaking of strange requests...

“Ah, you want me to watch, huh? Got it.” I sat down across from the customer.

“...!” The customer had never considered that I might sit. He seemed rather taken aback.

“By the way, could I order a coffee or something for myself?” I pushed my luck.

“...!” As surprised as he was by my audacious request, the customer chewed away at his omelet.

“Is it delicious?” I gazed off into the distance as I sipped my coffee.

“Ah...so delicious...it’s filled with your love...”

“It all comes prepackaged, you know...”

“...!” The customer was overwhelmed by this sad revelation.

After that, another customer asked me, “Can you cast a spell to make it delicious?”

“Huh? Are you saying you can’t eat it unless I say the magic words?” I scolded.

“I wish you would feed me...,” a different customer whined.

“What, your hands don’t work any better than your brain?” I scoffed.

“Do you have any favorites?” yet another customer asked. “If you like, we

could eat it together?” he suggested.

“My favorite thing is money,” I answered frankly.

“.....”

Okay, so maybe my service wasn't exactly up to the café's standards. I even glimpsed a few customers complaining to the manager when they went to pay their bill, saying things like, “She's the hot-and-cold type, but there's nothing 'hot' about her at all. This can't be right. You should let her go.”

But of course, I had a plan for this.

I'm not the type to be caught unprepared, after all.

“How cruel! How can you say such a thing?” I appeared right there before the customer with tears in my eyes.

“That's more like it!”

The customer suddenly seemed perversely satisfied.

By the way, my “tears” were actually eyedrops.

As a result, I moved up in the ranks as the day progressed.

“That's incredible, Elaina!” Avelia marveled. “You've made it to second place in the rankings in no time!”

Apparently, the rankings were determined by whoever got the most requests, and according to those numbers, I was now second only to the front-runner, Misty.

And since our pay went up the more we were requested, I was in a position to potentially earn a fair amount of money.

Staring vacantly at the rankings chart, Avelia added dejectedly, “There's no way I'm going to catch up.”

But no matter where you work, whenever a newcomer ends up being a big hit, they're certain to attract some negative attention. Sure enough, as Avelia and I looked at the chart, I heard someone grumble from behind us.

“...Tch. Beginner's luck.”

When I turned around, I saw Misty, the top-ranking maid, but she had already gone back to doting on her customer and was in the middle of some serious flirting.

“Meow, meow. ♥”

By the way...

“Avelia, I don’t see your name anywhere.”

“I didn’t even make it onto the board...”

I see.

“Maybe you should take your job seriously for a change.”

“You’re the one person I don’t want to hear that from.”



Both Avelia and I were working at the café as part of a plan to find the source of the catnip powder, but no matter how we searched, we never found a trace of the crucial substance.

For better or worse, I had become the second most popular maid in the whole establishment, so I had figured that as long as I worked a little, one of my sketchier customers would probably figure they had a better chance with me if they plied me with catnip first.

But as far as I could see, there weren’t any customers in the café who seemed to be dealing catnip powder, and there also weren’t any cat girls who were spaced out on catnip.

I was even starting to doubt whether any catnip powder was being dealt here at all. But Avelia’s information had seemed legitimate, so I kept on working at the café, keeping my eye out for the illicit substance.

“Hey, new girl.”

I had been there exactly three days before Misty, the most popular maid in the café, suddenly approached me. Flipping her lovely sand-colored hair over her shoulder, she snorted dismissively.

“Aren’t you getting a little cocky lately?”

“.....”

You say “lately,” but it’s been only three days since I started working here.

“Ah! What’s that look in your eyes? Got something to say?” Misty demanded. “You made second place in the rankings on your very first day, and now you’re getting cocky, aren’t you?! That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No, not particularly...”

I don’t really care about the rankings or whatever...

“‘I don’t really care about the rankings or whatever...’ That’s what your face says!” Misty jeered. “So cheeky!”

“.....”

“Don’t get all excited because you’ve reached the lofty number two position, all right?” Misty was puffed up with anger. “You listening? The difference between your second-place ranking and my first-place position is the difference between earth and heaven. I’m sure you think that you’re closing in, just one step behind me now that you’re in second place, but that’s not even close to the truth! If I’m like a prize flower in first place, you and everyone else below me are all like weeds growing off to the side!”

What a cruel way to put it...

“And what about people who don’t even make it on the chart?” I asked.

“Hmm? They’re the vermin that swarm on the weeds.”

“I see.” I nodded.

I’ll tell Avelia about that later.

“Well, anyway, I’m on a completely different level than the rest of you,” Misty insisted. “You’re not even competition for me. That’s right, you’re just like weeds!”

“.....”

If we can’t even compete, then why are you bothering to say anything at all?

“By the way, new girl...do you know why I’m as beautiful as I am?”

Misty tossed her hair dramatically again.

I shook my head. Just thinking about it was tiresome.

In response, she nodded happily and said, “That’s right! You don’t know, do you?! You’re not very smart! I come from a pure and beautiful cat person bloodline! In other words, I was born with exceptional talents not found in mongrels like you!”

“...Uh-huh...” I couldn’t hide my shock and confusion at Misty, who had for some reason suddenly started ranting about cat person eugenics or something. I probably looked like a crossbreed cat person because the white fur on my ears and tail didn’t match, but still.

“A special bloodline...and special beauty...it’s my natural destiny to be ranked first! The likes of you are no match for me! Got it?”

“...Well, I understand quite clearly what you’re trying to say.”

Misty went on and on, telling me one thing or another, but to make a long story short, she seemed upset that I had risen to second place so quickly.

All right, so from now on, I’ll just try to do my job and not make too much of an impression.

All I was here to do was discover the source of the catnip power, so standing out would only put my mission at risk.

Misty tossed her hair again. “Glad you understand!” she said before returning to work.

“Oh, master. ♥ So sorry to keep you waiiiting. ♥” Her composure was astounding, and her voice was sweet enough to give someone a cavity. Leaving aside any talk of blood purity, she certainly did seem to be good at her job.

“What did she say to you just now?” As I gazed absently at Misty, Avelia suddenly appeared by my side, holding her crate.

“I didn’t understand most of it,” I answered flatly. “She just seemed to want to insult me.”

“Uh-huh. For what, specifically?”

“Apparently, I’m a weed.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And you’re apparently one of the bugs that swarms on weeds.”

“I see. The only thing that’s clear is that this girl is our enemy.” Avelia held her crate closely while puffing out her cheeks in anger.

“.....”

I ignored her and kept my gaze focused on Misty. I wasn’t glaring at her because I was angry. Honestly, I couldn’t have cared less about her.

My attention was on the customer she was serving.

“Heh-heh...sweet Misty really is adorable...”

He was an unattractive man who muttered to himself like that at every turn.

Misty was flirting with him, saying things like, “Oh nooo ♡, I’m so embarrassed!”

During a few moments when Misty went to get food from the kitchen, the gross man pulled a little pouch out of his pocket and started rubbing some strange powder into his clothes.

It didn’t look like any kind of cologne I knew. Because it was powder.

It must have been something else.

“...? Oh? Something smells really good...”

To make matters worse, when Misty returned from the kitchen, her voice became even more coquettish than before.

Just like a cat intoxicated by catnip.



“As promised, here is the catnip powder that I recovered from that customer.”

After our work was finished that day, I summoned Avelia to my hotel room and put the baggie full of powder on the table between us. Avelia seemed surprised that I’d invited her to my room so suddenly, but even more than

that...

“This is...” With wide eyes, she stared very, very suspiciously at the powder. “...When on earth did you manage to recover it?”

“I was talking with the customer as he paid his bill, and that’s when I got him to hand it over.”

“What did you say to get him to do that?”

“I just asked him to give it to me.”

“...I don’t think someone would normally just hand over such a dangerous powder...”

Well, be that as it may...

Let’s leave the particulars of the story aside for now.

“But this powder, I wonder how exactly it’s made?” I mused. “I can’t imagine that a narcotic that only affects cat people is particularly common.” Holding the baggie full of powder up to the light, I tilted my head as I wondered aloud, “Someone, somewhere, for some purpose, must be distributing this, right?”

“...I don’t know who’s selling it, but I’m pretty sure I know why the customers are buying it.”

Oh? Sounds important.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“While I was hiding inside the crate, I noticed all sorts of things around the shop,” Avelia replied. She gestured to the powder in my hand. “All the customers who used this powder also requested Misty.”

“.....”

“I saw this powder several times while I was working in the café, but I never saw anyone other than Misty’s customers using it.”

Apparently, while I had been working my way up through the rankings, Avelia had been observing the café from her vantage point outside the competition for rankings.

“I remember it clearly,” Avelia continued, “because it’s a strange powder, and

the customers using it acted strangely, too. Every one of them waited for a moment when Misty wasn't looking, then they dusted their clothes or bodies with the powder."

"...I see."

That follows exactly with the scene I witnessed today.

It had only seemed like Avelia had spent the whole day cowering in a crate. But in her own way, she had been taking her job quite seriously.

"In other words, there's only one solution worth considering," Avelia said, "It's likely that the person selling catnip powder is someone with a grudge against Misty. That's why they're handing out a drug that muddles her mind—they're trying to mess with her," she revealed.

"...You mean someone is trying to bump her off the rankings?"

That's what it looks like, but...

Avelia nodded confidently.

"That's definitely what's going on."

Someone wanted to force Misty out of her job at the café so that they could claim her first-place ranking. They were giving out catnip powder and telling the new customers how to use it to make Misty like them. The more of these customers she saw, the more Misty would get addicted. Sooner or later it would start to affect her work, not to mention her health. These new customers would take up her time and fight for her attention, and probably drive away her regular customers. At any rate, her addiction would eventually drive her from the café.

Avelia's theory seemed like it could be right.

However...

"...Could that be it?"

I couldn't help but be puzzled by that guess.

"Of course that's it!" Avelia stood up triumphantly. "So then, Elaina, starting tomorrow, we'll work together to discover the source of this powder! That girl

is really disagreeable, but someone willing to stoop to these underhanded tactics is even worse!”

According to Avelia’s theory, the culprit was one of the cat girls at the café. And she was probably someone at the third ranking or lower.

“.....”

But I couldn’t quite get on board with it.

Her theory didn’t seem to have any holes, but I was worried about Misty. This powder was potent stuff, and if Misty was in danger, from her customers or the other cat girls, we needed to put an end to it right away.

That said...

“Before we can confirm whether or not your theory is correct, there’s one more thing I’d like to verify. Is that all right?”



The following day, Misty was, as always, entertaining a customer with the confident attitude and flirtatious behavior befitting her top-ranking status.

“Oh, maaaster, I was so lonely. ♥”

She was there, acting as always.

“...Um, yeah.”

But her client’s behavior was a little strange. He wasn’t acting like her customers regularly did. Somehow, he seemed even more awkward. To put it tactfully, he was distant.

“Here, master, please enjoy my homemade omelet. ♥”

Misty picked up the spoon as usual and casually brought a chunk of omelet to her client’s mouth, something I could never bring myself to do, no matter how I tried. Today, as always, Misty was on her game.

But.

“No...it’s all right. I’ll eat on my own today.”

The customer coldly refused her.

What on earth could have happened?

“Master...why are you acting so distant? It’s making me sad...” Misty was quite disheartened. Her ears and tail drooped lifelessly.

“Well, how do I put this...” But her customer pitilessly turned away from her. “...I’m embarrassed.”

What was that about? He’s acting like a bashful maiden.

Up to yesterday you were openly flirting with Misty, so what on earth could have caused this sudden self-awareness?

“...Um, it’s a little awkward...with all three of you there...,” the customer said stiffly.

“.....”

“.....”

He gestured toward the two of us, who were sitting on either side of Misty.

Oh my.

Avelia and I looked at each other.

“No, no, please don’t pay us any mind.” I gave a devilish smile.

“Please, go ahead and act all lovey-dovey like you always do.” Avelia smiled like a little angel.

“.....”

At this point, Misty finally turned her gaze toward us. It must have been her policy not to look at anything other than her customer while she was serving someone, so she had ignored us for a while as if we weren’t there. But apparently, she had reached her limit.

“Wait just a minute, okay?”

Bowing her head to the customer, Misty grabbed the two of us by our maid costumes and dragged us into the back. I’m sure we looked just like a couple of kittens whose mother was carrying them away by the scruffs of their necks.

After taking us into the office in the back, Misty glared at us and asked, “What

are you up to?"

What are we up to?

"We were studying the way you work," I said.

"That's right," Avelia agreed.

Misty scowled. "You're in my way."

"Don't pay us any mind," I insisted. "Think of us as bonus maids."

"That's right," Avelia agreed again.

"...Hmph." At that point, Misty seemed to realize something. "Could it be that you're worried about what I said yesterday? Are you trying to get back at me? You're planning to get in my way and try to knock me down in the rankings, aren't you?"

No, no, I would never.

"There's no way we would even think of trying something like that, right?" I nudged Avelia. "Right?"

"...Right?" Avelia blinked.

Misty glared at the two of us, who were intent on joking around. "I will get angry if you get in my way any further."

Aren't you already plenty angry?

I thought that, but I didn't say it.

Avelia and I just looked at each other and said, "Come, come, don't get so angry," and, "That's right, that's right," and snuggled up close to her, which only riled her up even more now that she was already upset.

By the way, Avelia hasn't said a single normal thing this whole time, has she?

"Come on! Jeez!" Misty grimaced, as if she was completely annoyed by the two of us clinging to her. "Cut it out, stop fooling around! What is your goal here?"

Oh no, you don't look so pretty now...

"Our goal? Heh-heh-heh... You want to know?" I clung tightly to her arm.

“That’s right!” And Avelia...

By the way, don’t you know any other real words, other than “That’s right”?

“Guh...you...! Let me go!”

Misty grasped us by the heads, as if to rip us off her.

But we didn’t stop.

We pulled ourselves even closer to her and clung to her tenaciously.

“By the way,” I asked, “do you feel anything when you’re with us?”

“That’s right!” Avelia added.

“...!” Misty went pale. “Don’t tell me you two are into that—”

“No, nothing like that.”

“But Elaina’s very keen.”

“Shut up, Avelia.”

You finally stop with all the “rights,” and that’s what you have to add?

Anyway, there was actually a reason why we’d been hanging all over Misty, and it didn’t have anything to do with getting in her way at work, or any other questionable motives.

Since we had gotten all the proof we needed by being in such close contact with her, it was about time to reveal the plan behind it.

“I’m sorry, Misty,” I began. “There was something that we wanted to test out, so that’s why we clung to you.”

“...Test out?” She glared. “Two girls beneath me wanted to test me, you say? How insolent. Exactly what were you aiming to accomplish?”

“Oh, sorry. You’ve misunderstood—we weren’t trying to test *you*, exactly...”

“Huh? What are you—”

“Do you know what this is?”

I cut her off and pulled a baggie from my pocket.

It was the bag for the catnip powder that I had recovered from a customer

the day before, but it was all used up. Just about used up anyway. There was hardly any left inside.

“This is catnip powder. Apparently, it has a pretty powerful effect on cat people. Put a bit of this on, and any cat girls near you will get intoxicated.”

“.....” Whether she had seen the baggie before or not, Misty stared fixedly at the small container of powder. “...What did you call it?” she murmured ambiguously.

I placed a hand on her shoulder and said, “By the way, we came to work today wearing this catnip powder.”

Then I brought my mouth close to one of her cat ears and asked, “How come you’ve been able to stay so composed?”



Let me tell you how I recovered the powder.

“Hey there, mister, what exactly is this powder?”

While the man was paying his bill, I snatched the baggie full of powder from his wallet.

“Ah...hey! What are you—”

“Is this catnip powder?”

“...!” Apparently, this customer who had requested Misty’s company was a very bad liar. “I d-don’t know... What could it be?”

“Mister...come to think of it, you used this earlier when you were with Misty, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t...no way!”

“It’s not good to lie...” I let out an exaggerated sigh. “Not good at all... If I were to report this to my boss...what do you suppose would happen to you?”

“...!”

“If word got out that you had used a powder like this on your innocent young companion... If it became a well-known fact that you were the sort of person who would use dirty tactics to lower a girl’s defenses, what do you suppose

would happen? You would probably be arrested, of course...and you'd almost certainly lose your job, huh...?"

"N-not that! Forgive me, please...! I'll do anything! So whatever you do—"

"You'll do anything?"

Oh-hoh, is that so?

"All right then, give me this powder."

"Huh?"

"Give me this powder."

"...Ah."

The customer's eyes went wide at this unexpected request. Of course, he had no right to refuse. I immediately put the powder away in my pocket, then placed a hand on his shoulder.

"By the way, how did this powder come into your possession?"

"....."

"I'll just go and call the manager."

"W-wait! I'll talk! I'll tell you!"

He wasn't in a position to refuse.

Finally, though reluctantly, he told me.

"Earlier, I was walking through town when a shady-looking woman gave me the powder—"

According to him, the woman had worn her hood low over her face and seemed very suspicious. She was the one he'd gotten it from.

As the hooded woman gave him the drug, she had told him, "This stuff is called 'catnip powder,' and if a cat girl smells it, it will make her fall in love with you... Ah, but it won't have an effect on just any cat person. It only works on cat girls with pure, unsullied bloodlines... Actually, come to think of it, there's a place nearby called Coco's Cat Café, isn't there? There's a girl there, Misty, who perfectly fits that description!"

Apparently, the man hadn't been familiar with Coco's Cat Café, but with the guidance of that suspicious woman, he decided to visit. And there he discovered that Misty, a peerless beauty, would indeed go crazy for him if he used the powder.

In a flash, the man had become a frequent customer at the café, and one of Misty's regulars.

"...And then I couldn't stop... I kept coming to this café..."

"Uh-huh, I see, I see."

That was how I was able to extract a confession.

So you see, this was not a simple case of one of the girls in the café trying a very creative method of taking Misty down, nor was it a regular customer trying to win her heart.

The men who had been handed a suspicious powder in a dark alley had all gone crazy for Misty. Ordinary passersby had first become customers, then fans, and then fanatics.

In other words...

...Misty wasn't the one intoxicated by the catnip powder; it was her customers.



There was only one thing left to be done: dealing with the person—er, cat girl—who had committed this crime. So after a tip from me and Avelia, Misty was sadly dragged off to the branch office of the United Magic Association.

"W-wait just a minute! Did I do something wrong? Where's your proof? On what grounds are you apprehending me? I was just working like normal! I don't know anything about any catnip!"

When it came to the cat girl in question, she seemed intent on playing innocent to the very end, but we presented as proof the mysterious catnip powder that she had walked around distributing to men around town. We reported those events as well, in every particular detail.

Several days after her arrest, I received notice from the Association that she

had confessed.

Incidentally, the “catnip powder” was actually just wheat flour, unfortunately made up to look like drugs, so we had no hope of getting our reward for confiscating it.

The real victim in this whole situation was Coco, the owner of the cat café.

“I can’t believe she did something like that...”

After the lead girl’s scheme was exposed, Misty’s generous fans all abandoned the café.

“It’s too bad... She was our biggest earner...” Coco dropped her shoulders, crestfallen. Though Misty had used underhanded tactics, filling the hole that she had left behind wouldn’t be easy.

“Well, I for one like the more relaxed atmosphere that the café has now.”

Inside the café, which had been constantly packed until a few days ago, I could now see several open seats. It had a calm, quiet atmosphere. The maids weren’t spending all their time sucking up to customers. In fact, I could see some of them indulging in friendly conversation in the corners of the café.

I couldn’t help but think that this was how a café should feel.

So I think that this café is going to be just fine even without Misty here, but...

“We may have lost our number one...but we have our number two...!”

Contrary to my expectations, however, Coco stood up and grabbed me tightly by the shoulder.

“Elaina! From now on, this café depends on you! You’re my new number one, starting now!”

“Ah, I’m terribly sorry, but I must tender my resignation, effective immediately.”

“.....”

“I said I quit.”

They’ll probably be fine without me, too.

“In the end, we didn’t make that much money.”

“We sure didn’t...”

Having escaped together from the nonsensical theme restaurant known as Coco’s Cat Café, Avelia and I longed for the comfort of a normal café and ended up walking to one nearby.

When it came down to it, the United Magic Association’s Criminal Enterprise Eradication Campaign was all about taking down criminal organizations, so we hadn’t been paid much for capturing a single rotten individual.

Avelia was right to complain. At the end of the day, we had made more working at the cat café than we had gotten in the reward.

...I had to wonder whether the people behind this Criminal Enterprise Eradication Campaign had set it up so that they could use that kind of logic to avoid paying out even if you did bring down an actual organization.

Which means the real criminal enterprise is the United Magic Association...?

“We failed. Looks like we would have made more if we had found a bunch of criminals and taken them head-on.”

With an exaggerated sigh, Avelia put a newspaper down on the table.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT! TWO MAGES CAUSED THE COMPLETE DESTRUCTION OF A MAJOR CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE! was printed on the front page, along with a picture of two mages posing inside some café somewhere.

One of them was a witch with blue hair...or so she appeared. She was wearing a somewhat self-satisfied expression.

The other one was a novice with chestnut-colored hair. She was striking an aggressive pose that did not make her look as cool as she thought she looked.

“.....”

A second glance confirmed that they were definitely two people I had met before. Apparently at some point, in a place unfamiliar to me, these two acquaintances of mine had become acquainted with each other.

“What’s the matter? Elaina, you’re making a really strange face for some

reason.”

“No, it’s just... It’s nothing.”

I was extremely curious to know how on earth the two of them had managed to destroy any sort of criminal enterprise. Compared to their success, the thought of our pitiful showing was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

“By the way, Elaina.” Avelia looked at me and said, “My sister is here in this city now, too. Naturally, since we’re traveling together...”

“...Oh, that’s right.”

Avelia and Amnesia were traveling together, looking for a new hometown, so even though they had gone their separate ways when they had arrived here, when Avelia went back to her hotel, Amnesia would probably be there as usual.

I hadn’t seen her even once while I’d been here, though.

“Do you want to see her? If you like, I could bring her with me tomorrow or something...”

Avelia mumbled quietly, “In any case, she would come flying over if she knew that you were here...” Then she turned to look out the window.

From what I could see, she seemed sulky and jealous.



“.....”

I found her behavior funny and laughed a little.

“No, that’s fine.”

Then I shook my head slowly and said to her, “There’s nothing quite like the sense of distance that I feel from someone who I would like to meet again someday, when I want to see them but can’t.”

If we were close enough to meet whenever we wanted, I would probably become just like the customers who’d gotten their hearts ensnared by the catnip plot.

So for now, I would just take it easy and look forward to the day that fate brought us together again.



CHAPTER 6

Frederika

Long ago, in a certain wealthy household, a pair of healthy twin girls was born.

The parents were delighted as they looked upon their newborn daughters, but at the same time, they harbored complicated feelings.

Twins were traditionally considered an ill omen in their homeland. People with the same face, the same voice. This country placed special importance on the belief that every human was unique and one of a kind. So two people who shared a face like a reflection in a mirror certainly made people uncomfortable.

Though obviously the belief that twins are somehow the same person is an utterly ridiculous and outdated notion, the two girls were unfortunately born in a country that believed in such anachronistic ideas.

Whenever twins were born in that country, most parents would send one of them into exile. Twins were bad luck, and they couldn't be raised together—that was what everyone there believed.

However, these parents couldn't bring themselves to choose one baby over the other. They didn't see the sisters as two halves of the same person.

Their neighbors were not kind toward the twin sisters. There were some who said right out that they were disgusting. There were even some who hounded the parents, telling them to hurry up and send both babies away.

Even so, the parents raised both of them. They knew that they didn't have two of the same person; these children were completely different, each her own person. And saying so all the while, they ignored any criticism and raised them both.

In order that the two sisters would not grow to resemble each other, their parents tried very hard to make them different in every way.

“You mustn't wear the same clothes.”

“You mustn’t read the same books.”

“You mustn’t have the same haircut.”

“You mustn’t play in the same places.”

They raised them strictly in that way.

As the girls grew, they developed such different personalities that there was no need to take the trouble to differentiate them by outward appearance.

The younger twin grew into a wonderful young girl, brilliant and considerate and beloved by many.

On the other hand, the older twin grew into a gloomy child who shut herself away at home and never did anything but play with her dolls.

In a certain sense, the two of them had indeed become different people, just as their parents had hoped. Even though in appearance they were as alike as could be, their countenances were completely different, one light and one dark.

The kindhearted younger sister was named Lunarik.

The gloomy older sister was named Frederika.

And then, after an incident when the girls were about fifteen years old, they were separated once and for all. Frederika deeply, deeply wounded her gentle sister’s heart.

Ultimately, the girls ended up living separate lives, like most twins in their country. The circumstances left them with no other choice.

“Elaina...” After confiding everything in me, she asked me, “Do you think that if Lunarik saw me as I am now, she would forgive me?”



Her hair was ashen, and her eyes were lapis. A single witch dressed in a black robe and triangular hat was enjoying dinner at a quiet restaurant attached to a high-class hotel.

She was sitting at a four-person table that was empty except for several pieces of plain bread. It was far too simple to be the dinner of a growing girl. It was certainly not a healthy and nutritionally balanced meal, but there was a reason why this girl was contenting herself with such simple fare.

“I...have no money...”

That’s right—she was broke.

She was a witch, and a traveler, but she was not a particularly good planner, and as she went through her daily life, she would say things like, “Heh-heh. Do you know what the purpose of having money is? That’s right, to spend it!” It was in her nature to get carried away and buy things she didn’t really need, so running out of money seemed to be something of a regular occurrence in her travels.

“Guh...why do I only have enough money to buy bread?!” The witch banged on the table.

She asked why, but surely her loose purse strings and taste for extravagant hotels were to blame. And yet for some reason she wanted to lay the blame anywhere else. She was just venting, though.

Anyway...

The witch sitting there like that, wallowing in her poverty in a high-class hotel restaurant, who could she be?

That’s right, she’s me.

“You blockhead!”

By the way, the abuse I was spitting was directed at myself.

First of all, I need to make some money quickly, before the single night I booked here is up. Let’s do that.

Apparently, my dinner table with only bread on it looked quite strange to the elegant tourists and wealthy travelers at the other tables, for I had seen people glancing repeatedly over at me since I sat down.

Each time I noticed them, I swallowed unbearable humiliation along with my bread.

Ah, delicious...

“.....”

I’m sure that the dinner of an overextended poor person must look like quite

a strange thing to the rich.

I was hounded through my whole meal by the feeling that someone somewhere was watching me.

I returned to my room and absentmindedly considered heading for my next destination as I gazed at a map of the surrounding region.

There didn't seem to be very many cities in this area, and even the one closest to where I was now was quite a distance away. It would take me more than a day to reach by broom—a place called Parastomeire.

I would probably end up camping out.

I was greatly perplexed. This state of affairs was too unfavorable. I had nothing but problems. Problems with distance...problems with money...

Let's think of a way to earn some money...

"Matches...does anyone need matches...?" I imagined myself shape-shifting into a young girl and selling matches.

"Eh-heh-heh... This oughta work just fine." I imagined myself counting a pile of money, the result of men being lured in easily by a cute little girl.

"All right, let's hurry up and say good-bye to this place." I imagined myself fleeing the city in haste.

"It's quite a long way to the next city..." I imagined myself camping out in the wilderness.

"Huh? Suspicion of fraud...I'm being arrested? No, please, wait a minute." I imagined myself being dragged away by local mages once they realized my misdeeds.

"....."

There would be nowhere for me to hide out after I left. I would be stuck camping out in the woods. If that was the case, it would be fairly risky to get involved in any crooked business. On the other hand, finding honest work would take time, and I might just die by the roadside while I was hunting for a job anyway.

“Hmmm...”

What to do?

I sat down on the bed and was puzzling it over when—*knock, knock!* Someone knocked politely two times on the door to my room.

I don't remember ordering any room service. Does that mean I have a visitor? I don't remember making any friends at this hotel, so who on earth could it be?

Waiting on the other side of the door, which I opened without questioning it further, was a single beautiful girl.

She was about the same age as I was, or maybe a little older.

Her hair was golden blond, and wavy, and went down to about the middle of her back, with the front cut short. Her eyes were a clear blue. She seemed to have been injured in her left eye, which was covered with a diagonal bandage.

From her outward appearance, I could somehow tell that the girl before me was a traveler.

She wore a black cloak, and underneath that a black vest and a white blouse. Long boots showed below her long black skirt.

At her hip, she wore a gun and a short sword. They must have been so she could at least defend herself.

“Good evening,” she said with a smile. “You’re the witch who was eating bread alone in the restaurant earlier, right? I watched you the entire time.”

“A stalker, eh...?” I quickly tried to shut the half-open door.

“No, I’m not a stalker. How rude. I just watched you the whole time earlier in the restaurant. Then I followed you to your room, and when I estimated it to be a suitable time, I knocked on the door. That’s all.”

“So you are a stalker after all, aren’t you?”

I'll just shut the door...

“I am not. How rude.” Spitting out the same words as before, the girl puffed her cheeks out, looking indignant. “I just came here to ask you a favor.”

“I decline.”

“You need money, right?”

“.....”

If she had watched me the whole time I was in the restaurant, she must have heard me mumbling pitiful things to myself about not having any money. No, she wouldn't have had to hear me—the fact that I was eating a lonesome dinner with only bread on the table made it clear as day that I was having money troubles.

“Look, if you don't mind, would you listen to my request?”

I already had an idea of what she wanted—and how I was going to raise some cash.

“...What is it?” I stopped trying to close the door, reeled in by the scent of easy money.

She laughed gently at me. “Okay, I want you to escort me to a nearby city,” she answered concisely.

The specifics must have hinged on my reply.

So I opened the door.

“What's your name?”

She answered concisely again, “Frederika.”



The single room where I was staying didn't have a sofa or anything for relaxing, so I had Frederika sit in the single chair.

“How uncomfortable. The suite where I'm staying has a sofa for receiving visitors.”

If you're gonna blame something, you should blame this room that barely has any furniture despite being in a high-class hotel.

“I already drank the coffee earlier, so please take this.” I halfheartedly poured two cups of the tea that came with the room and handed her one.

“Thank you. I like this tea.”

“It's just the complimentary teabags.”

“That’s why I like it. No matter where you drink it, the taste doesn’t change, right?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Long ago I found it too bitter to drink unless I put lots of sugar in it. But as I grew into an adult, I started drinking it without adding any sugar. The actual taste of the tea never changed, but the person drinking it did. Once I realized that, I could accept the bitter flavor for what it is, and that’s why I like it.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Well, I don’t suppose a child would understand,” Frederika said with a pointed glance down at my chest.

“Hey, keep your eyes up here! You looking for trouble or something?”

Frederika chuckled at my outburst.

“Well then, on to the request at hand.” After looking around restlessly, searching for a place to set her tea, she ended up plunking it down atop her knee, then told me, “I want you to escort me from here to another city nearby.”

I dragged over the only table in my high-class hotel room and placed it between us, then I sat down on the bed across from her. On the table was a map that I had been looking at just a moment ago; it showed the nearby region.

“Escort you how far?”

Frederika set her teacup down beside the map.

“Over to Parastomeire.” The city she pointed to was the one closest to our current location. “I have an appointment to meet someone.”

“I see.”

Though I said it was close, it would still take me a whole day to ride there on my broom alone. We wouldn’t be able to avoid the need to camp out. From what I could tell by looking at her, Frederika here didn’t seem like she could use magic, and I began to feel overwhelmed just thinking about how many hours it would take if we traveled on foot.

But...

"I don't really mind escorting you, but—but why?" I asked.

"Why? What do you mean?"

"You don't seem to be hard up for money." *It's obvious that you've got cash to spare, since you're staying in a suite room in an expensive hotel like this.* "Surely there are all sorts of ways to get from this city to Parastomeire, by carriage or otherwise."

"There are, yes. Apparently, there's regular carriage service."

"So wouldn't that work?"

"A carriage moves sluggishly and would take a lot of time, wouldn't it? I want to hurry if I can."

"I see."

In short, you're impatient.

Well, I didn't have any particular resistance to escorting a single woman to a neighboring city. There was no reason to refuse her request outright. Honestly, as I was currently at my wit's end trying to figure out how to make money, I couldn't have been more grateful for her proposal.

All right then, let's get to the good stuff.

"By the way, concerning my remuneration... How much are you prepared to spend?" I put on a cheerful smile.

"About that... I actually wanted to ask you, how much to let me ride with you?"

"I think about thirty gold pieces should do it. If you can arrange to pay that much, I'll fly very fast."

"That's quite the hefty price... How much if you fly at your usual speed?"

"About thirty gold pieces should do it."

"It didn't change at all."

"Nothing I can do about that. The slower I go, the longer you'll be sharing my broom, Frederika."

“That’s a terrible pricing scheme.”

“Oh? I’m giving you a big discount.”

“.....”

That was a joke, of course.

After making a show of clearing my throat, I just said, “Well, if you’ll pay me what you think is fair, that’ll be enough.”

In any case, I was already planning to go to Parastomeire. It was no trouble to add a bit of extra weight to the broom.

...After all, Frederika seems to have money to spare. She’s rather rich, I expect. So who can blame me for trying to weasel my way into a little extra cash?

“All right,” Frederika offered, “how about one copper piece?”

“You’re pretty stingy for someone staying in a luxury suite.”

In the end, after much badgering and grumbling, we struck a deal at five gold pieces.



The wilderness stretched out before us. Here and there, I could see just a little bit of green in the scenery that passed us by, but most of what was visible was withered and brown.

Almost like it had forgotten what it was to be green.

“This is my first time experiencing something like this.”

As we traveled toward Parastomeire, Frederika’s voice mixed with the rush of the wind.

I turned and looked back at her. “Do you mean your first time riding on a broom? That’s good. How does it feel to ride?” I smiled.

She gazed off into the distance somewhere as she answered me, “How does it feel...? It’s a pleasant sensation. I could do without the condescension, though.”

She answered me from behind—from inside a box that was tied to the back of my broom. A strange sense of sorrow was hanging in the air around Frederika, who was sitting with her knees pressed up against her chest inside a large box

that I was floating along behind me using a spell.

Her cheeks were puffed up in dissatisfaction. “Normally, wouldn’t someone sit with you on the broom as you fly? Why are you making me sit in a box...?”

“As a precaution.”

“Are you trying to imply that I might attack you or something? I would never do such a thing.”

“There’s that, and the fact that my broom is not so promiscuous as to blithely allow a total stranger to ride.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t quite understand what you’re saying.”

“But the ride is comfortable, yes?”

“I’m afraid I have to admit that it is.”

As a practical matter, people who aren’t used to riding on brooms for a long time get tired rather quickly. This trip was already going to take long enough; there was no way I was going to let her ride with me. Also, she apparently couldn’t use any magic.

Though I would absolutely never say something so patronizing out loud.

Besides.

“There’s nothing more fascinating than a new experience, right?” I asked.

“.....”

“They say that seeing is believing, don’t they?” I continued. “And that proof is better than theory? No matter how much knowledge you accumulate, no matter how many books you read, it will always be inferior to the experience of actually seeing and touching something. No matter how much knowledge you have, until you actually experience something, it’s the same as knowing nothing.”

“I’m not sure I really needed the experience of riding in a box...” Frederika let out a sigh.

By the way...

“Frederika?”

“Hmm?”

The girl who had until just a moment earlier been the picture of candid displeasure was now looking at me with her head tilted nonchalantly.

I looked back at her intently and tilted my own head. “About how long have you been living as a traveler?”

“Hmm...” She turned her gaze up at the vivid blue sky and said, “About four years...I think.”

“...A fairly long time, huh?”

About as long as I have.

“Yeah...and before I knew it, I’d turned nineteen.”

Which must mean, in other words, that you’ve been traveling since you were about fifteen?

“If you’ve been traveling this whole time, how do you usually get from place to place?”

“Oh, I’ve been traveling by horse.”

“Oh, by horse!” *Quite a wild one, she is.* “So where is that horse now?”

“By now, he’s probably living a peaceful life as a wild horse...” Frederika had a faraway look in her eyes.

“He ran away on you, huh...?”

“Yeah. Well...” Frederika nodded at me with a sigh, then stared at me. “You could say it’s adding insult to injury to be stuffed inside a box after losing my horse...”

“But the ride is comfortable, right?”

“I’m afraid I have to say yes.”

Sighing again with exasperation, she turned around and gazed out over the path we had followed thus far.

The city we had been in this morning was already out of sight.

“We’ve come quite a long way, huh?”

Her hair fluttered, fanned by the cool breeze.

“Are you tired?”

“I’m fine.”

She turned back around to face me and smiled as she smoothed down her hair with one hand.

Her eyes looked like they were lost in sadness.



Night had arrived.

Forgetting its afternoon warmth, an unpleasantly cold wind blew across the weather-beaten scenery, where I used spells to pitch a tent and light a bonfire. Branches were popping as they burned in the crackling fire. Feeling blessed to have magic to cut down on all the tedious labor, I took a seat in front of the dancing fire.

“Come to think of it, it’ll be comet season before long, huh?” Across from me, Frederika tossed a log onto the fire and looked up at the sky.

All the people of this region became restless whenever the comet was approaching.

Every twenty-two years, a very beautiful and solitary star appeared alone in the sky, then disappeared just as quickly. It had been almost twenty-two years since its last appearance. In fact, it was supposed to appear again in just ten days.

Everyone was looking forward to the comet’s reappearance.

Frederika probably was, too.

I followed her gaze and looked up into the dark sky.

A lovely night sky, with twinkling stars.

That was when a long, straight stream of light passed right overhead.

A shooting star.

“Ah—” In front of me, I could hear Frederika make an innocent sound, like a child. “Elaina, did you know? If you recite your wish three times while a

shooting star is passing overhead, it'll come true." Her voice was suddenly more cheerful.

"How romantic," I answered, continuing to look at the sky. "Did you wish for something?"

"....."

She was still looking up at the sky and was keeping silent.

It wasn't that she hadn't heard my question, and I don't think she was embarrassed about her wish. Frederika looked like she was taking her time to gather her thoughts.

Between us, the fire crackled and swayed, and by the time the log that she had just thrown on it began to disappear, she finally looked back at me.

And then she said:

"That the incident four years ago never would have happened—that's what I wished."

That's all she said.

Four years ago would coincide perfectly with when Frederika started her journey. "...Did something bad happen?"

"What happened back then is the reason I travel, Elaina. If it hadn't been for the incident four years ago, I would be living a quiet life in my hometown right now." She shrugged her shoulders.

"...What happened?"

She let my question hang in the air for a little while, then she pressed her left hand against her bandaged eye and opened her mouth.

"Something very, very sad."

Then she told me.

She told me of her four years of repentance and prayers, and her memories of an early life so hopeless, it led her to entreat a star for help.

She told me the story of how she became Frederika the traveler.





The story started shortly after the two girls were born.

In outward appearance, the sisters resembled each other very closely but had one obvious difference, which their parents, who had come from a long line of mages, realized when they were young.

The older sister, Frederika, possessed an exceptional talent for magic, while her younger sister, Lunarik, never made much progress, no matter how much they tried to teach her.

Apparently, when Lunarik was young, she was a bit of a handful. Understandably, their parents started to pay far more attention to Lunarik than to Frederika. They struggled with what to do so that the younger sister with no magical talent would nevertheless grow up into a proper mage.

From an outside perspective, it looked like they were giving their love only to the younger sister, Lunarik.

But the neglected sister, Frederika, did not complain. Instead, she quietly began spending all of her time on her magic studies. If she studied hard and learned to use more advanced spells, then her parents would praise her like they did her sister.

Or so she thought.

But the more advanced her magic got, the less attention Frederika's parents paid her. "This girl doesn't need any looking after," they said, and more and more, they only paid attention to Lunarik.

For their parents, the fact that there was a big difference between the girls was a good thing. They thought that the more different they were, the less they would seem like twins and the more they would seem like regular sisters.

Without realizing it, their parents came to see Frederika as a girl who could do anything without their help.

An uncrossable gulf developed between Frederika and her parents from a young age.

By the time the girls started going to school, that gulf had widened noticeably.

“What is this grade, Frederika?”

One day after coming home from school, Frederika and only Frederika was summoned by her parents and questioned about her grade on a recent test.

By no means had her score been bad. It was just a totally average grade. But from her parents’ perspective, it was unthinkable that Frederika, the girl who could do anything, had gotten an unremarkable score.

“This score is even worse than Lunarik’s. You’ve been slacking off recently, haven’t you?”

By this time, their parents’ handling of Lunarik and Frederika was completely different. Lunarik was usually praised no matter what she did. In contrast, their parents treated Frederika very strictly.

“If I study harder, if I excel more, they’ll praise me, too.”

Frederika became obsessive about her studies, devoting herself to them day after day as she grew up alongside Lunarik, who was being raised so permissively.

They were not yet ten years old.

Before long, Frederika’s efforts bore fruit, and she surpassed everyone at school. In magic as well as her regular studies, she became so outstanding that no one could match her.

However.

“Excellent, Lunarik, your grades went up again!”

“You figured out how to fly your broom, did you? Amazing! All right, now Mama will teach you a new spell.”

Frederika’s parents still ignored her.

Even though she had surpassed everyone, in the end, nothing changed, and they only praised her cute little sister, Lunarik.

She watched her father and mother stroke Lunarik’s head kindly.

Such kindness had never once been directed toward Frederika.

“Even though I can do more...,” Frederika muttered behind her parents’

backs. “Even though I’m better at school...” She crumpled up her answer sheet for a test she had gotten a perfect score on. “Why do they only praise Lunarik?”

Hatred filled her heart.

Hatred for her beloved sister.

“Papa, Mama, why won’t you look at me?”

When the girls were about twelve years old, their positions completely reversed.

Lunarik, who had taken her time learning all sorts of things, developed into a tenderhearted girl who was beloved by all. Her grades in school and magical skills were exceptional, and everyone had great expectations for her future.

Frederika, who had advanced more quickly than anyone else, shut herself away in her room and rarely spoke to anyone, developing a dark and miserable personality. *But she used to be so exceptional.* Her existence was so wretched that people whispered such cruel things.

“It’s fine, I don’t need any friends other than you.”

Shut up inside her room, she cast a spell on her homemade doll, made it move, and talked to it like it was her friend. Night after night, she spoke only with the doll, to distract herself from her loneliness.

Though the voices of her three family members engaged in pleasant conversation in the dining room made it to her ears, she pretended that she couldn’t hear them.

She pretended that her heart was satisfied.

She pretended that it wasn’t painful.

“What is this grade, Frederika?”

She was disciplined many times for her deteriorating grades.

“And you used to be such a capable child.” Her parents’ lectures were always a repetition of the same sort of words. “When did you turn into such a gloomy thing?” She had been scolded with the same words for the past few years. “Are you listening? We’re telling you that we expect better from you.” She remained

silent.

She wanted them to look her way more; she wanted them to praise her more. But no matter what efforts she made, her parents never paid her any attention.

She wanted to be spoiled like her sister, but her parents wouldn't indulge her for a moment, and she began to seriously resent them.

Only when they were lecturing her did her parents pay Frederika any attention.

That made her ever so slightly happy.

So in order to make the lectures last just a little bit longer, she kept silent and refused to answer.

Eventually, her father wasn't able to hide his anger at her attitude anymore.

"I've had enough!"

When Frederika was thirteen years old, an ordinary lecture turned violent. She was just sitting there in silence when her father slapped her across the cheek.

She fell from her chair and lay on the floor. Her mother pacified her father and ended the lecture.

Frederika's life began to fall apart.

She had not spoken to her younger sister, Lunarik, for several years. Not during meals, not when they passed in the hall, not when their eyes met during a scolding. Not even when Lunarik watched from the hallway as Frederika was struck and fell to the floor.

There was no way that Lunarik was coming to Frederika's rescue.

She didn't even speak to her afterward.

"Hey, listen! Today Papa and Mama spoke to me! I got hit, but they spoke to me for the first time in a long time, and that made me happy."

The doll that she had animated with a magic spell gently stroked Frederika's reddened cheek. The doll, which contained a bit of its owner's consciousness, always did as Frederika wished.

In her heart, dark emotions were brewing.

By the time Frederika was fourteen, she had largely stopped being lectured by her parents. They had given up on her.

“Lunarik is amazing, isn’t she? Apparently, she got the top score in school on her magic test again.” Their father was in a good mood.

“You’re our pride and joy!” Their mother smiled, also in a good mood.

“You’re both exaggerating. I just got lucky this time, that’s all.” Lunarik was being humble in the face of their praise.

They were the very picture of a happy family, but the parents were acting like their older daughter, silently eating her meal, didn’t exist at all.

Whether she studied or didn’t, no one took any interest in Frederika anymore.

From the bottom of her heart, Frederika loathed the happy family scene unfolding before her.

How badly she wished that she were Lunarik.

How happy she would have been if she were the only girl living in this house.

Truly, though she wanted to be loved more than anyone, she was loved by no one.

“By the way...”

During the conversation, Lunarik glanced over at Frederika from time to time, but she never spoke to her sister and never brought her into the conversation. She only continued talking with their parents.

Frederika thought she was being made fun of.

It’s because of you that I turned out this way.

If only you weren’t here, Papa and Mama would love me.

If only you didn’t exist, I would be sitting where you are.

“If only you weren’t around, everything would be so much better.”

The dark emotions that had been growing inside Frederika spilled out as she

snatched up her ragged doll, the only companion she'd had for so long, and stabbed it again and again with a kitchen knife until its stuffing was falling out.

They were fifteen years old.

The dining room in their home was spattered with blood. Everything was covered in red.

As to whose blood it was, that wasn't yet clear to Frederika.

All she knew was that everything she could see was soaked in blood.

"You! Do you have any idea what you've done?! This—" Frederika's father was straddling her on the floor, holding her by the front of her shirt as he struck her again and again.

She let out a sob. Still, her father did not stop. Her face was red and swollen. Still, her father did not stop. Her nose bled. Still, her father did not stop. Her left eye was crushed. Still, her father did not stop. His hands were sticky with blood. Still, he showed no sign of stopping.

Frederika never stopped smiling the whole time he was beating her.

"Ah...how awful...how cruel...!"

There beside him, her mother did not intervene; she did not challenge him. She had tears in her eyes. She looked desperate. "Are you all right? Stay with me, Lunarik! W-we're going to get you all fixed up...!"

Lunarik, lying in her mother's arms, said only, "I'm all right... I'm fine...", and held a hand to her abdomen.

Blood was spilling out of her. Her lovely clothes were dyed scarlet. A knife, wet and red, lay on the floor.

If only my little sister weren't here, I would be happier.

Frederika, who had been nursing a hatred within her heart for as long as she could remember, had finally turned a knife on Lunarik. She had stabbed her sister in the stomach.

That was the moment when the precarious balance that they had maintained in their family completely crumbled.

“We’d be better off without you—!”

Over and over again, Frederika’s father hit her.

Again and again, she took the blows.

On and on, she smiled.

By the time their mother had dressed Lunarik’s wound, Frederika had lost consciousness. Her face was red and swollen, her features unrecognizable.

“Get out. Never show your face here again.” With ragged breaths, as he wiped her blood from his hands, her father said, “You are no longer my daughter.”

She was allowed to gather what little she could carry and then was banished from her home.

“...Why?”

Only after she was driven from the city, banned from ever coming back or seeing her beloved parents again, did she realize that it was her own fault.

But by that time, it was already too late.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way, she thought. I just wanted to be loved.

She banged on the city gates many times, but once it became clear that they weren’t going to open for her, she left, battered and weeping.

That was how she became Frederika the traveler.



“Over the past four years, I’ve traveled to all sorts of places. I’ve visited many cities, observed many value systems, and reflected on my family’s past. I’ve thought about where we might have gone wrong.”

She brought a cup of the hotel tea to her lips, then after a short pause said, “In our case, you see, it was the place where we were born that was to blame. That’s all there is to it,” she said, as if it were nothing.

If only they’d been born somewhere else, surely the sisters would have been raised totally normally, as normal twins. Their parents never would have wanted so badly to make them into different people.

“And the place where you were born is called...”

Frederika nodded just as I was about to say it. “Parastomeire. Tomorrow, I’m going home.”

In that case, it was obvious who it was she had promised to meet.

Before I could get a word in, she said, “I’ve got an arrangement to meet Lunarik.”

“.....”

“For four years, I’ve traveled without stopping, and finally, I’ve made up my mind to go home. I’ve come to want to see her and my parents again, and talk to them. That’s why I sent a letter ahead of me, from a neighboring city.”

She must have meant the city where she and I met.

I looked down the path that we had traveled so far.

I could no longer see any trace of the city behind us.

“...So how did they respond?” I asked, turning back to face her.

“I’ve sent several letters back and forth with my parents, but they said that they wouldn’t see me until I had Lunarik’s forgiveness. So I arranged to meet Lunarik in person. It sounded like our parents were very reluctant, but yesterday, just before I met you, Elaina, they finally gave me permission to see her. They arranged for me to temporarily be allowed back into the city. And they said that Lunarik wants to see me, too.”

When she had commissioned me to ferry her to the next city, she had seemed to be in quite a hurry. Now I understood why.

She had been waiting impatiently for this.

“By the way, can I ask you one thing?”

Now that I had heard her story, there was one thing that was bothering me. Frederika had touched on it only briefly during her long, long reminiscence. But there was something different about her now, compared to then, something I couldn’t overlook.

Staring hard at her, with perhaps a challenging look in my eyes, I said, “You

used to be able to use magic, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. I still can,” Frederika answered me calmly. “Why?”

“I thought for sure that you couldn’t.”

“I don’t remember saying any such thing.”

“Well, you were definitely acting like it.”

“.....” She looked away from me for a while, then eventually, after bringing her tea to her lips again, said, “I had a reason for that. Magic is how I ended up in this situation, so if that’s the cause of everything, wouldn’t it be better if I never used magic again?”

“.....” At first glance, it seemed like a logical reason. “And is that also the reason you haven’t fixed that eye of yours?”

Her bandaged left eye.

All the other wounds she’d received when she was beaten by her father had surely healed by now, but...her left eye was still maimed.

Touching the bandages lightly, Frederika spoke quietly. “About that—I’ll tell you honestly. When I first started traveling, I left the wound as it was so that I would never forget my own hatred toward that girl.”

I see.

“And now?”

After a sigh, she said, “Now it’s so that I won’t forget my own wrongdoing.” She continued, “You see, I want to meet her, and apologize for everything that’s happened. On top of that, I want to try again, to start over—to understand each other. I’m sure that, because of me, she’s gone through some very painful times.”

There didn’t seem to be any falsehood in her words.

But if that’s true...

“We don’t need this box anymore, do we?”

I picked up the box that was sitting beside me, the box I had constructed to carry her, and tossed it into the fire. “Tomorrow, you’ll ride behind me.”

The fire, which had been wavering gently, flickered as if it were surprised by the large piece of kindling that had just fallen into it. Gradually, it engulfed the box and began to consume it.

As she watched it burn, Frederika said to me, "How kind."

What do you mean?

"Are you stupid? It's not for your sake. It's just that, if you're a mage, there's no need to go to all the fuss of letting you ride in a box."

It certainly wasn't because I sympathized with Frederika and didn't see her as a stranger anymore; don't get me wrong.

That's the truth.

...Isn't it?

I'm not sure what was so funny, but Frederika started chuckling, and I let out a laugh, too, drawn in by her cheer, and the two of us sat around for a little while, enjoying some lighter conversation.

We grew sleepy after spending some pleasant time chatting together.

The light from the fire had died down, and we were enveloped in the dark of night. When we were finally almost asleep, lying in the pitch-darkness, Frederika must have been feeling anxious.

"Elaina?" Mumbling in a vanishingly quiet voice, this girl who had confided everything in me asked, "When today's Lunarik sees me as I am now, do you think she'll forgive me?"



It was a little after noon on the next day when we arrived in Parastomeire.

There was a single gate in the towering wall. Standing before it was a sentry, who bowed once and greeted us, "Welcome to Parastomeire! Happy to receive you!"

After we both got down off the broom that we were riding together and returned his greeting right away, the guard said, "Now then, there are several things I need to check upon your entry into our city," and took out a piece of paper and a pen.

Yes, yes, let us begin the usual, perfectly ordinary immigration inspection.

Frederika and I, without any particular precautions, fluidly answered such simple questions as, “What are your names? What is your reason for visiting? How long will you stay?”

As the immigration inspection was continuing without a hitch, the guard turned to Frederika, who was standing beside me, and asked, “By the way, am I correct in assuming that you are Frederika the traveler?”

“Hmm? I am, but...” Frederika was wearing a fairly nervous expression as she nodded. She had been barred from returning to the city after all.

The guard questioned her further. “Older sister to Lunarik, if I’m not mistaken?”

“...Yes.”

“I have a letter from your sister.”

Apparently, Lunarik had known that Frederika was on her way. She had probably heard a certain amount from her parents.

As he handed Frederika the letter, which was sealed with wax, the guard said, “Well then, please enjoy your time in our city.” After bowing once more, he stepped back.

The city beyond the wall was no different from so many others, just a peaceful townscape stretching out before us.

“.....”

Beside me, Frederika began to walk.

With very, very heavy steps.

Dear Frederika:

Have you been well? This is your little sister, Lunarik.

I can’t meet you in person, so please forgive me for sending this letter. I’ve already heard from Papa and Mama that you want to see me.

I would like to see you again, too.

Both Papa and Mama were opposed to it, but I feel the same way that you

do. There is no falsehood in this feeling. If you would also like to see me again, I intend to respond in kind.

Thinking about it now, quite a lot of time has passed, hasn't it? Four years, in fact.

Both of us have grown into adults.

I believe that, at this point, we're certainly capable of meeting face-to-face, as different people than we used to be.

I'll be waiting alone for you in the fountain plaza at noon. Not on any specific day.

Until you come, I'll wait there every day. I'll be waiting, believing that you will come.

A little ways down the main avenue in Parastomeire, there was a plaza with a fountain.

"...Too bad. Looks like today's not the day."

Frederika had probably been hoping to meet her sister right away. She must have wanted to see her and talk to her immediately.

But there was no one in the fountain plaza. She must have figured that she wasn't coming today. The hands of the clock were already pointing to three.

"You'll have another chance tomorrow. How about relaxing today?"

You must be tired from the long journey. Actually, I'm a little tired myself. I understand your eagerness, but compared to four years, waiting for one more day is nothing, surely.

"...You're right."

Frederika nodded.

With one eye, she gazed quietly at the water's surface, wavering in the wind. Since it was in between busy periods, the fountain had been turned off, and the plaza around it was enveloped in a lonely feeling not unlike the one in her heart.

Then Frederika let out a short sigh and looked at me with determination in her one eye.

“...Thank you, Elaina, for bringing me this far.”

Those seemed like parting words.

Sure enough, now that we had arrived in the city, my duty was finished. I was just a guide, her transportation, so to speak, and had no business inserting myself beyond that.

“You really don’t need to thank me.” I held out my hand.

“It was just a short time, but I had fun traveling with you.” She smiled and shook my hand. “It’s strange. You have a way of getting me to talk more than I ever would otherwise. You’re the first person I’ve spoken to about my past in such detail.”

“...Is that so?”

“...Yeah.”

By the way...

“Hey, I’m really sorry to upset this pleasant atmosphere, but I wasn’t looking for a handshake. I was looking to get paid my fee.”

“How greedy...!” Frederika looked simply astonished. “What would your parents say if they heard you talk like that...?”

“Oh, would you like to extend your journey as far as my parents’ house? If you do, it will cost you quite a bit more. You know, I am somewhat interested in seeing the city where you were born...but I think I must decline. My journey ends here.”

If she was able to meet her sister and make amends, Frederika would no longer have any reason to be a traveler.

Perhaps she had told me all about her inner feelings because this was the last we would see of each other.

“Let’s meet again someday, Elaina.”

As she pressed five gold coins into my palm, Frederika squeezed my hand again and smiled.

“Yeah...see you.”

I smiled, too, drawn in by her cheer.

In this way, the two of us approached a relatively unremarkable parting.

That night I stayed at a nearby inn, but since those five gold pieces were all I had to my name, as before, I was almost broke. Never mind staying in a high-class hotel with an attached restaurant; sadly, I wasn't even able to go to a high-class restaurant at all.

"For now, I'll have the chef's recommended pasta, please."

I was having a simple dinner at a modest restaurant that didn't seem to get many tourists. I've found that you basically can't go wrong ordering the recommended special in a place like this.

The waitress said, "Yes, ma'am," bowed her head, and took the menu with her when she left my table.

Now that I had nothing to do and nothing to look at, I looked around at the hustle and bustle of the restaurant for a while. There I saw the everyday lives of the residents of this city. People enjoying a date as a couple, friends having a drink on the way home from work—in the nearly full restaurant, there were all sorts of people, and a completely ordinary evening was unfolding.

This is a peaceful city.

If Frederika was really able to settle here, I was sure that she, too, would be happy. I was absentmindedly thinking such things when, before long, the waitress returned.

"Please enjoy this."

With a *clink*, she set down on my table a glass of red wine. I didn't remember ordering it.

Did I lose my mind, thinking the chef was recommending pasta?

I frowned with confusion, and the waitress politely indicated someone in a counter seat.

She said simply, "It's from that customer over there."

"....."

There was a girl sitting over there. She was about my age. After waving at me briefly, she walked over with a wineglass in one hand.

She looked familiar.

“Good evening.”

The girl had wavy blond hair and was dressed in black.

She was nothing if not familiar.

“Stalking me again?” I laughed at her.

I was looking at Frederika, whom I had just parted ways with that afternoon.

But...

“...What do you mean?”

She tilted her head, looking puzzled, and pointed at me, “You’re a witch with ashen hair, and you’re about my age. You’re the traveler, Elaina, aren’t you?” she asked.

As if it was the first time she had ever met me.

“.....” That’s when I realized.

The girl before my eyes was not the Frederika that I knew. To begin with, her left eye, which should have been patched up, was uncovered, just like normal.

“I wonder, could I speak with you a little?”

She introduced herself as Lunarik.



“Ever since I heard from Papa and Mama that my big sister wanted to see me, I haven’t been able to sit still, you see, and I’ve gone to the fountain plaza every day. I haven’t even been able to go to work.”

On the table were two glasses of red wine and one empty plate. I had barely tasted my food because I wolfed it down so quickly.

“I heard from the sentry that my sister entered the city today. He also told me that you were accompanying her, Elaina.”

“The soldiers in this city sure are talkative, huh?”

Maybe the concept of privacy doesn't exist here...

“Didn’t you know? The gate guards will do all sorts of things for you if you pay them enough money. Like giving that letter to my sister. Also, informing me of her arrival, and so on. My parents and I all work for the government, so favors like that are no trouble at all.”

“.....”

I felt like cracking a joke about both sisters being stalkers, but I reminded myself that they only looked alike on the outside, and that this girl was not the Frederika I knew, so in the end, the complaint that was halfway out of my mouth turned into a sigh.

“I can see you’re shocked. I am sorry. But I’ve got my reasons for being so desperate.”

“I know.”

It was obvious why she was reaching out to me. “You probably want to know what she thinks about you?”

“...Yeah.” She nodded. “You nailed it.”

“She told me everything that happened between you two, so...,” I continued, trying to keep it vague, “Frederika did something really awful, didn’t she?”

“...I’ve never been able to forget what my sister did to me, though the wound is completely gone.”

As she spoke, she rubbed her own belly gently.

“.....” I wasn’t quite sure how to respond, but eventually I told her frankly, “Your sister is very, very sorry about everything that’s happened.”

I knew that it definitely wasn’t something she was supposed to be hearing from me, since I had only traveled with her sister recently, but she had no idea what kind of person Frederika was now.

I simply thought that, if Lunarik was feeling apprehensive about taking the plunge on their reunion, I ought to do what I could to dispel some of that anxiety.

Though I was also curious about what the girl before me intended to do.

“.....”

She was hanging her head, staring at her glass of bloodred wine.

And then, finally...

“I, too, feel very, very sorry about what happened four years ago.” Slowly, she spoke. “Just like my big sister, you see? That’s my only reason for wanting to see her.”

“...Is that so?”

She nodded and said, “That’s why, when Papa and Mama received a letter from her after four years, I ignored their apprehensions and decided I absolutely wanted to see my sister again. I didn’t want to cause Papa and Mama any trouble, but more importantly, I just had to see her.”

At the end of the day, it seemed both sisters shared the same feelings.

...Frankly, I had been rather anxious about whether Frederika was really going to be able to reunite with her sister the next day, and had considered sneaking over to have a look...and unfortunately, I’m not exactly the most honest person in the world, so I had been planning to do it without telling Frederika, but...

If this was the situation, it seemed like I didn’t have to worry.

It would be insensitive to throw cold water on the sisters’ emotional reunion.

“Say, Elaina? Just in case you were planning to be present tomorrow for our reunion, do you think I could ask you to refrain?”

“.....” I was surprised and astonished by her request. “...Yes, of course. I had no intention of intruding.”

“Good. I want to take my time and talk with my sister tomorrow, just the two of us.”

“...Is that so?”

Remember, I’m not exactly the most honest person in the world.



And so the following day, I secretly made my way over to the fountain plaza.

The chimes of bells marking twelve noon filled the city. The fountain at the center of the plaza was continually shooting water up toward the sky, and right beside it was the figure of Frederika, whom I had been accompanying on a short journey just the day before.

She had bandages wound around one eye as always and was wearing her usual clothes.

“.....”

Like a girl restlessly waiting for her sweetheart, she couldn't calm down as she stood around, occasionally fussing with her hair. Her gaze swept left to right, and sometimes she turned to check behind her, constantly on the lookout for anyone who might recognize her.

I, too, watching from my hiding place, looked off somewhere else when I wanted to be looking at the fountain, feigning composure, and awaited the sisters' meeting. I'm sure I looked awfully suspicious, too.

I was pretty anxious myself.

I wondered whether the sisters could really understand each other.

“.....!”

Finally, Frederika, waiting in front of the fountain, broke into a smile.

I followed her gaze and saw a single girl with an almost identical face. Waving her hand slowly, that girl approached Frederika.

“Hello, big sister.”

Lunarik was there.

At the appointed time, exactly at twelve o'clock, she had appeared in the fountain plaza.

The sound of the chimes faded, and before long, only the sound of water filled the air around the two of them. Lunarik was wearing a smile, but Frederika had on a fairly nervous expression and was hanging her head, even as she stared at her sister.

“.....” Finally, Frederika slowly opened her mouth. “Lunarik, um, well—”

She recounted everything that had happened during the four years they had been apart.

She spoke of how, when she had first started her travels, it had been unbearably painful. How, if she was being honest, her heart had been full of anger for all of the awful treatment she had received.

But then, her thinking had changed as she continued traveling.

She had come to realize that she wanted to live with her sister again.

And...

“For everything that’s happened, I’m truly sorry.”

She slowly hung her head as she said that to Lunarik, who had just been listening carefully to Frederika’s story the whole time, staying silent.

“.....”

Lunarik was still wearing the same smile.

She was just standing there smiling, with her eyebrows furrowed as if in distress.

“Big sister. Look at me.”

“.....”

And then Lunarik stepped closer to Frederika, who raised her head and embraced her.

She squeezed her tight, like she wasn’t going to let her go.

I thought my fears had been groundless.

Seems like it would have been a mistake to throw cold water on the sisters’ reunion. My presence isn’t needed here.

With that thought in mind, I turned my back on the fountain and started to walk away.

I’m sure that, after this, the two of them will live together just like old times, while building a relationship that is different and better than it used to be.

More than any other possibility, that seemed to be a very happy outcome.

And so I moved to take my leave of that place.

“Big sister...Frederika.”

But apparently I had been mistaken.

Even as they embraced each other, Lunarik’s hushed words were biting. Very, very cold and biting.

“Do you know why I came here today?”

By the time I realized that something was wrong and started to turn around, it was already too late.

“Ever since we got the first letter from you, I’ve hardly been able to contain myself. I also truly regret what happened four years ago.”

Frederika slumped over and then fell to the ground with an icicle stuck into her back, muttering sounds that were not words. Looking down at her, Lunarik wore the same unchanging smile, and said...

“I should have killed you four years ago, *Lunarik*.”



Two days earlier, when Frederika and I had been camping out, she had told me of her past.

She told me about how her parents had withheld their love ever since she was young.

She told me that they only concerned themselves with her younger sister, Lunarik, and hardly even looked Frederika’s way. After the two of them were born as twins, their parents had been shunned and avoided by all sorts of people, and as a result, they had tried all the more to differentiate between Frederika and Lunarik.

As a result, Frederika had turned to violence.

However...

“The truth is that I am Lunarik, and the one waiting in our hometown is Frederika.”

The two of them had changed places.

“I became Frederika four years ago. Four years ago, Frederika stabbed Lunarik, and ever since that day, I have been Frederika.”

Then she told me matter-of-factly what had happened on that day four years earlier.

The real Frederika had cast a spell on her younger sister, Lunarik.

It was a consciousness duplication spell.

Frederika had cast this advanced magic spell on her little sister.

With the spell, the real Frederika moved all the hatred she felt toward her sister into her sister’s mind. She filled her sister’s head with a copy of her own consciousness and memories.

After that, Lunarik, seized with deep loathing and despair, pointed a blade at her older sister, who looked the same as she did.

She wrongly assumed that she was Frederika, and that the girl before her eyes was her younger sister, Lunarik.

As planned, Lunarik stabbed Frederika and ended up being expelled from the house. Frederika played the pitiful victim and remained at home.

“It worked because her specialty was manipulating dolls.”

Everything went according to the original Frederika’s plan, and Lunarik was manipulated just like one of her dolls.

After Lunarik had stabbed the original Frederika, she was disowned by their parents and driven out of the house. And that’s how she became Frederika the traveler.

Frederika, who had been injured by the real Lunarik, on the other hand, lived at home with her family, posing as her tenderhearted yet pitiable sister. When her grades dropped slightly in comparison to before, or when she became a slightly gloomier person, there was no problem at all. There was no need to be the wonderful Lunarik that her sister had been before.

Everyone assumed that Lunarik had been traumatized by her awful older sister’s actions, so nobody thought it was unusual that her personality had changed a bit.

In this way, the two sisters switched places.

“For about a year after I started traveling, I was convinced I was Frederika.”

When she had first started her travels, she had been fixated on revenge. Day in and day out, as she endured the pain in her eye while moving from place to place, and during spare moments, too, the whole time she thought of nothing but her hatred for her younger sister. That’s how she spent her days.

However...

“But you see, I understand now. Knowledge and experience are two different things.”

It had been over a year. Once she had been away from her hometown for quite some time, the new Frederika noticed she was feeling out of place.

She said that, at first, it was only a slight discomfort. She wondered why she wasn’t able to use spells that she should have been able to use, and why she could use spells that she shouldn’t have been able to use. She wondered why she didn’t have any strong feelings toward the doll she was supposed to love so much, and why she could converse cheerfully with anyone when she supposedly couldn’t look a stranger in the eye, much less speak to one.

Supposedly, in the past she had used her doll as a conversation partner in order to distract herself from her loneliness. But now that Frederika was traveling, even if she animated the doll with a spell, she wasn’t able to control it so skillfully.

That was when she started to question whether she was really the real Frederika, she told me.

And then, as she continued her travels, her doubts turned to certainty.

“After a little over a year of continuous traveling, my real memories came back to me. I realized the other memories had been implanted.”

The real name of the girl who was traveling was Lunarik.

The girl who was beloved by everyone, and tenderhearted, she was the one who became Frederika the traveler.

“Frederika probably wanted me to experience the suffering she went through

while living in Parastomeire. By switching places with me like that, she probably thought she could have our parents' love all to herself."

And her plan had actually gone off without a hitch.

Although there was a fake Lunarik living in their hometown now—the emotionally damaged Frederika, who had remained at home—no one had realized that the two girls had switched.

Not even their parents.

"But you know, that's a story from four years ago." Frederika smiled gently. "I think it's about time we came to an understanding, isn't it?"

"....."

"It's clear that it was my fault that my big sister turned out so strange. The version of me that lives in her memories is a very unpleasant girl, so I understand."

Apparently, the memories that had been transplanted from the original Frederika still remained inside the present Frederika.

"I wish we had talked more. I wish I had looked up to her more. The truth is, I should have been able to offer her my support, but..."

But four years earlier, the two of them had parted.

The current Frederika possessed two sets of memories, those belonging to Frederika up to age fifteen, and all of Lunarik's.

Experiencing the pain of both of them, she had traveled for four years.

"Ever since that day four years ago, and from now on, I'm satisfied being Frederika, so—"

So she wanted to live together as a family once more.

That was the wish of Lunarik, who four years earlier had left to travel the outside world as Frederika.

"I'm certain in my belief that, now that four years have passed, we'll be able to understand each other. And I believe that my sister has also changed, just like I have."

Frederika had grown and changed over the course of her four-year journey.

She was certain, now that four years had passed—now that the two of them had become adults—they could reach a different conclusion than they had four years earlier.

The current Frederika said, “So I’ve got a request, Elaina. I wonder if, tomorrow, you would let me and Lunarik meet alone, just the two of us?”

I didn’t want to discourage her, so...

“I see... All right then, tomorrow, once we arrive in the city, we’ll part there, shall we?”

And then...

The girl who was wrapping up a journey of four years brought her story of the past, which had gone quite long, to an end with a single sentence.

She said...

“In our case, the city where we were born is to blame.”



Sure enough, the current Frederika had achieved her reunion after four years and apologized to the current Lunarik for everything that had happened during that time.

“I remember everything that you did four years ago.”

Then, standing in front of the fountain, the current Frederika told the story of everything that had happened during the four years they had been apart.

She spoke of how, when she had first started her travels, it had been unbearably painful. How, if she was being honest, her heart had been full of anger for all the awful treatment she had received.

But then, her thinking had changed as she continued traveling.

She had come to realize that she wanted to live with her sister again.

She said she regretted neglecting her older sister.

The current Frederika told her all of this.

But the current Lunarik didn't hear a word of it.

Frederika had fallen on the ground with an icicle piercing her back. Her blood was spilling out, and her whole body was trembling.

"Why...? Why don't you understand me...?! Big sister... I, I—"

"I really despised you from the bottom of my heart. You, who were Papa and Mama's favorite. I hated you. They loved you, even though I was actually better in every way." The current Lunarik interrupted the words of her younger sister and pointed her wand down at her. "When I heard that you wanted to see me again, I really couldn't believe it... I mean, I thought *I* was the daughter that Papa and Mama called selfish. Why now, after four years had passed, would you want to see us again? I was really stumped, but...now I see. Your memories came back, huh?"

As she stared down at her sister, there was not the slightest trace of familial affection in her eyes. "But you know, if your memories came back, then I'm even less able to live with you. Because I loathe you now just as I did back then, from the bottom of my heart."

Then she waved her wand.

To the little sister who bore her own name, she said...

"Good-bye, Frederika."

They were parting words.

But...

A lone witch intervened, stepping between the two of them. Some fool, who was there to throw cold water on the sisters' four-year reunion.

"Wait a minute."

I was there.

At the end of the day, I'm not exactly the most honest person in the world, so even though both the real Frederika and the fake one had asked me not to interfere, I just couldn't help myself.

Using a spell, I sent the wand belonging to Frederika—now calling herself

Lunarik—flying and, in the same movement, pointed my own wand at her throat, stopping her in her tracks.

“...Ah!”

Her wand flew through the air before landing on the ground, and the current Lunarik laughed coldly. “Of course, you were watching from nearby...”

She must have known that I was going to intervene like this. The current Lunarik didn’t seem particularly surprised, and she readily raised both hands.

“Stop, don’t attack! I surrender. I’m no match for a witch. And besides, I don’t want to die.”

“.....”

How can you ask that? You were just about to kill your own sister.

“I don’t feel like dirtying my hands with you, and you’ve got to live to atone for your crimes,” I said.

I knew she was probably concealing some other weapon, so I kept her restrained. I conjured a rope using a spell, tied her up with it, and immobilized her.

I thought I’d tied her up fairly tightly, but Lunarik maintained a composed expression.

“I’ve got nothing to atone for,” she said, smiling. “I was just protecting myself.”

At the time, I didn’t understand what those words were supposed to mean...



With that, the two sisters’ reunion came to an end.

“Are you all right, Frederika?”

“.....”

She didn’t answer me, but the Frederika that I knew was unharmed. She was fully conscious, and her eyes were looking at me. It was just one very vacant, hazy eye, actually, without any life in it, but...Frederika was definitely breathing.

After I had extracted the icicle and cast a healing spell on Frederika, I

delivered Lunarik to the city guard.

Pulling the limp Frederika by the hand, I forcefully dragged Lunarik away. As I pulled them both along, neither of them said a word.

“.....”

But unlike her sister, Lunarik was smiling the whole time.

When I handed Lunarik over to the city guard, I told him the whole story, from beginning to end.

I told him everything, without exception, from start to finish. The story of the two sisters reuniting after four years apart—and how they weren’t able to understand each other after all.

However...

“I can’t believe a story like that.”

Even as the guard accepted Lunarik from me, he shook his head. “I’ve already heard all about what kind of person Frederika is...from her younger sister, Lunarik. The guard was given all the details about her entering Parastomeire this time and about the sisters’ relationship.”

“...Huh?”

I didn’t understand what he was saying.

I was dumbfounded.

The soldier continued, “I’ll be taking custody of Frederika.”

As he spoke, he grabbed ahold of Frederika.

“Wait, what are you...”

I raised my voice and tried to hold on to her hand.

But her hand had lost all its strength and slipped right out of mine, so in the end, she was taken away.

That was when I realized that all of this had been planned by the current Lunarik from the very beginning.

From her perspective, she didn’t really care whether I jumped in to stop her

or not.

Four years earlier, Frederika had tried to kill her little sister and gotten expelled from the city. After four years, she had come back into the city to try to reunite with her little sister, and that courageous little sister had gone to the fountain plaza to grant her foolish older sister's wish.

To the people of this city, that was the truth, which meant that even if the Frederika I knew had lost her life—even if someone like me hadn't intervened to stop things—there wasn't a single person in this city who would suspect the current Lunarik.

In this city, Lunarik was known as an admirable girl who possessed a kind heart that was wonderful beyond compare.

And Frederika was known as a girl with a heart as black as they come.

I wondered how it would have looked to bystanders if they had seen the current Frederika collapsed in front of the fountain spitting up blood—and the current Lunarik standing in front of her gripping her wand.

They probably would have seen an inhuman older sister who was trying to take her younger sister's life for the second time, and a courageous younger sister who was trying to protect herself.

No matter what the current Lunarik did to Frederika when she returned, she must have known that she wouldn't be accused of any crime.

She had known that it would be considered legitimate self-defense.

"Frederika is sentenced to exile from the city."

Several days had passed before her sentence was announced.

Frederika was to be cast out. As her companion, I, too, was thrown out of the city alongside her. I wasn't told that I was exactly banned from ever entering, but...the meaning was the same.

I'm sure I will never come back to this city again.



Looking up at the closed gate with her one eye, Frederika was in a daze.

The past few days, which had flown by in a blur, must have seemed just like

an illusion to her. She was wearing an expression that said she still didn't really comprehend what had just happened and looked awfully stiff.

"...Frederika?"

She noticed my voice and looked over at me.

She was smiling.

A very lonesome smile.

"I'm sorry, Elaina. You got expelled because of me..."

"....." It was heartbreaking to see Frederika concerned about others even at a time like this, and I turned away. "It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong..."

I couldn't look her in the eye. I didn't know what kind of expression she might be wearing. I hung my head and mumbled, "I'm the one who should be apologizing. I wasn't able to keep my promise to you."

I don't want you to get involved—both Frederikas had told me that.

But I hadn't been able to let them be, no matter how I tried. Most travelers would not have interfered, but I'd had no choice except to meddle. Despite my better judgment, I couldn't stand by and watch as Frederika was murdered right in front of me.

Even if she was someone I had spent only one night with, I didn't want her to die.

"It's fine." She shook her head. Dropping her gaze, she said, "I should be thanking you for helping me out."

"....."

"I'm sorry for showing you such an ugly part of my life."

I was surprised she had enough energy even to think about that, much less apologize for it.

"Elaina, what are you going to do now? I'm thinking of returning to my travels, but..."

"...Me too."

“I see.”

She was probably putting on a brave front.

She was probably holding back on my account.

“.....”

“.....”

The two of us stood there silently in front of the city gate, and time passed quietly between us.

We really do have to part ways here.

“...Is there anything I can do?” I asked as I searched for the right words to say to her.

She had been hanging her head, and she slowly turned her eyes up toward me. Her blue eye, the one not obscured by bandages, looked like it had lost all of its light.

That’s how much vitality had gone out of her gaze.

“...All right, will you let me make one request?” she asked, and tilted her head inquisitively.

“What is it?” I replied, also tilting my head in the same way.

“...I want you to stroke my head,” she said falteringly, hesitantly, in a somber tone of voice. “I want you to tell me that I tried my best.” Her request sounded like the kind of modest pleading that a child might use toward a parent. “I want you to praise me. Tell me I’ve done well enduring for so long.”

That was all she asked for; that was her last request.

“.....”

And so instead of answering with words, I placed my hand on Frederika’s head.

I mussed her hair, running my fingers through it. Then, to fix the hair that I had disturbed, I slowly, over and over again, stroked Frederika’s hair, which was warm and soft like sunshine.

As my hand touched her head, her eye darted back and forth in bewilderment, and her lip suddenly started quivering. She intertwined her fingers on both hands and gripped her skirt tightly as she started to tremble.

She wasn't behaving like a traveler, or like an adult.

The person with me was just a hurt little girl.

"....."

As she had wished for, I said, "You've really tried your best, haven't you?"

I'm sure this is what she also wished for all along.

"You've endured for so long, it's very admirable."

This is probably what the real Frederika, the one transplanted into the Frederika I know, the one full of deep-seated hatred, had wanted all along.

When they were young, if their parents had done this—if anyone had recognized the efforts of the real Frederika—if only someone had done just that much, I'm sure none of this would have ever happened.

She never would have laid a hand on her sister.

She never would have forced her memories on her and transformed into Lunarik.

It never should have happened.

If only someone had done this much, she could have been saved.

But no one could do this sort of thing.

Because the place where they were born was simply a bad place.

"....."

My chest felt like it would burst.

I couldn't help but find it heartbreaking that even after being hurt this much, even after going through such an awful ordeal, this girl was still trying to save the specter of her older sister that now lived inside her.

I couldn't help but feel sad for this girl, who wasn't even trying to save herself.

And so...

“You can live for yourself now, you know.” With one hand still on her head, I used my unoccupied hand to embrace her. “Even if the people of this city don’t see you, even if your parents don’t see you—even if no one sees you as you are now.”

Even if they don’t...

“I see you. I know you,” I told her.

“...Sniff...”

Her trembling fingers clung to my robe. I felt her hot tears on my chest.

“...Can we stay like this for just a little bit longer?” a trembling voice asked.

And so I said...

“Yeah...”

I squeezed her even tighter.

Even when she could no longer hold back her sobbing, I held her tightly enough that no one could hear.

I held her tightly enough that I would never forget her, even after we’d parted.

And that she would never forget me.





CHAPTER 7

The Night It Rained Stardust

Let me tell you a story from when I was young.

A story I've never told anyone before, a memory from my childhood.

The place where I was born, Bielawald, was an old-fashioned place where we respected tradition and convention.

Most of the land was covered by dense forest, and the city that stood where the land had been cleared was full of white brick houses. Even at the time I was born, the place already had a long history, and most of the houses were old, full of cracks or covered in ivy. The aging buildings looked like they might be swallowed up by the forest at any time.

I loved it.

I loved the scenery anyway.

But the place itself, not so much.

"Ah, it's twelve already."

I was enjoying some light recreational reading on a day off, when the *gong*, *gong* of the bell reverberated through town. In this city, the bell rang every night at twelve o'clock.

The chime not only signaled the end of the day, but had an even more important purpose.

In this city, when the clock struck twelve, there was an important ritual, something that every resident must do.

"....."

I opened the window and closed my eyes, and with both hands clasped together, I lifted my prayers up to the star-filled sky.

I closed my eyes for precisely thirty seconds. Praying for thirty seconds like this was one of the customs here.

Children began to pray from the date of their fifth birthday. Starting on that day, I was taught by the lady at the orphanage to look up at the night sky and pray when the bell chimed.

At the time I was a carefree child, so I nodded and told her that I understood, without really understanding at all, and started staying up until twelve o'clock to look up at the night sky and pray together with the other children at the orphanage.

I wasn't very good at staying up late and was always dozing off, so I often prayed while half asleep, rubbing my eyes. I was frequently asleep on my feet. And sometimes I would fall asleep without waiting for twelve, and the lady at the orphanage would get terribly angry.

In Bielawald, this nightly ritual was apparently more important than anything else.

I always wondered what the meaning behind the tradition was, but I seemed to be the only one in this city who had such questions.

I asked my schoolmates, and I asked the lady who raised me at the orphanage, but no one knew the reason for it. Instead...

"I've never given it any thought."

...they were all puzzled by my question.

When it came to the lady at the orphanage, she took me into a back room the moment I voiced the question and gave me a very stern warning. "Are you listening? You absolutely must not ever ask that question outside these walls."

She told me:

"This custom began long before any of us were born. I moved here from another place, so I don't know all the details, but it seems like it's prohibited to ask about those sorts of things around here. So you mustn't ask anyone else."

She placed a finger to my lips and shushed me as she said that.

"So it's like a taboo?"

"Yes. And if you don't want to be selected for the ritual, it's even more important not to do anything to stand out."

She said this to five-year-old me and patted my head.

About nine years passed. Ever since that conversation, I'd performed the prayer every night, but I'd also always wondered about the origin of this tradition.

In our city, every year in the spring, a ceremony was conducted that we called "the ritual."

In order to pray for an abundant harvest that year, the girl selected for this ritual was shut inside a shrine in the middle of town and required to pray the whole night through. Usually, one girl was selected for the ritual, but depending on the year, it could be two or even three girls. I didn't know what criteria they used to select them, though.

So why on earth did they do it?

I thought that if I spoke with someone who had actually experienced the ritual, I would probably understand the situation, but unfortunately, now that I was thirteen years old, there was hardly anyone with whom I had the kind of relationship where I could casually ask such a thing.

When I was ten, the lady from the orphanage had been selected for the ritual, and at the end of it, she had disappeared. She was nowhere to be found.

I remembered that day well.

Clad in a plain white gown and wearing beautiful makeup on her face, she disappeared into the shrine without making eye contact with anyone, staring at the ground with vacant eyes under a night sky twinkling with stars, surrounded by a crowd of people.

"The nameless maiden, our chosen one, has now entered the shrine."

As he said this, the chieftain, who was also leading the ritual, closed the door to the shrine.

And then, supposedly, she continuously prayed inside the shrine all night long.

Supposedly, she prayed fervently all night, asking for a bountiful harvest in the coming year. The bell rang, and we all prayed, too, and then she continued

praying even as everyone else had fallen asleep.

The following morning, I woke up early and headed for the shrine, but by the time I got there, it had already been opened back up, and people were going in and out.

She was not inside.

The people of the city said:

“That girl has already left us.”

“Apparently, she got tired of our customs.”

“I doubt she will ever come back again.”

And so without even saying good-bye, she had suddenly disappeared.

After that, I investigated things the best I could.

I spent my days going to school, returning home to the orphanage, then walking over to the great library that housed all of our city’s books.

At school, there wasn’t a single person whom I could call a friend, both because I was raised in an orphanage and also because I wasn’t inclined to get involved with people in the first place.

Perhaps it was my isolation that had led me to get completely absorbed in my research at the great library.

“...How strange.”

But there were surprisingly few books about my homeland’s history, and they didn’t have much information to offer. I was surprised to find that they were mostly full of dubious tales that were more like legends or stories from folklore. Many claimed that the city had a history of supernatural phenomena, or even that the land itself was possessed by some dire spirit.

When it came to reference books, a number of volumes were moth-eaten, and any page that contained information about any other place had been redacted anyway. The city’s greatest library had next to no information concerning anything outside its walls. Nothing was written there that wasn’t common knowledge, stuff that even I, a child, already knew. There was nothing

I could learn from what was on offer at the great library.

So then, where on earth could they be keeping all the real knowledge?

“Um, excuse me? Do you have the next volume of this book?”

Carrying several moth-eaten tomes with me, I went to ask a librarian.

After casting a sharp glance my way, the librarian asked, “...Why do you want to read it?”

I dodged the question. “...Just out of curiosity.”

But the librarian shook her head. “...Unfortunately, it’s not here.”

I realized that relying on books wasn’t going to get me anywhere.

Since I’d come this far, my curiosity couldn’t be so easily deterred, so in the end, I gave up on finding things in the library and decided to try another tactic.

“Huh? Information about foreign lands?”

Merchants and travelers often came to visit Bielawald. I kept an eye out for new arrivals and went around interviewing them about the state of the world outside our small city.

“Yes. Please tell me.” I leaned in close to a merchant without hesitation and told him, “I have an interest in other places.”

“...Hmm.” The merchant smiled awkwardly and averted his eyes. “...I’m sorry, miss. I was told in no uncertain terms when I arrived that I mustn’t speak of places outside this country, so I couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to. Apparently, that’s the rule here.”

That’s when I knew that something was up. Even outsiders were being forced to follow this rule. Finding out that information was being concealed made me all the more interested. What could they be trying to hide? More importantly, did the people here even know that anything was being hidden?

In any case, the fires of my curiosity were fanned, and after that, I spent even more time asking around to hear what the travelers and merchants had to say. Now then, allow me to recount here the total outcome of my efforts.

“Hmm. So you want to know about other lands, huh? Sure thing, sweetheart,

just come with me.”

I do want to make it outside the country, but not in the company of a merchant. I decline.

“Look at this, miss! This butterfly is a really rare species, and it sells for a high price. Apparently, it lives in the forest surrounding this country. Do you know anything about it?”

I’ve never even been outside the country, but I guess I would try to catch a butterfly if I found one. I wouldn’t hand it over to a merchant, though.

“Uh-huh, you want to know about the outside world, huh...? All right, I’ll tell you something good.” *Oh, I have a hunch this might be some useful information!* “By the way, before I tell you, do you have a boyfriend? If you like, we could go to that café—” *And good-bye.*

“Instead of learning about the outside world, don’t you want to know more about me? Oh, you don’t...? I see...”

Anyway...

To sum up what I learned from my thorough investigation.

“I got absolutely no real information!”

It was evening, and I shouted to myself as I returned once more to the great library.

“What was that? I guess that merchants and travelers are nothing but a bunch of disgusting jerks with their minds in the gutter? Each and every one of them just kept saying, ‘Oh, you’re cute,’ or ‘Wanna get a drink?’ They just whispered sweet words and that’s all. I just wanted to hear their stories, but none of them cared. And anyway, what does it say about our country that all the adults who visit would seriously make a pass at a thirteen-year-old?”

I pouted sullenly as I opened up a book.

“Be quiet in the library.” A clear command resounded out of nowhere. “Don’t you have any common sense?”

I looked around for the owner of the voice and saw the figure of a young woman.

She was a beautiful mage.

Her hair was a nearly white ash-gray color. Her eyes were lapis-colored. She was dressed simply, in a black robe and triangular hat. On her breast, she wore a star-shaped brooch.

I guess she thinks she's fashionable?

She looked like she was about twenty years old, although I couldn't tell her exact age, because her grace and composure made her seem older than her years.

Where on earth did she come from? Well, she was probably there the whole time, but—

Then the woman who had been watching me approached and tilted her head inquisitively. Her gaze fell on the reference book in my hands.

"You have some interest in other countries?"

".....!"

To think that she could tell that much just from seeing me reading one reference book...! Mages are amazing...!

Secretly, I was elated.

It was embarrassing, but I had yet to leave Bielawald, even once, which meant that I had never happened to meet a mage, and I had absolutely no knowledge of what magic or the mages who wielded it were like.

For that reason, I was even more excited than I was amazed by the fact that the woman in front of my eyes had guessed my desire in an instant.

How did she know that?

"C-can mages peer inside people's minds...?" I asked her with amazement and anticipation.

Maybe people with psychic powers all go on to become mages? Maybe that's it?

But the mage quickly shook her head in response to my excited anticipation.

"No, I just saw you asking around near the gate."

I let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

“Ah...I guess that makes sense...”

“Don’t you think it’s rude to act so openly disappointed...?”

Upon further inquiry, I learned that apparently this woman was a traveler who had arrived several days before I began my search for knowledge, and that she was touring the region alone. She also told me that she was a mage, or more accurately, she was a witch, but I didn’t really understand the difference between the two anyway. I did know now that mages were not as I had imagined them, and I didn’t really care about the difference, so I let her explanation go in one ear and out the other. To make a long story short and simple, she was a traveler. The end.

“But it’s rare, isn’t it? To find a girl who has doubts about the conventions and customs of her home,” she said, staring at me, the one who had looked so openly disappointed.

“.....” After answering her initially with silence, I asked, “...Are you telling me that I’m strange for having doubts, too?”

I could tell from the way that her eyebrows moved into a slight frown that my tone of voice had been somewhat harsh.

Then she shook her head.

“No, it’s actually the opposite. I’m impressed.”

“.....?”

“I’m just glad there’s someone around here who has some sense.”

I didn’t really understand what she was trying to say.

I continued to tilt my head in confusion.

Maybe because she could tell what I was thinking, or maybe because mages could actually read people’s minds, she looked at me and said, “Rules and regulations are often made to benefit the people who make them. Having doubts about them is a good thing. It seems like most people around here have no idea if they’re benefiting or losing out by following the rules. Compared to them, you’re very shrewd.”

And so on.

I found myself borrowing a popular local phrase.

“I’ve never given it any thought.”

I must have had a wild look on my face as I said those words, and the mage laughed at me.

“Well, you’re not exactly the kind of person who thinks about whether or not you’re shrewd, now, are you? You’ve got a sort of dumb-looking face.”

“...All I understand is that you just made fun of me.”

“If you don’t understand anything, you’d better watch your step.”

She looked fed up and let out a sigh.

For some reason, I got the feeling that this person was going to tell me all the things I had been dying to hear. I had a feeling that, unlike the good-for-nothing travelers and merchants I had spent all day meeting, she was going to satisfy my craving for knowledge.

“...Um.” So I looked at her and said, “Miss Mage, do you think I could get you to tell me about the outside world?”

In response to those words, which I had to muster up a little courage to say, she nodded and said, “Yes, of course.”

But right after that, she shook her head. “But today’s no good.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The sun’s going down soon.”

“...What do you mean?”

I didn’t understand what she was getting at.

It felt a little irritating, being kept in suspense, but she gently placed her hand on my shoulder as if to comfort me.

“Tomorrow will be good. But I can’t do it today.” She repeated herself, but as she spoke, she smiled and looked out the window of the library. “You see, tonight, the night sky will be incredibly beautiful.”

Outside the window, it was already dark enough that the stars were coming out.

As to whether it was beautiful...well, I couldn't tell from where I was.

"Come to the library again tomorrow. If you do that, I'll tell you all sorts of things."

After forcing me to postpone our meeting, the mage left the great library. After she'd left, I read my book for a while, then also left myself.

That night, the stars were very beautiful.

There wasn't a single cloud in the night sky, and the twinkling stars spread out to the ends of the earth, looking just like they might sprinkle down onto the ground at any moment.

The sky was such a beautiful sight, the people of the city were gathering in the streets.

"....."

No—

Apparently, the people were gathering in the streets for a completely different reason.

"Ahh, how awful...!"

"What on earth...?!"

"What is that...?! It's terrifying...!"

The commotion among the people had nothing to do with the beauty of the stars. It was just focused on the sky to the west.

"....."

Sure enough, there was something strange there, strange enough to eclipse the beauty of the stars.

Stars were hanging, twinkling, in the night sky. There was one star that was noticeably brighter and bigger than the others. This strange star suddenly appeared, trailing a brightly shining tail as it streamed across the sky from one side to the other.

I was certain it hadn't been there the day before. The city was in a stir over the star that had suddenly appeared, and words of confusion arose from all directions.

"It's inauspicious."

"It's a sign, warning of a natural disaster."

It was the first time in my life I had ever seen the strange star, but apparently it looked familiar to a few people.

Someone said, "The star of death from twenty-two years ago has appeared again."

Someone else answered, "Hurry, if we don't conduct the ritual right away, we'll be too late—"

That was the moment I realized that I had arrived at the thirteenth spring since my birth.

"_____"

And that was about when my consciousness started to go fuzzy.

From behind me, someone placed a cloth over my mouth. It was suffocating and smelled strange. When I took in a breath, my head felt dizzy, and my body felt like it was starting to fall asleep. My body became numb, then my eyelids grew heavy, and finally, I lost consciousness in the street.

"Congratulations. You have been selected for this year's ritual. This is a great honor," someone said to me.

"Now, change into these clothes. You must wear them in order to pray in the shrine," someone else said.

"Oh, wonderful. She's just perfect." Yet another someone clapped their hands happily.

"We're all ready now. All right, shall we go perform the ritual?" Then someone tugged at my hand, and we started walking.

I had no accurate memory of how many days' time had gone by since I passed out. We had the custom of praying every night at twelve, so I should have been

able to figure it out by counting the number of prayers, but my head had been in such a daze since that day that I couldn't even do that. It might have been one day later, or a whole week could have gone by.

“.....”

When I came to, I had been selected for the ritual. But I didn't have any of my usual doubts about it. I didn't even have any doubts about the fact that I had no doubts about it. The more I tried to get my mind to work, the more it refused, and I walked on toward the shrine.

I tried to resist when the doors to the shrine were opened, but I kept on walking, as if my body was being sucked into it.

Inside, the light flickered from innumerable candles.

“The nameless maiden, our chosen one, has now entered the shrine—”

Behind me, I heard the chieftain say those words. I tried to turn around, but by that time, the door to the shrine had already been closed.

Only the faint light of candles illuminated the dark space, where even moonlight didn't reach.

“.....”

That was when I noticed that there was a strange scent hanging in the air inside this shrine, but by then, I was already starting to lose my ability to think straight.

I started to walk down a narrow path into the deep recesses of the shrine. I knew for certain that my body was not listening to my conscious mind. It was just moving like a marionette.

There weren't even candles to provide light deep inside the shrine. It was dark, and damp, and the strange smell just got thicker as I went.

After a short while, I stopped.

“...Ah!”

In the depths of the shrine, I discovered hundreds of flowers. Beautiful white blossoms growing from between many, many bones. Atop a cluster of

skeletons, all dressed in the exact same clothing that I was wearing at the moment, the beautiful flowers were in full bloom.

Then, at that point, I finally realized something.

The lady from the orphanage, who had taught me so much—she'd never actually left.

I realized the true purpose of the ritual.

“I’ve never given it any thought.”

The fact that each and every person I’d asked about our traditions had given me the same answer was not because nobody ever questioned our customs. It must have been because anyone with any doubts was quietly eliminated.

The lady from the orphanage must have been one of those so selected.

This place was even worse than I’d imagined.

“Ah, ah...!” But by the time I’d realized all this, it was too late to do anything. “No...no...! I don’t want to die...not yet...!”

In this airtight space where not even the moonlight could reach, the strange scent that was dulling my senses gradually yet steadily grew stronger and thicker.

It might have been mixed in with the smell of the burning candles. Or maybe it was coming from the many blossoms.

Even if I tried to resist, even if I tried to escape, my control over my body was gradually being stolen away.

And then I collapsed on top of the many bones, just like I had collapsed when I had been smothered by a cloth beneath a sky sparkling with stars.

I couldn’t find my breath. I was gasping for air. I felt sleepy, and my eyelids began drooping.

“Why...did this happen...?”

Come to the library again tomorrow. If you do that, I’ll tell you all sorts of things.

I felt overwhelming sadness when it became clear that I would never live to

see tomorrow. Even though I had finally met someone who seemed to understand me. Even though I had finally gotten the chance to talk to someone like her.

Without fulfilling my promise to meet her, I was going to lose my life, here and now.

Ah, if only I had asked that mage's name, I thought wistfully.

My eyelids, growing heavier by the second, slowly closed.

In this city, anyone who challenged the status quo was branded an enemy, locked away, and suffocated.

I saw all sorts of images in the brief moment after I closed my eyes. They looked like they were on a revolving lantern. Scenes of my everyday life passed through my mind and disappeared. The days I spent at the orphanage, the days I spent absorbed in reading at the great library, memories of people getting mad at me because I didn't make it in time for nightly prayers, and foolish memories of when I had admired the girls who were chosen for the ritual.

And then...

Before long...

The curtain fell on my short, thirteen-year life.



In this region, there is apparently an incredibly beautiful comet that appears in a cycle once every twenty-two years.

This spring was exactly when it was expected to arrive, and every town in the area was holding some sort of festival or hawking some kind of special something-or-other, trying to draw in tourists.

Of course, I, a traveler who was just journeying along according to my whims, fell victim to their schemes and was practically forced to buy all sorts of things in all sorts of places.

For example, there was the plain white bread from an old woman at a roadside stall who claimed that it was "special comet bread." Or the unremarkable stone from a curio dealer who insisted that it was "hewn from a

fragment of the comet.”

It was enough to make me wonder if maybe every last one of the tourists who were so excited to see a comet that came every twenty-two years was an idiot with a flower field blooming where their brain should be.

Nothing makes me angrier than people carrying on with shady business! But setting that aside, this ill-tempered witch, munching away at the alleged comet bread, who on earth could she be?

That's right, it's me.

“.....”

I can almost hear a voice from somewhere asking, *What's this? So you did buy the special comet bread after all? What's become of you?* But I'd like to make one thing clear here. I was definitely not tricked into purchasing the bread by the old woman running the roadside stall.

“I've heard that there once was a place called Bielawald around here. Do you know anything about it?” I asked her. That's right, I bribed her—I bought some of the old hag's bread so that she would tell me something useful.

Unfortunately, the place I was trying to find, Bielawald, had been abandoned by its citizens long ago and fallen into ruin, so it wasn't on my map. Consequently, I decided to bribe this old lady to make her hurry up and spit out its location.

“Huh? You want to go to Bielawald? I don't know what to tell you... That place hasn't existed for quite some time... I wonder if I can remember...? My memory's a little fuzzy, you see.”

“Mm-hmm.”

So buying the bread wasn't enough to make you talk, huh? Is that it? I see, I see.

“Here, take this.” I gave her one gold piece as a bribe.

“The location of Bielawald, was it? I remember it perfectly. Let me borrow your map for a second.”

The old woman quickly marked the spot on the map.

So it was that easy?

And so that was what transpired. I'd had to sacrifice one gold piece, but I considered it a necessary expense.

"But tell me, just what business could you possibly have in a place like that? There's nothing there, you know?"

While she was writing the location on my map, the old woman had narrowed her eyes seductively, as if she were looking at a lover or something, then looked up at me.

I didn't know how to answer.

There was nothing in the place where I was headed now. The city had been abandoned by its citizens before I was even born, and only the deserted ruins were left, passing the years alone. Of course, since there were no people, there was no light, and it was probably quieter than anywhere else.

"That's exactly why I'm going."

I was certain that the sky, seen from such a place, would be brighter than the sky I could see from anywhere else, and more beautiful.

When you're a traveler, you sometimes find that the reality of a place is not at all what you had expected. Bielawald was one of those experiences for me.

Not because it was entirely different from what I had imagined or because I was somehow disappointed. But because the place indicated on my map—these ruins deep in the woods—had something really strange going on.

"...What is this?"

I suppose the forest had considered the departure of the people to be a good opportunity to regrow, because the city was disappearing into the greenery. It had probably been a beautiful white city long ago. But ivy was creeping up the walls of the houses that lined the avenue, working its way around them.

And the large street that I was walking down must once have been covered in cobblestones, but in the intervening years, weeds had grown up, and many flowers of different colors had bloomed.

Surely there are no human beings living in these ruins.

Up to this point, I hadn't seen anything surprising. But there was one thing that stood out to me—a humble dwelling in a far corner of the ruined city.

"All right then, everyone, let's sing songs today. Does anyone have any suggestions?"

Through a small window, I could see the figure of a woman facing some children and smiling at them.

Well now, so there are people here after all, I thought to myself as I approached the window giddily. But the figures of the children and the woman disappeared, as if they had been just a momentary illusion.

What remained in that spot was nothing more than an ancient, time-worn house that looked the same as every other building in the city.

It looked like there was an orphanage here, but—

No matter how close I got, no matter how many times I blinked my eyes, the young woman and the children did not appear before me again.

"Congratulations! You've been selected for the ritual—"

Someone, somewhere, was speaking to someone else.

"Now, change into these clothes—"

When I looked, I saw an older woman handing white clothes to a young girl.

"Twenty-two years have passed since the unlucky star last appeared—"

"The time has come."

A little farther on, there were two people talking in the street.

"So that means it's going to appear again this spring?"

"No mistaking it."

"What should we do? Who do we choose for the ritual?"

"...Right. I know the perfect girl."

I approached them, intending to try to speak to them, but they took no notice of me, no matter how close I got, and just continued their discussion with somewhat worried expressions.

Eventually, I said, “Umm,” and tried walking right in between the men, but...

“I’ve heard that girl has doubts about our traditions.”

“Apparently, she’s even been doing some research at the great library.”

“I got a tip-off from a librarian about it, so there’s no doubt.”

...they ignored me.

They didn’t even look at me. As a test, I said, “Hellooo,” and waved my hands in front of the men. “How are you today?” I jumped up and down. “I am the Ashen Witch, Elainaaa!” I looked quickly between them.

But sure enough, the men still ignored me.

As you might expect, this blatant disrespect was making me rather angry.

“Hey now, are you listening?” I reached out and tried to touch one of the men on the shoulder.

“.....”

But my hand passed through the man’s body. My hand, which I had extended with a little too much force, appeared to sharply bisect him from the shoulder down. But the man himself was still wearing the same serious expression and turned to look toward the city, saying, “All right then, as we planned, we’ll seal a girl in the shrine again this year.”

“.....”

That was when I realized that this place was showing me an illusion.

In the direction the man was looking stood a single tiny building.

The shrine in the center of the city looked weathered by the passage of time, the same as the other buildings. Moss had grown over the door like a seal.

“.....”

I was a little concerned by the words that the ghostly figures had exchanged. But still, I placed a hand on the door of the shrine. If what they had said was true, then it had been customary here to lock young girls away in this small building.

For some reason, I was curious.

“Hellooo...”

The moss-covered door creaked open easily when I pushed on it. The moss that covered the outside of the door had apparently extended its reach inside, for the walls of the shrine were coated in green when the sunlight shone in.

When I stepped inside, the floor creaked underfoot. The inside of the shrine was surprisingly empty, and to my disappointment, all I saw was a bunch of nothing.

An empty city, abandoned by its citizens. In the center of it stood a lonely shrine, shrouded in silence and full of hidden significance. I was certain that it must be holding some treasure, but there wasn't a single such thing inside, and no matter how far in I walked, the only thing to find was more moss.

It was all the same, even as I proceeded into the depths.

There's nothing here. Well now, isn't this boring...

I did see a girl with black hair dressed in white clothes lying on top of the weeds, but this seemed to be an apparition like the ones I had seen before, so in the end, I didn't think it was anything to worry about.

I had anticipated that there would probably be something interesting left behind in this mysterious place that had been abandoned by its people, but this was clearly nothing more than an illusion.

I had been betrayed by my expectations and was feeling awfully disappointed. Still, I pressed on deeper into the shrine, when—

Squish.

“Gyaah!”

A voice came from below me. I felt a strange sensation under my feet, which were supposed to have been treading on moss.

“.....”

I had been convinced that the black-haired girl must be an apparition and had started to walk right through her as if she weren't there, but...

Let me see, what's going on here?

My foot was standing on the girl's face. I wasn't passing through her body but, sure enough, was touching her where I stood.

".....Huh?"

What's this? Are you serious?

Going extremely pale, I removed my foot, crouched down beside her, and extended a hand.

I poked at her cheek. It felt soft and squishy.

"...Nngh." The black-haired girl let out a groan.

Next, I lightly slapped her cheeks.

She clearly felt like something corporeal.

"...Oww," she moaned.

Clearly, she existed on this plane.

"....."

I was silent for a brief while.

I see, I see, no matter how I look at it, she is alive...

No matter how I think about it, she's not an illusion...

...Wait, that means—

Who could have ever expected that there was a living person in a place like this?



I was sure that I should have died, and I felt like I had, but when I opened my eyes, the bright sky stretched out above me.

I was looking at a blue sky, so bright, it was almost blinding.

When I narrowed my eyes and let my gaze wander, I saw bookshelves around me, extending upward. Ivy was coiled around them, and they were lined with books that didn't look to be in any state to read.

I had a strange feeling that something about that scenery looked familiar, and yet unfamiliar at the same time.

It was apparent that this was without a doubt the great library. But it looked completely transformed from the library in my memories.

“...This place...?”

Where on earth am I?

When I sat up, I heard someone speak from beside me.

“Oh, you’re awake?”

My attention was drawn to the voice. I turned to look and saw a mage with ashen hair staring at me.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know the details of how you came to be sleeping in that shrine, but it felt wrong to leave you there, so I moved you here.”

“.....”

I honestly had no idea what had happened to me.

Everything that had taken place since the moment when I was watching that sparkling star blaze a trail across the western sky was hazy in my memory, like a dream or a vision.

Unbeknownst to me, I had been selected for the ritual, and when I came to, my body wasn’t listening to what I told it to do. The people of my homeland had tried to kill me, and when I opened my eyes again, I was with a stranger in the library, which was not as I remembered it. My memory bounced around these scenes with such dizzying speed that I couldn’t tell how much of it was reality, and I even wondered if it had all been a dream.

Perhaps my mind was still spaced out because of the strange odor in the shrine.

“.....”

But in the midst of all these vague memories, the thing that remained more vivid than anything else was the fear I had felt, and I couldn’t get away from that.

I was afraid. Afraid of the people around me, who all seemed to think the same thing. Afraid that I was alone, the only person who could see that something was wrong. Afraid that I had made myself a target with my curiosity. Afraid that the one person who had been kind to me had died a long time ago.

I couldn't help but be afraid.

"...Ah, uh...mm..."

I felt my cheeks growing hot. I realized I was crying when my vision blurred and my lip began trembling. I pressed my lips together and tried to hold back the tears, but the more I put up my futile resistance, the less able I was to keep from crying.

I had been much more frightened than even I had realized.

As I suddenly burst into tears, the mage looking down at me laughed uncomfortably and gently stroked my head. "Did you have a scary dream or something?" she asked.

When I felt the warmth of her hand, neither a dream nor an illusion, I cried even harder.



The girl suddenly burst into tears, which made me terribly worried that I'd done something awful without even realizing it. But after she had finished sobbing, she told me, in bits and pieces, her story, and it had nothing to do with me.

It was also the story of a lone girl who'd experienced a terrible misfortune. The story of an unlucky girl who had found herself in mortal danger just because she was curious.

But if her story was true, if what she had experienced hadn't been a dream or an illusion...

"...In other words, you came here from a long time ago—from twenty years ago or more—is that what you're saying?"

The comet appeared only once every twenty-two years, so that would mean that the girl before my eyes was someone from at least twenty-two years ago, or maybe even two or three times that.

"It's a difficult story to believe all of a sudden..." I muttered.

To begin with, how on earth did you manage to get here, from twenty-two years in the past?

I was wondering this, but when I stopped to think about it, I realized that I had encountered many strange happenings since arriving here.

It seemed likely that this old ruin was the locus for some kind of unusual magical phenomenon. Surely this girl and I, and the apparitions I had seen, were all caught up in the same phenomenon.

But of the two of us, she was less able to hide her bewilderment at the circumstances she found herself in. She had been imprisoned, and when she opened her eyes, twenty-two years or more had passed. It was no wonder she was confused.

And I was the one to have to tell her that her home had gone to ruin a long time ago.

Looking up at the crumbling ceiling from the library chair where she was sitting, she mumbled, "...So right now, I'm in the future?"

She seemed calm, but—

"...Could this be...a dream maybe? Oww..." She tugged at her own cheek with all her might, and I could guess from the tears in her eyes that she wasn't all that calm.



You're gonna rip it. Are you all right?

"How strange...it hurts..." Unsatisfied with just pulling at her cheek, she started slapping herself.

Are you a masochist? You don't seem all right.

"Stop that. You'll ruin your pretty face." Her cheek was already red and swollen by the time I managed to intervene.

She looked around through teary eyes and groaned. "...Is this all for real?" she asked quietly.

"As you can see, it is." I nodded. "Things have become much more peaceful since the time you lived here."

"...It's just fallen into ruin, hasn't it?"

That's right.

"That's what I said."

Perhaps the black-haired girl and I had something in common.

Once the flame of my curiosity was lit, I found it very difficult to restrain myself, no matter what. In a word, once something caught my eye, I couldn't help but get curious.

That held true about this place as well.

I wanted to ascertain the reason why it had fallen into ruin. This "great library" was surely the most suitable place to seek out that reason, so for now I was pulling every book I could find off the shelves, stacking them up on a table entwined in greenery, and reading them one by one.

I thought that if I could learn the reason the city had fallen into ruin, then maybe I could figure out the key to returning the girl to her own time.

"Huh? But I don't particularly want to go back to my own time," she said.

"....."

I tried a different tactic. "Well, you've got plenty of free time right now, don't you? If you've got free time, won't you help me with my research?"

But she just tilted her head and asked, “Huh? Why should I have to do something like that?”

How strange... I remember her being a little more serious, but...

“Look, I only investigated that stuff so seriously because I had an interest in it,” she continued. “I’m not actually a particularly studious person.” The girl quickly shook her head. At least she was being honest. “Actually, given the choice, I just want to sleep all day.”

I see—apparently she’s just very lazy.

On top of all that, she rapidly brought her face closer to me as she asked, “By the way, Miss Mage, I’ve got a request if that’s okay?”

Her lovely blue eyes peered into mine.

And then, at point-blank range, close enough that I could feel her breath, with eyes full of determination, she looked at me and said, “Won’t you please teach me magic?”

“Huh? No way,” I immediately replied.

As you can see, I’m currently busy with my research.

“That’s no good. Teach me, please.”

What do you mean, “That’s no good”?

“Look, you’ve got plenty of free time right now, don’t you? If you’ve got free time, then you can teach me magic, can’t you?” she said, looking slightly annoyed.

“.....”

It seemed we really did have a lot in common.

“Please teach me.”

“No way.”

“I said, please teach me.”

“And I said no, didn’t I?”

“If you don’t teach me, I’ll spread the rumor that you kidnapped me.”

“...But there’s no one here.”

“Please teach me anyway.”

“.....”

We had this pointless back-and-forth, and in the end—

“...If you help me with my research, then okay. I’ll teach you magic in return.”

I folded.

If I was being honest, I was facing all sorts of uncertainties regarding her traveling from the past and the reason this place had fallen into ruin. But when I considered the possibility of her returning to her own time, it occurred to me that teaching her magic now might help her out a lot back in the past.

Though it wasn’t yet clear whether she could actually learn to use magic or not.

I can’t help but wonder if she’ll still assist me with my search if it turns out she can’t use magic. If possible, I’d like to discover both why she came to this place and how to keep her from returning to the past while there’s still time.

“Come to think of it, you haven’t told me your name yet, have you?” I held out my hand to her. “I am the Ashen Witch, Elaina. I’m a traveler.”

“...Thank you.”

She gripped my hand lightly and smiled, looking just a little bit bashful.

And then...

“My name is...”

And when she said her name, I could scarcely believe it. It made everything else—the question of whether she could learn to use magic, the question of why she’d come here from the past, the question of why she and I were so much alike—seem trivial.

This girl, with her black hair down to her shoulders and her lovely blue eyes, spoke up.

She said...

“...Fran.”

Just “Fran.”

And she smiled at me.



At that point, I had figured a few things out. There was the fact that the lazy witch known as the Stardust Witch, Fran, who had taught me all sorts of things as my teacher, had in actuality met me before in the past, and had apparently been keeping it a secret from me this whole time. And there was the fact that the girl before my eyes definitely had to return to the past somehow or other at some point.

The more I looked at her, the more I could see that the girl in front of me was definitely none other than my teacher, Fran. I just stood there thinking, *Ah, she used to make faces like this before; she hasn't changed a bit, still a beauty, huh, wow.*

It's safe to say that, in that moment, I was in quite a state of confusion and couldn't get my thinking straight.

“Elaina? Um, I'd like you to let go of my hand anytime now... And having you stare at me so much is, um, a little...”

Fran was fidgeting, looking rather embarrassed. The more I looked at her, the more she looked like herself.

“.....”

Hearing her call me “Elaina” felt oddly embarrassing. Some very complicated emotions were bubbling up in the depths of my chest.

“...Ahem!” I shook off these troublesome thoughts. As I released her hand, I asked, “All right, are you listening? From this point forward, I'm going to become your instructor, so please address me as ‘teacher’ from now on.”

“Understood. Teacher.” Fran nodded obediently.

“.....”

Miss Fran is calling me “teacher”...

“Teacher, what's the matter?” she asked. “You've got on a very complicated

expression...”

“T-that’s just the way I look.”

“Uh-huh...you must have had a very complicated life...”

Setting that aside...

“For now, let’s establish our schedule,” I said. “We’ll have to balance research with practical studies, so we’re going to be rather busy.”

Conducting my investigation while also teaching her magic would be difficult, not to mention a real pain. It seemed like the best approach would be to strictly divide my time between the two tasks.

“For the time being, we’ll investigate from morning until afternoon,” I said. “From afternoon until evening, we’ll study magic. How’s that sound?”

“...If we do it like that, I’ll only end up doing the magic studies, is that all right?”

“Wait a minute, why are you assuming that you’re going to sleep in late? Is this a joke?”

“I hate waking up in the morning...”

“Ugh, I know.”

“Hmm? Did I already tell you that, teacher?”

“.....”

It would be difficult to explain how I already knew that she hated waking up—that she’d been like this when I’d known her in the future, and that I’d figured that she’d probably been that way since she was young.

“...No, I could just sort of tell somehow...,” I answered. “For now, I’ll plan to wake you up when I get up. That’s the idea.”

When I was in training, waking Miss Fran had been part of my daily routine after all.

That much was no hardship.

“Well, it’s already the afternoon now, so can I take that to mean you’re going

to start teaching me magic?” Fran tilted her head.

“Yes. That’s the plan.” I nodded. “Are you ready? When I say I’m going to teach someone magic, I teach them properly.”

“I look forward to your lessons.”

“Unlike some *other* people, I’m going to teach you seriously. Prepare yourself.”

“...Who are you talking about?”

“...I’m talking about my own teacher.”

“Your teacher didn’t teach you proper magic?”

“Well...um...”

“I see. That’s really crappy, huh?”

“.....”

Fran nodded repeatedly and made knowing noises, while I stood there in silence.

“Your teacher was a real jerk, huh?”

“.....”

You’re just trashing your future self, you know!

I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t say it.

And so the curtain rose on our strange daily routine.

This girl would become my teacher in the future, so it was no surprise that she had a talent for magic. Actually, she was more gifted than I’d imagined.

“Let’s start with a drill to practice manipulating magic. There’s water here in this bottle, right? Without touching it, please draw the water out.”

“Something like this, I suppose?”

“.....”

Fran quickly drew the water out of the bottle using a wand that I had loaned her. The water was floating in a blob in midair.

How on earth can she handle magic so easily the first time she's ever picked up a wand...?

The thought lingered in my mind, but I found it vexing, so I stayed silent.

"...All right, next, form the water into a ball."

"Like this?"

Fran quickly made the water into a ball in the air.

"....."

She didn't seem like a beginner at all. The lesson appeared to come to her naturally.

I thought she would have a little bit of difficulty with it, but...

"All right, next, let's try using wind magic." After moving the bottle far away from her, I said, "Send some wind in this direction, and knock down this bottle, please."

"Something like this, I suppose?"

"....."

She sent the bottle flying with a *ping!*

"...Have you got experience handling magic?" I asked.

"...? No, I don't, but..."

Apparently, she was a natural prodigy.

Oh-hoh, I see, I see. She's so absurdly gifted, it makes all my days of hard work seem ridiculous.

After she'd grown comfortable handling the wand, Fran turned to me and asked, "Um, teacher? Is it possible that I might be a little bit of a magical prodigy...?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? This is normal progress. Don't get carried away with yourself."

There stood a wicked witch who used the fact that her student knew nothing about the wider world to temper her enthusiasm.

“.....”

She was a prodigy, plain and simple. She seemed to have an unparalleled gift for magic, and it seemed like I would be able to teach her absolutely everything I knew, so that it would be useful to her when she returned to the past.

From that day forward, we took up lodging at the great library. Moss and other greenery had invaded most of the houses in this area, making them musty and impossible to sleep in even if we tried. So there was no avoiding it, and we decided to sleep in the library. After easily using our magic to repair two beds salvaged from nearby houses, Fran and I set them up beside each other.

“And we get to sleep in the great library, too... How nice... It’s so romantic...”

Fran gazed up at the starry sky from her bed, and her mouth relaxed ever so slightly into a cheerful smile.

Looking over at her, I answered, “How gratifying to hear that you’re happy,” and turned back to my desk.

“You’re not sleeping yet, teacher?”

“I’ve got research to do.”

“...There’s no decent information in this library. Just stuff that everybody here knows.”

“Well, things that are common knowledge to everyone here are still new to me,” I answered. “You can go ahead and sleep.”

“.....”

In the brief silence that followed, I got the sense that she was troubled by something, and holding something back, but she must have been tired.

“...Well then, I’ll take you up on that.”

Shortly after she’d replied to me with those words, the sound of her quiet, sleeping breaths echoed through the great library.

The Miss Fran I knew was extraordinarily lazy, and apparently that was true in this era as well. The next morning, when I awoke in the great library, she was there beside me, snoring quietly, snuggled under her covers.

“Wake up. It’s morning.”

“Five more minutes...”

“Not a chance. Hurry and get up...”

“Nngh.” Fran squirmed deeper down under the comforter.

“.....”

Apparently, she hadn’t woken up even the slightest bit.

...Well, she did handle magic for the first time yesterday, plus she just had a pretty harrowing experience, so...maybe she shouldn’t be faulted for sleeping in a little bit?

Making excuses like this to myself, I patted her blanket.

“...All right then, I’ll do my research on my own today.”

I was almost certainly going easy on her, giving up in the end like that.

If there was one thing that was clear in her...in Fran’s recollections that she told me about, it was the fact that no matter how much I searched this great library, I wouldn’t find anything.

Maybe it had all been censored, but either way, it wasn’t here in the open. Apparently, any unfavorable information about the place was not a matter of public record.

In that case, if that’s how it is, then I should probably postpone my search of the great library. It seems like it would be much more worthwhile to take a look around instead.

“It doesn’t seem likely that the cause for all this ruin is going to come to light quickly or easily, does it...?” I mumbled to myself as I toured the city alone.

The phantoms that I’d been seeing ever since arriving the day before continued to appear constantly, regardless of the time of day or what was happening at the moment.

Before I went to sleep at night, the figures of people I had never seen before had shown up several times, reading books in the library.

“Ah, welcome, welcome! We’ve lowered our prices!”

“I wonder what I should have for dinner tonight...”

“Excuse me, but I’ve just moved here today. Could you point me toward the orphanage?”

Not long after, I found my way to the city gates.

It was the same road I had taken the previous day, but there was one thing I hadn’t noticed before—according to stories of Miss Fran’s youth, the people here hadn’t been big fans of trading with the outside world. So one would expect the city gates to stay locked.

But I had been able to enter without the slightest inconvenience. I had just walked right in.

“.....”

The gate had been destroyed. An enormous hole had been punched right through the middle of it.

“Ah, what the heck happened here...? Our gate is...,” someone said from somewhere. But by the time I looked around for them, the apparition had already disappeared.

In other words, someone had put a hole through the city gate. That’s what it must have meant.

But I wonder who on earth could have done such a thing...

“.....”

After that, I tried standing there watching the gate for a while, but the apparitions only ever appeared when I wasn’t looking for them.

And so a routine coalesced for the both of us.

In the morning, I would wake up, shake Fran’s body, and whisper, “It’s morning!” She would answer me with, “Five more minutes,” indicating a time that would never actually arrive. I would sulk off to do my research alone, saying, “All right, all right. Well, I’m going by myself, then.” In the afternoon, Fran would open her eyes and badger me. “Okay, teach me magic now!” Putting on an incredibly reluctant face, I would extract a promise that would never actually come true—“All right, but tomorrow please get up early”—and

teach her spells.

I taught her enough to handle herself even after she returned to the past.

I had a feeling that that was probably my destiny here.

I taught her magic to the best of my ability, so that she might become the splendid witch who would teach me magic in her future.

To tell the truth, I felt like the time I spent teaching Fran magic was much more valuable than my own research—more important even than learning the reason why this place had gone to ruin.

It was probably because I felt more of a sense of satisfaction from teaching what I knew to the person who would go on to teach me, rather than from searching for something I might not find, no matter how hard I looked.

“.....”

No, I'm sure that's not the only reason.

I'm sure this is some kind of very, very long-term repayment of a favor.

Fran was very important to me. She was the one who had taught me magic in my past.

Though I wasn't sure whether or not I was going to be an important figure to her, as the person who had taught her magic in her past.



Six days had passed since I got Elaina to start teaching me magic, but nothing had changed. Whether awake or asleep, I was still in the future.

Once I awoke in the middle of the night, but of course, I still found myself in the decaying remains of the great library.

Just when am I going to go back?

Whenever I lay awake, trying to fall asleep, a vague unease smoldered inside me.

I hadn't entirely recovered from my traumatic experience in the past. Even though outwardly I was perfectly composed, inside, the awful memory of it was eating me up. That was why I would ignore my teacher, who was staying up late

reading books in the great library for her research, announcing that I was going to sleep as I crawled between my blankets.

Maybe she could guess what was on my mind, because she didn't compel me to accompany her on her searches of the city and seemed to be going out on her own to explore in the mornings.

In all honesty, I did feel a little lonely when I woke up in the mornings with my teacher nowhere to be seen, but I was sure that if I'd said anything about it, it would've only caused even more trouble for her.

Even though I was grateful to still be alive here in the future, it was very clear to me that I would upset my teacher if I spoke of my feelings, so whether sleeping or waking, I acted as if I didn't have a care.

“.....”

If I looked up through the holes in the ceiling before the break of dawn, I could see stars sparkling in the sky. I didn't see any that looked like that ominous, unlucky comet. Just a normal night sky, stretching out before me.

I wonder how many years older this sky is since I last saw it...

“Miss? I'm terribly sorry, but customers aren't allowed past this point...”

It happened when I was lost in my own thoughts. From out of nowhere came a voice; it sounded annoyed and perplexed.

I crawled out of my bed to look for its source, but there was no need to search for it. The whole of the great library was blanketed in an illusion, showing it as it had looked a long time ago.

“Oh, come on now. You're hiding something back there, aren't you? That's right, isn't it?”

An image of a mage was interrogating an image of the librarian.

“No, I'm telling you, this part of the library is off limits to outsiders, even if you think something is hidden back there...”

And the image of the librarian looked troubled but stubbornly refused the mage passage.

I had seen both of them before.

I was looking at two people with whom I had exchanged words in the past.

“.....”

Hearing their conversation, I was reminded that every single one of the books I'd read about this place had either been missing sections or only contained knowledge so common that anyone might know it. It was obvious that the government was censoring anything that might make them look bad.

The mage seemed to have guessed that what she was looking for was concealed in the back rooms of the library. She leaned in even closer to the librarian. “There’s absolutely nothing that might make this place look bad. You must be keeping it all in the back, right?”

“I don’t think that we have anything like that...,” the librarian said. She looked bewildered, but she didn’t seem to know anything useful.

The mage narrowed her eyes to stare intensely at the perplexed librarian before she eventually said, “...Well, whatever. I’ll come back again,” and turned on her heel to leave.

In the past, access to the back rooms of the library had been blocked by the librarian.

“.....”

But now the library was deserted. It would be easy to investigate.

I thought about telling this fact to my teacher right away, but when I looked over my shoulder at her, she was still breathing peacefully in her sleep and showed absolutely no signs of waking.

I wonder if I should wake her... Should I? Surely I ought to tell her right away, since I have no idea when I might return to the past?

After debating it for a moment, I shook my teacher’s shoulder and called out to the sleeping woman, “Teacher, teacher!”

However...

“Nngh...”

She let out a delicate sigh.

“...Five more minutes,” she mumbled.

She didn’t wake up. She didn’t wake up at all.

What’s the meaning of this? Surely I ought to wake her up, even if I have to slap her or something, right?

“Teacher...”

I shook her shoulder once more, and then...

A book fell free from her clothes and hit the ground with a loud *thump*. I picked up the beautifully bound tome, which must have been her private property. Tempted by my own curiosity, I began flipping through the pages, against my better judgment. The pages were tightly packed with lovely handwriting.

“.....”

It was a diary. She seemed to have already filled several volumes, because unfortunately there was no mention of the start of her journey. But she had recorded the events of recent days.

From trifling everyday events like buying a particularly good loaf of bread, to the story of her meeting someone and then parting from them, it was all there.

There was the tale of her encounter with an immortal mage. There was the story of the time she ran into a friend in a certain city. There was the story of an adventurer traveling around and freeing slaves. All this and more was recorded in her diary.

The outside world I had yearned for was all written in this book.

Her descriptions of the past few days were also there. In short, she had written about the days since meeting me. I knew it wasn’t something I ought to be reading, but my hand seemed to turn the pages on its own, and I ended up reading to the end.

According to her diary...

XX month, XX day

I suppose it's my mission to teach her magic. That's what it feels like.

If possible, I'd like to drill every bit of knowledge I have into her, but unfortunately, I have no idea how much time we have left together. I'm going to put off my vacation for the time being and will consider teaching her magic to be my top priority.

I can do my research about this place whenever, but the time I have now to spend with her isn't going to be that long.

So I've made little progress exploring.

XX month, XX day

She didn't get out of bed this morning, either, no matter how long I waited. I wonder if there isn't a spell to cure oversleeping.

As expected, her talent for magic is exceptional. In fact, she probably far surpasses me in terms of latent potential. I felt a bit jealous watching her learn everything I taught her with ease. But at the same time, it also made me consider that perhaps I have a talent for teaching.

Regarding my research, after two days it's become clear that there is no pattern to the apparitions. They seem to be disconnected in time, and in every other way, nothing more than phantoms that appear and disappear, remnants of the city's past. What on earth could be showing me these visions?

XX month, XX day

Starting today, our third day together, I've been able to catch moments of brightness in her somewhat gloomy expressions. It seems that she's not necessarily going to be influenced by her past forever. That's good.

As usual, I'm still a little upset that she's so darn good with magic, and also annoyed that she's so bad at getting up in the morning. But anyway, putting all that aside, after three days of my instruction, she should at least be able to put up a fight if she's challenged by any normal human after returning to the past.

Though I definitely don't think I'm ready to tell her that yet.

My exploration of the city has, as usual, made no progress. Today's search also concluded without finding a way to return her to the past.

XX month, XX day

Today is day four.

Our days together continue without interruption.

I'd like to end today's diary entry with a prayer that they will persist.

Today I took a break from exploring the city.

XX month, XX day

It's day five.

She was still here when I awoke this morning. Seems she hasn't returned to the past yet.

When night fell, I remembered that I hadn't searched the city.

XX month, XX day

Today is day six, but she's still here in the grand library.

I suppose tomorrow will be more of the same.

Some part of me hopes that's true.

"....."

My teacher is a liar, I thought. She told me that she was staying up late doing research, but she hasn't been doing any such thing.

Beside her where she slept facedown on the desk was a small mountain of books about magic. She must have been using her sleeping time to study. She must have been trying to learn more spells to teach me. Maybe she didn't want to seem like she was doing me a favor, so she kept it a secret from me.

"...Thank you so much, teacher," I said as I stroked her hair. It was the kind of thing I could only ever say to her while she was asleep.

Maybe we were more alike than I had imagined.

Strangely, that didn't bother me.

The following day, Fran woke up first for once.

Such strange behavior from her was enough to make me wonder if it was an ill omen or something.

“Oh my, what’s this? A harbinger of some natural disaster?”

I even went so far as to say it out loud. That’s how rare it was for her to wake up early.

“Heh-heh-heh...teacher, I’m not the kind of person who is just going to sit back and let you go easy on her...”

She smiled boldly.

Oh my, I don’t remember going easy on you, though?

“Today I mustered all my feelings of gratitude for you, my teacher, and put in a little effort.”

I found this puzzling, but she wore a broad smile as she set some strange black thing down on the table and said, “Please enjoy.”

The black thing sitting on the plate sizzled and sent up smoke of a disgusting color. It was impossible to look directly at the mysterious object.

“...Um, what is this?”

I looked up from the table at her, and she smiled.

“I made you something to eat,” she answered.

“.....”

Huh? Is this some kind of prank or something?

Fran puffed up her chest with pride. “I tried to bring out the full flavors of the raw ingredients.” I thought that she would probably have gotten better flavor by throwing the ingredients straight into the trash.

“Exactly what kind of cooking results in something like this...?” I wondered aloud.

“Eh-heh-heh...”

Ah, no, that wasn’t a compliment...

I wasn't trying to hide my grimace, but apparently my feelings weren't obvious to Fran.

"I put my whole heart into making it...," she told me proudly.

To think that your heart is this pitch-black...this is the first I knew of it...

"Please, go ahead," she said, and pushed the plate toward me, urging me to eat. "I'm planning to help you with your exploration this morning, so please hurry and eat up."

Well now, that's a very admirable thing to try to do, though it's really not necessary.

"Did something happen?" I asked suspiciously. "You got up awfully early this morning..."

"I'm going to grow and develop, too, teacher."

"Huh? Develop?"

I looked at the plate sitting in front of me.

Well, your culinary skills certainly aren't going to get any better, if the Fran I know in the future is any indication...

"What's wrong, teacher? You really don't look so good..."

"...No, it's nothing..."

"Anyway, hurry up and eat, please. We don't have much time. I woke up in the middle of the night last night, and I feel like I might have a clue about the disaster that took place in this city."

I tilted my head quizzically. "Oh? What do you mean?"

Fran told me breathlessly about the apparition she had seen the night before.

It had been only one scene, that of a mage who had come here by chance, pressing a librarian to be allowed to enter the grand library's back rooms. The mage had seemed to recognize that everything in the public part of the library was heavily censored as a matter of course, meaning that anything significant was probably hidden in the back.

However...

“By any chance, was the mage you saw a witch with nearly white, ash-colored hair, wearing a black robe and triangular hat?” I asked.

“...!” Fran’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “S-so mages can see into people’s minds after all...?”

“...No.” I shook my head and answered, “Actually, I’m looking at her.”

I pointed into the back of the library. There was a lone mage there wearing a devious smile and muttering to herself about sneaking in.

Fran sighed wearily. “Ah...so that’s it...”

Apparently, she was feeling disheartened.

However...

“The fact that an apparition has appeared now means we had probably better hurry,” I said. “Since we have no idea when it might disappear again.”

“Ah, but your breakfast...,” Fran said.

“I’ll eat it later, alone, in secret,” I replied. “Since it’s a meal made for me by my precious first student, I want to take care when eating it,” I told her quickly as I gathered up my things.

“Teacher...” Fran looked overjoyed.

“Well then, let’s go.”

Jumping on the opportunity to leave behind the mysterious black mass that Fran had called breakfast, we chased after the apparition of the witch with the whitish hair.

“By the way, don’t you think that woman resembles you, teacher?”

“Not at all.”

“B-but...”

“We look nothing alike.”



Regarding the question of how exactly the witch with whitish hair had managed to sneak into the back of the great library, well, her apparition

showed us the answer in due course.

“Heh-heh-heh...” Wearing a daring smile, she cast a spell on herself right then and there.

Immediately, she transformed into a little mouse.

I see, she must have thought it would be easy to sneak in as a mouse.

In fact, since no one seemed to take any notice of her now that she was transformed, the little mouse was able to run around as she pleased in the depths of the library. Though I was watching her from the future, her trick was quite obvious.

“Squeak, squeak!” *Mm-hmm, I see! Looks like they’re hiding all sorts of things back here,* the mouse seemed to want to say as she ran farther and farther into the back of the library.

“Squeak, squeak!” *Oh? Where could this door lead? ...It’s obviously suspicious,* the mouse seemed to want to say as she transformed herself back into a human.

“...Suspicious.”

Then the witch extended a hand toward the door, but it seemed to be shut tight, and there was a large lock installed near the handle. It wouldn’t open, regardless of whether she pushed or pulled.

Even so, before a witch, a lock or any other contrivance was meaningless.

“Hyah!”

The witch struck the lock with a spell and broke it as if it were nothing, then opened the door.

That’s where the vision ended.

“.....”

“.....”

We were left standing in that spot, with only an open door before us.

It had probably been standing open like this the whole time, right here, ever since the witch had visited twenty-two years earlier.

Without much hesitation, we went inside.

However...

"...There's nothing here." Fran shook her head, looking around the room.

"...There really isn't," I agreed.

It was completely empty.

The large room was lined with bookshelves, but there wasn't a single book on any of them.

I was certain that this room would be packed with juicy secrets, but...

Could we have missed the mark?

"...I see," someone said.

Someone's voice rang out from beside us as we stood there, stumped.

It was the voice of the mage from earlier. Apparently, the vision was not over.

"...They're hiding quite a lot of books, huh?"

And apparently what we were looking at was entirely different from what she was seeing.

She reached out toward one of the shelves and gripped a book in her hand.

Not paying any mind to us gazing at her from the future, the witch leaned against a bookshelf and began reading right then and there.

"....."

"....."

We looked at each other.

If there was nothing here now, then there was only one way for us to learn the real story. Without saying a word to each other, we quickly leaned in close to her on each side.

We were peeking over her shoulder.

"By the way, don't you think that this person looks a lot like you...?"

"She does not."

We kept on staring intently at the book in the witch's hands as she leisurely flipped through the pages.

In her hands an entire history was flowing by.

The ancient history of this place was said to have begun about a thousand years ago, when stones rained from the sky above the forest. A part of the forest was flattened by the falling stones, leaving the ground bare.

The people who had been living in the forest revered the sudden appearance of the sky stones as an act of the gods and built their houses around that spot.

Before anyone noticed, this nondescript cluster of houses came to be called Bielawald.

The people living here were said to witness a strange object in the sky every twenty-two years.

A contemporary account had this to say:

Once every twenty-two years, an unfamiliar star appeared in the night sky.

It was the comet.

The people of ancient times must not have had any knowledge of comets—when it first started appearing, they apparently thought that the appearance of a new star was quite ominous.

They couldn't understand why it had appeared at all, or why it showed up only once every twenty-two years.

All sorts of mysterious things began to happen after that. For example, people's houses would suddenly disappear into thin air. Or people's bodies would spontaneously catch on fire. Never-before-seen flowers would sprout from the ground. Never-before-seen creatures would appear from nowhere.

The people who lived in Bielawald at the time didn't know what was causing all these strange phenomena, but they were certain that the gods were angry. So one spring, they decided to start offering up their prayers every night to appease the gods' wrath.

Even so, the strange phenomena continued happening at regular intervals.

The people of the city decided that they had better offer up a sacrifice. They thought for certain that the gods demanded a sacrifice. So the people erected a shrine in the center of the city and started making sacrifices there whenever the comet appeared.

The person chosen as the sacrificial victim was always a young, pure girl. The girl would be put to sleep using a drug made from the white flowers, sealed inside the shrine, and offered as a sacrifice.

Back then, they believed the ritual could prevent any misfortune. And after the sacrifices started, the strange phenomenon did stop appearing.

In exchange for this peace, girls were routinely sacrificed.

In the beginning, it was nothing more than a way of quelling the wrath of the gods.

The tradition was threatened when the city began to grow and prosper. Some people, who hadn't been there when the sacrifices began, began insisting that the practice was barbaric and outdated. Young people who didn't remember the time before the sacrifices thought that the ritual was nothing more than a terrible waste of life. It was only natural for them to harbor doubts, since they didn't remember a time before the sacrifices.

However, the adults were quick to silence those doubtful voices. They believed that the tradition was necessary and that if they didn't make a sacrifice at least once every twenty-two years, they would come to even more harm.

But the children who had their doubts about the tradition never ceased their protests.

Eventually, the adults decided to take a hard-line policy.

"We should make a sacrificial offering every year. If anyone voices any misgivings about it, that person can be locked in the shrine as

the sacrifice the following spring.”

It was forbidden for anyone to ask any questions about any of the customs or traditions. The people in charge of the city sealed away any controversial books in the depths of the great library, and anyone who still had doubts about the city’s traditions was killed in the shrine.

And so time passed, but nothing changed. The customs and conventions remained while the ages advanced and people went on living their lives. Eventually, there was no one left who knew the reason why they had started in the first place.

Only the disgusting tradition of killing anyone who questioned the system continued to be passed down through the years.

Even so, very few people questioned it.

Because anyone who did was killed.

The comet floating through the night sky continued, as always, to appear every twenty-two years.

“...I see.”

The witch slammed the book shut and crossed her arms, as if she was thinking. Then she disappeared.

The apparition had ended, and only Fran and I remained among the ruins.

“.....”

“.....”

Both of us simply stood there in silence.

Twenty-two years ago, Fran had been chosen as a sacrifice. According to an ancient tradition, she had been fated to die and was locked up in a shrine.

But the fact that she’s here now, surely it was because she had also gotten swallowed up by another strange phenomenon that came around once every twenty-two years—an event known to cause many strange manifestations, such as spontaneous combustion, or the sudden blooming of white flowers, or the

birth of strange creatures.

“Teacher, do you know when the comet is going to appear next?”

Supposing Fran was to return to the past, it would have to happen when the comet was visible again in the night sky, something that she herself seemed to realize.

I had been thinking the same thing.

“Seems like we’ll be parting ways very soon.”

Unlike in the distant past, these days we could accurately predict when comets would appear, right down to the day, even. That was the source of all the recent excitement.

“It’s tonight,” I said. “Tonight, the comet will appear in the sky.”

Our parting was very near.



After that, we focused our efforts on magical training until the sun went down.

I taught her as many spells as I knew—as many as time would permit.

Well, actually, I drilled her on all the spells that I had been taught by Miss Fran during my time training with her.

“You really know all sorts of magic, don’t you, teacher?” Fran asked during a pause in our training. “Are all witches as amazing as you?”

Well now, I wonder...

“There are all sorts of witches,” I answered. “So I suppose there must be some who aren’t as good with magic as I am.”

“...Were you perhaps boasting a little bit just now?”

“No, no, I wouldn’t dream of it,” I answered with feigned humility. “The reason I know so many spells is because I had an outstanding teacher.”

“What kind of person was your teacher, teacher?”

“Let me see...” After some hesitation, I answered, “She’s a little dumber than I

am, the type of person who skips out on lessons to chase butterflies, and who, as a rule, sleeps right through the afternoon. When I started my training, I could barely get her to teach me any magic.”

“I see.” Fran nodded.

“And she was unbelievably bad at cooking,” I added.

“That’s really crappy, huh?”

“.....”

“No matter how much I learn about her,” Fran continued, “it sounds like your teacher was a real jerk.”

“Yeah, well...I won’t deny that. But you know, she was an excellent teacher. That much I can say for certain. I’m sure that, without her, I wouldn’t be the person I am now.”

And so we continued our training until the sun set.

“There’s nothing left for me to teach you. Well, I wouldn’t say that. But there is a limit to how many spells I can teach you in just a few days.”

By the time the sun began to sink below the horizon, Fran and I had set aside our wands. Neither of us seemed to have any further inclination toward more lessons.

This last bit of time we wanted to spend at our leisure.

We sat next to each other in front of the grand library, gazing at the setting sun.

“What will you do once you return to the past?” I asked, tilting my head.

Fran hummed. “Hmm...first of all, I’m going to leave this place. I don’t have very good memories here, and besides, I’ve always wanted to travel,” she told me casually.

“It makes me very happy to hear you say that.”

“You know, I thought that since I make you so happy, you might give me something as a parting gift, teacher.”

“What a presumptuous thing to say...”

With a sigh, I picked up my wand. Then I waved it with a grunt and cast one more spell.

A triangular hat appeared out of thin air. The pitch-black hat resembled the one that I usually wore, with a slightly different design. It was the best I could come up with on short notice.

“I made the perfect hat for you,” I said as I placed it on her head. “Please wear this and try your best, even after you go back to the past, okay?”

“.....”

She probably hadn’t really thought that I was going to give her anything. Seeming quite surprised and embarrassed and hesitant, Fran said, “T-thank you, very much...,” and touched the hat, feeling its texture.

“Teacher?” she said after a few moments, staring vacantly up at the darkening sky. “Once I’m grown up, I’m going to come see you again, okay?”

And so I answered matter-of-factly, “See you again someday. Until then, good-bye.”

I replied with these words that my teacher had said to me some time ago, exactly as she had said them.

And then Fran disappeared with a smile.



When I returned to my own time, I was greeted by the sight of the city as I had always known it. The place wasn’t ruined or abandoned. I had returned home.

The only thing that seemed different was the way the people who greeted me were behaving.

The people of the city were naturally surprised when they laid eyes on me as I emerged from the shrine—when they saw the girl who should have died.

But they didn’t react with hostility.

“Oh...! How remarkable...! She’s alive...!”

“Ah...! Wonderful! How truly wonderful...!”

The people of the city crowded around me, crying with joy, and gave me a warm welcome. It was very different from how they had treated me when they had put me in the shrine.

“...?”

Huh, what on earth is going on?

Did I arrive somewhere else, and not Bielawald?

I couldn't help but wonder.

What on earth happened while I was away in the future?

“.....”

The answer to my question was in the sky.

Countless scraps of paper were fluttering down from the clouds above. One of them landed in my hand. It was one of the documents that my teacher and I had seen in the future, exposing the country's secrets.

All the papers that had been hidden long ago in the back room of the great library were falling from the sky.

“How on earth...?”

But immediately after I'd voiced my question, I realized the answer. In the future, there hadn't been a single scrap of paper left in the back room of the great library. And the witch I had met in this time had been obsessed with getting her hands on them. So while I was in the future, she must have broken in and stolen them all.

She had found a way to show them to everyone.

“Open your eyes, you ignorant people! The history of this country is much more brutal and barbaric than you think!” she was shouting from the sky. “You sacrifice innocent children just for questioning your ways. Is that how far you're willing to go to protect your traditions? How can you not see the obvious corruption that's been going on for so long?”

Stirred up by the witch in the sky, the people of the city picked up the papers that had fallen to the ground, or caught them out of the air, and got a glimpse

of the truth that they had long forgotten. They were being told by a witch tossing paper from the sky that their coveted traditions were actually meaningless.

“Miss Witch...”

Standing apart from the crowd, I murmured as I looked up into the sky at the witch.

I looked up at the woman who was the spitting image of the teacher who had taught me magic.

“.....”

My quiet murmur must have reached her ears. The witch met my eyes for an instant, and she looked almost surprised, then...

“...Thank goodness. You lived,” she said.

She smiled happily.

And then, she didn’t say anything more. She just turned her broom around and flew away.

Come to the library again tomorrow. If you do that, I’ll tell you all sorts of things.

That was when I recalled the words she had said to me.

And so I...

...threw away the paper that was in my hands and ran after her.

And that was how my journey began.



I was all by myself.

That was what I had wanted, actually—to find a place where I could watch the comet in peace, with no one else around to bother me. I had figured the comet would look prettier that way. I had figured that I would be able to relax and enjoy the show.

But this was the first time I was alone since I’d arrived here. Because she had been with me the whole time—and for some reason, I was starting to feel

lonely. The echoes of her presence were weighing on my mind.

At some point, I had also stopped seeing the apparitions.

I was all by myself, alone in the ruins, staring up at the lonesome sky.

Stars twinkled overhead, but I couldn't see the comet.

It was almost as if I had been abandoned by the night sky, too.

I was so very, very alone.

"How lonesome..."

The words that I muttered disappeared into the emptiness of the night.

Or they should have.

"Is that so? Even with me here?"

But a voice answered my words.

I turned around in surprise.

"....."

There stood a witch with long, lustrous black hair. I wondered how long she had been there.

"Miss Fran..."

Sure enough, there she was.

She wasn't a dream, or an illusion. She was right there in front of me.

"I told you that I was going to see you again once I grew up, didn't I, Elaina?"

"Can I sit with you?" Before she had even finished asking, Fran plopped right down beside me.

I didn't say you could sit yet, did I...?

I was about to ask her what on earth she was doing here, but as if she could sense what was in my heart, as if she could read my mind, she said, "I've been looking forward to this day for a very long time."

Then she smiled impishly. "I never would have imagined that the person who taught me magic would become my pupil, though."

I suppose she must have remembered everything this whole time.

But if that's true, there's something I'm not entirely satisfied with.

"...Miss, you never said anything about meeting me in the future, did you?"

That's depraved. I'm really peeved.

"Goodness, what are you complaining about? You did the same thing, right? Didn't you stay silent about the fact that you were my pupil?"

"No, I told you!"

"Oh, did you?"

"I said that I had been taught magic by a wonderful teacher, didn't I?"

"You studied magic under a lazy, good-for-nothing teacher who just chased butterflies all day—at least that's what I remember you saying."

Ha-ha, seems like we remember things differently, huh?

Well, setting that aside for now...

"What did you do after that, Miss Fran?"

I could more or less imagine what path Miss Fran had taken after returning to the past, but even so, I couldn't resist asking.

Had she managed to flee the country after all that?

"Things generally went the way you would expect," she said. "After that, I left Bielawald to go find that witch—my teacher—and apply to be her pupil. Apparently, she had made quite a mess of things, and the police had tried to arrest her, so she broke her way out. Then we ended up on the run for a while."

"....."

Quite an aggressive departure...

The gate to the city had never been fixed. Probably because by the time Fran managed to escape, the whole place was headed for complete destruction.

Once they knew the truth, the citizens stopped fearing the unnatural phenomena that had been happening in Bielawald and fled the oppressive city.

After everybody had left, this place was just a ruin.

I suppose that's what happened.

"And then, for several years, I traveled with her. Along the way we happened to meet the girl who would be my sister pupil, and now I'm here beside you."

"...Is that so?"

I didn't know how to respond, so I looked up at the sky. As always, the lonely firmament stretched out above me. I couldn't see any sign of the comet, just a clear, starry sky.

I wonder when the comet will appear.

Maybe it won't at all...

I was still looking up at the sky, thinking uneasy thoughts, when—

"...Ah!"

Finally, a streak of light crossed the starry sky and disappeared.

It was a shooting star.

No sooner had that single shooting star begun to fade than bright flashes lit up the night, one after another. A whole succession of shooting stars streamed across the sky.

"Huh, what the...?"

There were so many, they would have been impossible to count. There were so many flashes falling through the starry sky that it even seemed like we might be witnessing the end of the world.

"...Goodness." Miss Fran watched the sky in fascination beside me and said, "This is what's called a meteor shower."

I mean, yeah, I know that, but...

"Why is there a meteor shower going on when we came to see a comet...?"

Fran pondered my question for a few moments, making a humming noise as she thought. "I've heard of this before. Some meteor showers are caused by comets breaking into pieces. The scattered bits of the comet rain down as a shower of light."

Well, well...

“You’re very well informed,” I remarked.

“Surely it’s only natural to learn about the place where I was born?”

Perhaps even after leaving, she had done some investigating into the strange phenomena that took place in her hometown.

And then she told me all sorts of things.

Apparently, after this country had gone to ruin, she had visited the place many times. According to Fran— An enormous rock was buried directly underneath the shrine in the center of the city. When the city was founded, the people built their homes right on top of that rock, but no one knew it was there.

As the story goes, the huge rock was a fragment of the comet that appeared once every twenty-two years. Fran believed that when the comet in the sky came very close, this fragment must have reacted with the magical energy in the forest and caused the strange happenings. That’s what she told me.



I see... So her name, the Stardust Witch, is pretty fitting after all.

"I don't suppose that comet will ever appear again." Sitting beside me, she looked just a little bit lonesome as she spoke. "And I don't suppose this place will ever go back to the way it was."

It had fallen into ruin long ago and was now all but forgotten.

"But it is pretty, isn't it?" I said.

That's when it happened.

Just for a moment, I saw an apparition of one witch and one mage walking side by side toward the city gate. But it disappeared just as quickly.

The apparitions that we had been seeing were probably echoes of the city before its decline.

"Is something the matter, Elaina?" Beside me, Miss Fran was wearing a puzzled expression and tilting her head.

I shook my head. "No," I said, and then I looked at the living, breathing woman beside me. "I just had a little dream."



"I wonder, where should we go from here?"

After violently destroying the gate, she—the witch with ashen hair—let me get onto her broom behind her, and we flew off into the outside world.

Far behind us, I could see the soldiers of Bielawald still chasing us. But there was no way ordinary humans could possibly catch up to a witch's broom, and every time I turned around to look, their figures had gotten a little bit smaller.

I soon forgot about the clamor in the city as beautiful greenery stretched out around us.

We sped over grassy fields, which undulated like gentle waves in the bright sunlight.

I was seeing the outside world for the first time, and it was beautiful and shining.

It left me speechless.

“There aren’t really any particularly interesting places to visit around here. And anyway, I’ve already made the rounds through every place nearby.”

My attention was captivated by the scenery, so the witch ignored me and idly pondered where to go next. Views like this must have been a regular sight for her. It occurred to me that one day I, too, might think such sights pedestrian.

“.....”

How very wonderful the possibility seemed to me.

She turned to me with a smile. “Is there any place you’d like to go?”

So I smiled back and answered, “As long as I’m with you, I’ll go anywhere.”



The day after stargazing with Miss Fran, the two of us left Bielawald—or the ruins that used to be the city—and emerged into a grassy field.

All through the night, on and on, we had talked of our travels, and now that we felt very sleep-deprived, the light of the sun sparkling brilliantly directly above the field was dazzling and disorienting to our eyes.

“And where will we go from here?” Miss Fran asked with narrowed eyes as she gazed out over the field. She might have been asking what I intended, or maybe just pondering her own next move.

“Well, what are your plans, miss?”

So I asked her directly.

“Let me see... For the time being, I was planning to return to Royal Celestelia, but...that country is pretty far away, so I’ll probably end up taking a few detours on my way back.”

“Is that so?” I nodded. “In that case, I suppose there’s a chance that we’ll run into each other again, isn’t there?”

Because maybe on her way home, she would happen to stop in places that I had yet to visit.

“I suppose there is,” she replied. “And I suppose that, if we end up visiting the same place, we might travel to the next place together as well.”

And traveling together in such a way, we might just end up taking Fran's whole route home together.

"....."

That seemed like a very lovely idea to me.

She turned to me with a smile. "Is there any place you'd like to go?"

So I smiled back and answered, "As long as I'm with you, anywhere is fine."

Afterword

One day in July.

Jougi Shiraishi is the most nervous he's ever been in his life.

Far more nervous than that one time back in high school when his club adviser came to him with a strange and unreasonable request.

"The concert band club only has five members. If things continue as they are, the club will be disbanded," his adviser had said. "You're the current club leader, right? Would you enter the upcoming solo contest? Enter the contest and save your club!"

The adviser made him perform at a competition that drew the heavy hitters from all around the prefecture, even though he wasn't very good.

His face is far paler today than that one time when he got stuck performing without accompaniment because the music teacher he was counting on to accompany him suddenly withdrew.

"Sorry...I'm still a new teacher, so I can't take on important duties like accompanying you in the music contest. You'll have to enter alone," the teacher had said.

Today is the day of the drama CD recording.

When the drama CD cast for *Wandering Witch* was first chosen, I thought that the cast was amazing, and I still think that today.

Anyhow, since I was a real bundle of nerves on the day of the recording, the trip to the recording studio seemed to go on forever, and even once I'd arrived, I felt as if I were in a dream.

Then someone said, "All right, say hello to the author, Jougi Shiraishi," and pushed me out in front of the voice actors to greet them.

"Uh, these books were originally self-published..."

And I skipped over my actual self-introduction to launch straight into talking about the books. This was also due to nerves.

Give a proper self-introduction! What the hell is wrong with you, man?

I inwardly scolded myself after failing to even identify myself by my pen name during my greeting.

I had been dreaming of making a drama CD ever since *Wandering Witch* was first published by GA Books, and the fact that I actually got such incredible cast members is truly beyond amazing. All during the recording, I was asking myself if it was really okay for me to be there in that joyful environment with them.

It took two-and-a-half years of dogged perseverance to get that drama CD made.

The road seemed so long while I was walking it, but as I look back on it from the end, it passed by in a flash.

Well then, what was the actual recording process like, you ask?

“.....” “.....” ← Dialogue between two cast members.

“.....” ← Jougi Shiraishi quietly biting his lower lip.

“.....!” “.....!” ← Comical dialogue between two cast members.

“.....!” ← Jougi Shiraishi aggressively biting his lower lip.

Hearing my own writing being performed aloud, I nearly laughed with amusement several times, but I couldn’t just burst out laughing in the middle of such a serious professional atmosphere, so I had all these emotions brewing inside me and was still totally nervous, so I ended up biting my lower lip harder and harder.

The drama CD is really entertaining, and the voices of the five characters—Elaina, Saya, Miss Fran, Amnesia, and Avelia—are not only exactly as I imagined them in my mind, but even more amazing, incredible, stupendous, really truly the absolute best! Oh, I bite my lip.

By the way, back in high school, I also used to bite my lip over nothing, like that one time when I participated in that music contest and got all fired up with a weird sense of rivalry in front of the exceptionally skilled students from the

other schools.

“Aw, shit!” I shouted. “If this is what it comes to, I’ll have to compete with my air sax!” Then I pretended like I was performing. So it’s possible that I still have a tendency to bite my lower lip when I’m nervous.

This is another digression, but despite the embarrassment I suffered being thrown in with the tough guys from the other schools for that solo music contest, the concert band club still ended up getting disbanded. We weren’t able to assemble enough club members the following year. Are you kidding me?!

At any rate, the drama CD turned out wonderfully, thanks to the amazing cast members, so if you’re interested, please give it a listen!

Now then, I’d like to start giving my commentary on each chapter. These comments are going to be full of spoilers, so anyone who wants to avoid spoilers should turn around now!

Chapter 1 → An Important Day for an Important Person

This is the prologue to the final chapter... That’s it! Explanation over!

Chapter 2 → The Curse of Immortality

Humans have a thing called the immune system, so that even if we fall ill, our bodies can overcome the sickness for us. I was struck with the idea for this story one time when I had the opportunity to do some research on disease.

I had been thinking for quite a while about debuting an immortal character, but super-competent immortal characters who know everything and walk around with smug grins on their faces are a dime a dozen... I was worried about that, and other issues, too. Eventually, though, I came up with Matroyshka. By the way, her name originates from the Russian matryoshka dolls. Apparently those toys, the ones where you open up a doll and a smaller doll emerges from inside, are named after an actual girl’s name.

Chapter 3 → That Is There, This Is Here

Cannabis can actually be a helpful medicine for people with cancer... I read that in a book somewhere, and that’s more or less how I came up with this

story. Some places stay neat and tidy by putting a lid on anything that stinks, but I think it's very sad when people can't find new value in old things. That said, I'm certainly not endorsing the use of illicit drugs, cannabis included.

Chapter 4 → Welcome to the Den of Crime

Now that I've written eight volumes of *The Journey of Elaina*, there are quite a few characters that I want to bring back again and again. Among them, I definitely wanted to use the characters of Yuuri and Sharon in a more comedic chapter. I was able to really make it happen this time, and I'm so glad I did.

By the way, in the first draft of this chapter, the narration missed a lot of chances to poke fun at the characters, so I ended up revising it to read as if Elaina is the one telling the story.

Sharon is still Sharon, even after the change.

Chapter 5 → Welcome to the Cat Ears Café

This is the tale of Elaina, who wants to rush off to play with cats after being cured of her cat allergy, meeting Avelia, who for some reason starts working at a café staffed by cat-eared maids.

I've written at length about the interactions among Saya, Amnesia, and Elaina, but when I thought about opportunities for Avelia and Elaina to interact one-on-one, there was only that one section of the final chapter of Volume 4, so I'm glad that I got to write about them here.

I digress, but while I was in the middle of writing this chapter, I received a number of reader comments like, "I want to see Elaina in a maid costume!" and, "I want to see Elaina wearing animal ears!" And I just so happened to be writing both! Go me!

Chapter 6 → Frederika

Much of an individual's character is shaped during early childhood. Apparently it's quite difficult to change your personality as an adult (there are various theories on this).

The two sisters, Frederika and Lunarik, who were raised from birth in an environment where they absolutely had to be different, would certainly have

developed vastly different personalities, even though they were twins.

Chapter 7 → The Night It Rained Stardust

Biela's Comet, first discovered in 1772, appeared at regular intervals in the night sky like most comets, but it was seen for the last time in 1845 and then never again. They say that the core of the comet split in two, and it crumbled apart. Because of that, people thought they wouldn't see the comet again, but then in 1872, the remains of Biela's Comet appeared to humanity in a new form.

This was the Andromedids meteor shower, which in that year produced a shower of several thousand shooting stars in the space of an hour. They say countless numbers of shooting stars filled the night sky. I really wish I could have seen it.

That was the main inspiration for the comet and meteor shower that appeared in the final chapter, and the name *Bielawald* was taken from Biela's Comet. If you read Chapter 3, I think you'll have a general idea of what became of the citizens of Bielawald after the events of this chapter.

Volume 8 brought back a lot of characters from previous volumes. It had already been decided from the start that we were going to produce a drama CD, so I had always planned to include the five characters who I knew would be on the CD—Elaina, Saya, Miss Fran, Amnesia, and Avelia. But when I started writing this volume, I never would have expected that Sharon and Yuuri would make an appearance, too. In the end, the page count for each chapter just got longer and longer.

I've been getting questions about this on Twitter, so let me say that there are plenty more characters from the past that I would also like to use again, but I haven't found the opportunity yet. I do want to use them again, though.

So that was *Wandering Witch*, Volume 8. Hope you stick with me for Volume 9!

Well then, on to the acknowledgments.

To Azure: Thank you for always drawing such adorable illustrations. I really do love all of your illustrations, but especially the cover for the drama CD edition.

To the head editor, M: Thank you for always taking good care of me. And thank you for the sashimi. Part of me thought that I hated sea urchin and squid and couldn't eat them, but once I tried them, they were ridiculously tasty...

To Elaina's actor, Kaede Hondo: We were working to get you to play Elaina since Volume 1, so I would be so happy if you continued to play her role for future drama CDs. I can't imagine anyone but you playing the role.

To Miss Fran's actor, Kana Hanazawa: It was the greatest honor to have you playing the role of Miss Fran, and it was super fun to listen in on the dialogue between Elaina and Miss Fran from behind the scenes!

To Saya's actor, Tomoyo Kurosawa: Thank you for playing such a pitch-perfect Saya that as I listened in on your performance, I got all excited and thought that Saya was really in the studio! Sorry for making you say "tickets" over and over again...

To Amnesia's actor, Konomi Kohara: Amnesia has been an important character since Volume 4, so I was so happy to get you to play her. The way you speak, with the air of an older sister, is just like Amnesia...

To Avelia's actor, Miho Okasaki: Avelia's way of talking was really entertaining, and I had to bite my lower lip several times as I listened in. I particularly liked Avelia's reaction when she had the wet hand towel thrown at her.

To Ikki Nanao, who is in charge of turning these novels into comics: Thank you so much for the truly amazing adaptation! I tear up every time I receive one of the drafts. I look forward to reading along whenever the Manga UP! version comes out.

To everyone in the light novel division at GA Books, to everyone involved in the production of the drama CD, to everyone in the editing department at GA Books, and to everyone in the sales department:

I want to offer you my sincerest thanks on this occasion. I've had a number of new experiences between Volumes 7 and 8, and nothing makes me happier than thinking about the valuable opportunities that I've been given.

To all my readers: I'm going to keep on writing *Wandering Witch* for a long

time, and it would make me so happy to have you keep cheering me on as always! See you next time!

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