

5
JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina



Won't you tell me
about yourself?

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A girl who
earned the title
of "witch," the
highest rank for
a mage. Inspired
by a certain
book to go on a
long journey
of her own.



THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA
CHARACTERS

SHEILA
(IN HER
STUDENT DAYS)
Her appearance
back when she
was a witch's
apprentice. Bold
and dynamic,
a real firebrand.



FRAN
(IN HER
STUDENT DAYS)
Her appearance
back when
she was a witch's
apprentice.
Calm and collected,
a prodigy of a girl.



MINA
Saya's younger
sister and pupil
of the Midnight
Witch, Sheila.
Loves her
older sister.



SAYA
A girl from
an Eastern
country and
pupil of the
Midnight
Witch, Sheila.
Loves Elaina.

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WANDERING WITCH 5

The Journey of Elaina

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WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAI SHI

Illustration
AZURE

5


YEN
NEW YORK

Copyright

Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina Jougi Shiraishi

Translation by Nicole Wilder

Cover art by Azure

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CHAPTER 1

A Certain Witch's Stories

"And then, you see, she embraced me, and...I thought to myself, *Oh, so this is where we part.* I knew I would miss her, but I'm a traveler—a wanderer really—and she has to travel toward her own past and future now. That was why we had to go our separate ways..."

Chilly autumn wind rattled the windowpanes of the decrepit house.

No other residences were around it, and beyond the window, maple trees were turning red and yellow. Something was making noise outdoors, like an invisible force trying to obstruct her story.

It was grating to the ears. *What I'd give for a moment's peace...*

But her long story was not over. On and on, the ashen-haired girl continued, recounting her previous travels. Reminiscing about the past made her lose track of time, but that was just inevitable, wasn't it?

"....."

Upon scowling at the rattling windows, the girl with ashen hair realized the sun had long since set. She'd begun her story in the afternoon... Did that mean she had just spent half a day talking?

Oh no... Am I a blabbermouth...? she wondered.

After a bit of introspection, the witch turned back toward the girl sitting across from her. "...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to talk so much."

All would wonder about the identity of this witch.

That's right. She's me.

"Don't apologize. Let me hear a little more," urged the girl facing me, cocking her head and swinging her hair—brilliant blue like shallow water in springtime. Her lips formed a tiny smile.

I hesitated ever so slightly as her crystal-clear eyes fixed themselves on me. She watched me snatch up my diary from the edge of the sofa and rustle noisily

through the pages, searching for some kind of story that could satisfy her.

"Let's see... In that case, here's the story of a man who became overly muscular to search for his younger sister—"

"Oh, I heard that one yesterday."

"....." *Is that so?* "Then, how about the tale of a country teeming with cats—"

"Heard that one, too."

"....." *Oh really?* "Well, maybe a story about when I had my hair cut off—"

"Heard it!"

"....." *What's going on here?* "All right. What have you not heard?"

I was starting to sulk, since she'd dismissed most of the material I had been keeping secret in my diary.

"I don't think I can know what I haven't heard yet." She gave a forced shrug, looking exasperated.

"All right. Fine. Which stories *have* you heard?"

"Lemme see..." She placed a finger to her lips, looking up at the ceiling, and started to rattle off the stories I had told her.

For example, about the time when I taught spells to a novice in a country where only mages live, when I ran into her again, and when I spent time with my teacher. She recounted my travels to date, and the encounters and partings with people in the places I'd visited.

"...And the latest story with Amnesia was the last one, I think. Don't you have any stories that you left out?"

"....."

To humor her, I thumbed through my diary again, but it seemed I had told her most everything I had recorded there.

I see, I see.

Things had happened since I parted from Amnesia, too.

My tale continued, even after the pages on which I had recorded my time

with her. This girl wouldn't have heard any of the stories that transpired after that.

"...I suppose I have more."

"I thought so." She nodded, as if she had known all along.

"Do you want to hear them?" I asked, just to be sure.

"Of course," she answered immediately.

It was already getting late, and I was really hoping to avoid any more of this endless talking...

I was hungry. And very sleepy. And my throat was dry. And I was feeling sluggish.

"Elaina! Chop-chop!" She banged her fists on the table.

"Yes, ma'am."

Well then, by your leave— I began to read my diary.

The tale was one that had happened to me recently, simply a memory of my travels, so there was no need to go to the trouble of opening my diary, but in any case, I lowered my eyes and looked down at the pages.

I did it to escape from her all-too-direct gaze.

The girl, whose pale blue hair was bound into a single sleek ponytail that hung down her back, was an ordinary person, the same age as I was. She wasn't a mage or anything, just a totally normal girl.

If there was one thing that made her stand out from other people, it was that she was unreasonably interested in hearing the stories of my travels. Whenever I began speaking, her deep blue eyes always stared at me like she didn't know her manners. She would nod over and over, looking slightly euphoric.

Like a maiden in love.

Like a sheltered girl who knew nothing of the outside world.

"...Um, Anemone? Could you not stare at me?" *It's embarrassing.*

"Don't mind me! Go on. Tell me a story!"

“.....”

But I can't not mind...

I guess nothing good will come of talking more. I seem to recall having this exact exchange several times before now. But she always gets defiant and says, “I can't stop myself; it's so interesting!”

I knew already it would all be a waste of breath, no matter how much I explained myself.

“...Sigh.”

And so, fed up as I was, I began to narrate my tale.

This is the story of coming together and coming apart.



CHAPTER 2

Castle Town Fresia: Gardenia's Carrier Pigeons

At the entryway of a birdcage-shaped building...

It was dim behind the heavy doors, air saturated with the revolting stench of birds. With every step forward, the smell only got stronger.

The walls were lined with rows of birdcages, containing feathered creatures that clucked and cooed and came together like a great chorus. It was so grating to the ears.

For anyone to fall asleep here, they would have to be hard of hearing or dead.

“.....!”

That was why I thought I'd stepped into the scene of a crime when I stumbled across a woman and almost started to panic.

A woman was sprawled out in the center of the large room.

Her light green hair was close cropped, partly concealed by a brimmed hat that sat on her head at a forty-five-degree angle. Her hair was caked with dirt and sweat and plastered to her pale skin in thin strands.

Her hollow eyes, devoid of life, were colored gold.

Her worn clothes must have been some kind of uniform—a deep green coat and skirt, complete with a bright red bag hanging from her shoulder.

What could have led her to collapse in a place like this?

“A-are you all right?!” I rushed over right away and propped her up. “What on earth happened to you...? Don’t tell me you were attacked—”

With a trembling hand, the girl pressed a single scrap of folded paper against my chest.

—*Read this.*

I could tell that was her request. And so I nodded, took the paper, and opened it up.

Inside was scrawled a message that she must have mustered her last bit of strength to write, frail handwriting crawling across the page like squirming insects.

I can't do this anymore. I think I might die. No time to sleep. No time to eat. I'm tired of living. What's up with these shitty working conditions...? I wish I could sleep forever. Please don't wake me up.

This pity party of a letter was ruining the vibe of the grim situation.

Could you please go into work for me...? asked the second scrap of paper that she passed to me.

“...What? No thanks.”

Please. I'm begging you.

“...Ehh—”

It didn't take long for me to guess this wasn't the serious situation it appeared to be. It was just another annoying post I'd gotten caught up in.

○

Several hours earlier—

“Welcome to the Castle Town Fresia! We would like to extend our warmest greetings, Miss Witch!”

I bowed the tiniest bit at the soldier's salute as I passed through the gates of the city.

As expected of a castle town, the main avenue stretched toward a towering castle in the distance. Its spires stretched up, rigidly straight, puncturing the cloudless blue sky.

The city itself extended low within the confines of the high walls, as if in deference to the castle or to symbolize it was bent low to serve. Brick edifices were painted red, blue, or yellow, or were covered in moss. Though the townscape lacked uniformity, its mismatched appearance had a strange charm, and I imagine I must have had a smile on my face as I strolled through its streets.

I don't think that was simply because of the scenery.

“...So this is the City of Letters, huh?”

A moniker that had been conferred on this land.

I must have been smiling because I was basking in a sense of accomplishment—having found my way to a city that launched many rumors—and expectation, seeing that this place was as interesting as I had imagined.

The City of Letters.

The sky above was swarming with carrier pigeons audibly flapping their wings. A small bag hung around each of their necks, and on their heads perched tiny brimmed hats.

Their wings knocked against residential windows before slipping letters inside and alighting on the next house. At times, they rested on roofs, cooing gently or pecking at the food tossed by old men resting on benches. They fetched breadcrumbs from the baker, nibbled breadcrumbs from the café waitresses, gobbled breadcrumbs from witches doing their shopping at roadside stalls. Breadcrumbs galore.

I’m going off topic, but there was a witch generously tearing bits off the bread she’d just bought to give to the pigeons. Just who could she be?

That’s right. She’s me.

“What a wonderful city...” I mumbled absently between bites of bread. I can be quite kind toward creatures other than cats. I would never do such a thing to them. In fact, I would have made every effort to run for my life.

“Miss Witch, have you also come to this city to watch the parade next week?”

I stood there in a daze, tilting my head quizzically at the woman working at the roadside stall who had taken my coppers a moment ago.

“What parade?” I asked between bites.

“Hm? You don’t know about it? I was sure that you were here to see it, since you’re here now.” The woman pointed behind her with a wild jerk of her thumb. What I could see there looked like the wall of an ordinary house, but plastered with flyers.

Upon them had been written: IT’S ALMOST TIME FOR PRINCESS PLUMERIA’S BIRTHDAY BASH!

The poster bore the photograph of a girl looking toward the viewer with a cold gaze. Her pink bangs and hair were cut straight across very tidily, and somehow, that was enough to give her an indescribable aura of grace.

From the briefest of glances, you could tell her facial features were beyond perfection. Even if the princess strolled through the streets without her crown, all the men would be left spellbound in her wake.

“...Does the princess’s birthday celebration draw quite a crowd?”

The woman nodded sharply. “Certainly. As you can see, the princess is beautiful. Every year, the princes from neighboring countries and sons of major corporate heads come bearing gifts, you know.”

“Mm-hm.”

“But the princess doesn’t seem to have the least bit of interest in the men around her, and no matter what she receives or what wonderful suitors appear, she’s completely unyielding. Far from it, in fact. She gives them the cold shoulder, as if they’re garbage. I bet her hard-to-get attitude is the key to her popularity.”

“Uh-huh.”

“How nice to be beautiful! Men will give you anything, if only you have a pretty face.”

“Right you are.”

That was not to say I hadn’t had such experiences myself. I seem to recall letting some compliments get to my head and believing in my heart that I was actually beautiful. I seem to remember writing it over and over in my diary, but I’ve really started to mature recently, so I’ve been able to check my big ego.

“Well, to celebrate the birthday of a princess, they have a parade that lasts all day at the end of the week. If you’re interested, you can hang around town and watch it—” the woman said, then handed me one more piece of bread.

I didn’t realize I had finished eating all the bread I had bought, and it looked like the generous woman was giving me one as a freebie.

It was like she was telling me I was beautiful, too.

“Oh, thank you!”

Ever the dummy that gets carried away with praise, I accepted the bread dutifully and shoved it into my mouth.

“It’s delicious!” *It pays to be beautiful, huh...*

I was indulging myself in my reverie when the woman stuck her hand out at me.

“That’ll be one more copper, please.”

“...This wasn’t a freebie?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? You’re not that pretty. Just between us girls.”

“.....”

I really do let things get to my head, don’t I...?



Soon after, I decided to search for an inn.

As one would expect, all the lodgings had no vacancies with the princess’s birthday close at hand. Awaiting me as I waltzed in to make an overnight stay without a reservation was a string of formal refusals from innkeepers. It was like they were telling me, “Huh? You don’t have a reservation? You obviously can’t stay here, you dummy! Go camp outside!”

As it stood, it seemed like I really might be sleeping beneath the wintry sky.

With growing impatience, I flew from inn to inn, my daily accommodations budget creeping up with each try. Ordinarily, I get by without a care in a cheap hotel, but on this occasion, I just wanted a place to sleep, and anything, even a high-class resort, would do.

Several hours had passed since my arrival in the city—it must have been just past lunchtime—and I found one single room where I might be able to stay.

“You’ve got extremely good luck, miss! A single room just opened up. And of course, you can stay until the parade next week!”

“.....Uh, great.”

The employee began to explain that this was a hotel of the highest quality, foremost in the city, where celebrities from all around the world gathered at this time of year.

Needless to say, the price for a single night's stay, as marked on the sign, was ridiculous.

"...Uh, one night, at this price...?" I was starting to get dizzy.

"Yes. It's quite a bargain. What do you say?"

What do I say? Oh please. I don't have a choice. This is the only place left!

"...All right. One week's stay, please."

"Of course! Well then, your total cost will be—"

My field of vision started to narrow as I pulled out my wallet.

Ah, my funds are getting sucked clean...

The hotel room that I was shown to wasn't what I would call a room or even a lodging.

"This house will be yours, Miss Witch. Here is your key. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to contact the main building of our hotel using the carrier pigeon near the window. Let us take care of your every need, from meals to laundry, even cleaning. Just ask."

I was in a chic, two-story brick house. It certainly wasn't too large, nor especially snug, but the inside was disturbingly nice. A menu was casually placed on the dining table. According to the staff member at the hotel counter, everything written inside could be had for free and in unlimited quantity. In other words, securing food was not going to be a problem. Whoop-de-doo.

On the second floor, there was a carrier pigeon always on standby next to the window. It seemed the creature would go directly to the main building whenever I gave it a letter with whatever unreasonable orders or requests I might write. In other words, I could hole up in my room until I got sick of it. Frankly, I had the perfect setup to be waited on hand and foot without so much as lifting a finger.

It was at about this point that my standards for acceptable accommodations

began to change rather dramatically.

Luxury hotels are amazing...

“...But my money is...”

In a room like this, I’d like to relax and have my fill of the celebrity lifestyle, but unfortunately, that wasn’t going to be possible. As soon as I had paid my bill at the hotel, my wallet had been wiped completely clean.

I needed to get my hands on some liquid capital—and fast.

“.....”

Since I was staying here, I decided to make free use of what the city was known for and do some job hunting.

I took up a pen and wrote a letter.

Any good jobs around here?

When I popped the letter into the bag fastened to the carrier pigeon, the feathered creature immediately took off. After I’d daydreamed for a dozen minutes near the windowsill, a different pigeon returned, flapping its wings.

I rushed to open the letter bag.

Oh, I feel like I’ve been dreaming of meeting you my entire life. How I yearn for you. Please whisk me away from here!

“.....”

Huh? What was that? Did the employee at the front desk suddenly lose his marbles? Is he trying to say all my money problems would be solved if I married him? Is he stupid?

As I was puzzling over it, another carrier pigeon returned to my side.

It seemed the previous delivery had been a mistake. This one read, *Here are some day jobs that would suit a witch!* Accompanying the letter was a stack of flyers.

I tossed the love letter, whoever it was from.

The jobs recommended to me were as follows.

PART-TIME WORK IN A CAFÉ. A little difficult for a traveler.

ESCORT TO HER MAJESTY THE PRINCESS. Appealing, but I gave that one up when I saw the addendum, SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED.

DRUG TRAFFICKER. Who was so bold as to advertise a job like that...?

PORTRAIT MODEL. Strangely lucrative, so no doubt a project with a lot of exposed skin. Pass.

And so on.

Apparently, the sender had collected only the shadiest of flyers. *Is this city all right?*

Flipping through the flyers gradually became a perfunctory task, and my eyes started glazing across the pages.

Among all the nonsense, there was just one job that piqued my interest.

It certainly wasn't the one with the highest pay, but it was likely to be a job unique to this city. Plus, the actual work seemed easy. You could say it was the right fit for me, perfect for someone who loves to slack off.

The flyer said, CARRIER PIGEON CARETAKER.

Apparently, the workplace was right nearby my hotel, and the flyer had a map and a sketch of the post office. Interestingly enough, the office was in the shape of a birdcage.

Inside that building was where I found the girl.

○

There was no way that I could leave the birdcage girl on the ground, so for the time being, I lugged her back to my lodgings.

Luckily, I didn't have to worry about feeding her, since I'd paid a hefty sum of money earlier. I chose items from the menu without much care and requested them to be brought to us.

Mmm! This is delicious, miss! You saved my life!

"My name is Elaina."

She looked up and handed me another letter. *Oh, I'm Gardenia.*

“By the way, why haven’t you spoken a single word this whole time?”

She hadn’t so much as made a peep since I had found her collapsed in the post office. Instead, she’d just jotted down letters. I happen to recall meeting someone like this before...

Maybe she can only speak the truth?

Her pen raced across the page. *There’s a rule that those who manage the carrier pigeons must communicate in writing.*

“...I see.”

If you hadn’t come by, Elaina, I would have become birdfeed by now. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

“Don’t mention it. By the way, your getup... Would you happen to be a postal employee?”

Indeed.

“...Are there no other employees besides you?” *How sucky do they have to be to leave you there until I came to help?*

There aren’t. I work solo.

“.....”

I’m a witch, despite appearances. She pulled a star-shaped brooch from her breast pocket. Managing those carrier pigeons is currently entirely up to me alone.

And then she unloaded a torrent of information onto me.

Apparently, there was some kind of device built into the brimmed hats of the carrier pigeons that imbued the birds with magic, making it possible for them to carry out simple commands. As mail carriers, the birds were responsible for delivering letters in accordance with those orders.

“Have you been doing it by yourself the whole time?”

Yes. This city has a chronic mage shortage.

“...Ah.”

I'm in trouble. Since no one besides me can do it, I can never take time off, and that isn't the only issue that's been plaguing me these days.

"Issues, huh?"

She nodded. As of late, the carrier pigeons have stopped listening to my instructions. They're messing up their destinations, acting like birds, prone to slacking off, and stink of bird. Plus, they reek like birds and smell like birds!

"But they are birds." *What are you talking about?*

I had caught sight of carrier pigeons resting their wings on rooftops, but... what exactly did she mean they were 'acting like birds'?

Anyway, that's why I got the head of the post office to put out a job posting. I think I might be to blame for the pigeons' disobedience. I need some time to solve the issue. Hence why I've been searching for someone who can lend me a hand.

She didn't seem like she had the time to properly extend herself and look for an appropriate candidate.

That was obvious from the fact that she'd been locked up in that birdcage. Even now, she'd been particularly fidgety, waiting for her chance to get back, and it was obvious she wasn't even tasting the food, but practically shoveling it into her mouth. She must have had her own reasons.

Mmm! That is my first real meal in a while!

Or maybe she was just really hungry.

By the way, why did you come to the post office earlier, Elaina? She held up another messily scrawled letter.

"....."

Why, you ask...? I was a little lost on how I should answer her, but I felt like there was only one thing she needed to know.

"Because I saw this."

I showed her the job flyer, mimicking the way she displayed her written responses.



The more I heard about the situation from Gardenia, who was practically a prisoner maintaining the carrier pigeon system, the more my head began to hurt.

I'm a live-in postal worker. It's the most efficient way to manage all of the carrier pigeons in this city.

...And your meals? I had started to carry my half of the conversation in writing, too. It's imperative to adapt to the situation.

My employer sends my meals with the feed for the pigeons. I eat that.

Wow, that can't be good for your health! Her meals are an afterthought, huh.

So you see, I haven't left the post office for a while. This was the first time I've gone outside in a long time.

.....

I could have cried. It was such a horrific environment, it made other toxic workplaces seem almost kind. She worked nonstop from morning to night, likely without any breaks or semblance of free time.

Having returned to the post office, the girl held a baton and waved it around like a conductor, bestowing magic on the carrier pigeons.

By doing this every day, I keep the carrier pigeons in good shape.

She continued waving her wand around as she handed me a letter on which was written, *Starting today, this will be your duty, Elaina.*

The birds alighting in the post office and those about to set off shook their wings as they received magic. Soft blue light whizzed around the room, and the soft sounds of beating wings could be heard throughout.

According to Gardenia—

To make sure the carrier pigeons can fly the entire day, it's necessary to resupply them with magic almost constantly. That means we can't rest until the sun goes down.

On top of daytime responsibilities, there was a strict routine to prepare for the next day after the sun had set. Come dawn, she prepared the daily

newspaper and carried out other tasks, so her schedule gave her only the absolute minimum time for sleep.

I could certainly see how it would exhaust one person.

That being said, watching her wave her baton and conduct the birds was enchanting enough to hypnotize me just a little bit. If this image of her were to spread around the city, I imagined there would be some people who aspired to become a postal worker like her.

They're only ever inspired for the first week, you know. And then they realize they can't stand the stench of birds and leave.

...Apparently not.

And so I stayed to help her with her work.

Since all the mail in the city was supplied by carrier pigeon, our actual duties were rather limited. Give food. Clean up. Supply magic. That was it.

It was a two-person setup, so we alternated in shifts, but there was nothing else to do besides that. Between sunrise and sunset, it was necessary to supply the carrier pigeons with magic, so that they could continually make their round trips from the post office. Since we dove into our work, the day passed by quickly.

Gardenia had said that those who came to work here were enthusiastic only in the beginning, but I found myself tired of the routine midway through Day 1.

Why did you start working here, Gardenia? I scrawled, taking on the part of a true postal worker.

Because I'm the only mage in this city. If I quit, there's no one else who can do it.

I hear you.

In other words, she was a corporate slave.

We've got a serious labor shortage. Not with pigeons, though! Gardenia wrote, smiling. *I'm always looking for new apprentices, you know?*

I'll pass. I slowly shook my head. *I don't seem to be very well liked by the birds*

here.

It appeared she was dearly beloved by the carrier pigeons.

As I swished my wand around, she sat idly right next to me in a chair. On her head, shoulders, and lap relaxed off-duty birds.

They didn't even approach me.

I suppose. When you get to my level, the pigeons will be smitten with you. She nodded. Just then, one of the pigeons on top of her head pecked at her with its beak. Quite aggressively, I might add.

.....

I'll have you know that's a courtship ritual.

The ones on her shoulders and her lap joined in. *Peck-peck-peck-peck-peck.*

...Oh, um, but you're bleeding.

That's... Well you see, they love me so much, they could just eat me up... I think?

When did pigeons become birds of prey...?

You know how it is. They just love me to death.

...Are you crying?

Happy tears. Some droppings dribbled down on her.

.....

A token of love from carrier pigeons.

A pigeon's love can be crappy, huh. I cleaned up the blood and droppings for her.

Gardenia started to weep openly.

Around lunchtime, meals for her and the carrier pigeons were delivered.

“Hey, Gardenia! How goes it? Job going okay? Ha-ha-ha!”

A portly man laughed quite loudly as he entered the birdhouse. His belly was so swollen that he looked pregnant. An extreme beer gut. His face was flushed

so red, it made me suspect that he might possess the heart of a virginal young man embarrassed to be interacting with two cute girls.

Oh, boss! Hey there! We're working hard!

Just a moment ago, Gardenia had been in tears, bullied by her birds, but she snapped out of it and bowed when she saw the man. I could tell there was a power dynamic that was inherent to their relationship.

The man glanced at me and tilted his head. "Hm...? Who's that little lady over there?"

I could smell the alcohol on his breath as he exhaled in my direction.

This guy is wasted in the middle of the day! Gross.

The traveling witch Elaina! She's working with me today to manage the carrier pigeons!

"Hoh-hoh! Well, well, well..." The plump man smiled cheerfully at me. "Nice to meet you, Elaina. We're chronically understaffed, so..."

Well, obviously, you're going to be understaffed if you're forcing this girl to work until she collapses. There's no doubt this place is hopelessly corrupt.

Speaking of which...

Who is this person? I asked.

She replied, *My employer. You should greet him, too, Elaina.*

"....." I didn't really know what was going on, but I obliged.

Hello, I'm Elaina.

The post office chief looked at the scrap of paper I'd handed him then laughed again. "It's all right, Elaina! Forget about the job for now. I don't mind if you speak!"

"Oh, yeah? Thanks." *Don't mind if I do.*

"By the way, Gardenia. Fetch Elaina here a hat and uniform. It doesn't look great to have her working in her own clothes."

He'd addressed Gardenia rather harshly.

Looking frightened by his demeanor, Gardenia scribbled in a trembling hand,
Y-y-y-yessir! So sorry for the oversight!

“Come to my office when you’re finished with your work. I’ll give you both your day’s pay. Oh, and here, this is Elaina’s lunch. Since you hired Elaina without telling me, you’ll go without lunch today, Gardenia. As a penalty, I’m reducing your pay for today as well.”

Thank yoooooooooooo!

For what? Didn’t you just get docked lunch? Wasn’t your pay reduced? Isn’t he just the worst?

I was shocked by Gardenia’s acquiescence to her boss.

I said farewell to the questionable man.

By the way, we split the lunch.

Here’s the postal worker’s uniform. Get changed.

After we had eaten lunch, she brought me a dusty outfit.

It’s a little faded...

And the official hat. After I had changed clothes, she handed me a brimmed hat.

“.....” My hand stopped just before I was about to put it on. *...It smells.*

Because it was used by the old guy that worked here before you.

I see. I threw it aside.

Aaaaaah! What do you think you’re doing?! Put it on! Now! Hurry!

No way. It stinks. Don’t mess with me.

But I’ll lose my pay and my lunch!

What if I only wear it when that man is around?

...Oh, that works. Gardenia clapped her hands in agreement.

I was getting the sense that she wasn’t the brightest star in the sky.

Around sunset, we wrapped up our work for the day... At least, I thought we

did. Apparently, Gardenia had some work left, but I was released at sunset.

Your pay for the day. She extended an envelope toward me. She continued writing her words, even after we had finished our work.

For what purpose...? Could it be that she can't speak...?

"Oh, thanks..." Just as I was trying to take the envelope, she gripped it even harder. "...? Um..."

I tilted my head in confusion, and she bashfully held up another scrap of paper.

...Will you come again tomorrow?

"Oh? Yeah, of course." *If it means more money.*

Really?

"As long as I can get paid what I'm worth."

".....Hm!" Gardenia heaved a delighted sigh through her nostrils. *Well then, see you tomorrow!* With a smile, she handed over the envelope.

I suppose she's been lonely, working by herself the whole time.

Somehow, I felt strangely attached to this girl. And it wasn't a bad feeling.

"....."

However—

Even assuming we tackled the job together, it didn't seem like that would be enough to put an end to the recent troubles with the carrier pigeons.

Waiting for me by the window when I returned to my lodgings was an envelope sent from someone, somewhere. I had been too preoccupied in the afternoon that I neglected to open it, but now that I examined it closely, I saw that the stationery was decorated with gold leaf and looked expensive. I didn't know the sender's address, but it looked like a love letter from some celebrity somewhere to another.

Being the nosy person that I was, I tore it open.

Oh, don't be this way. Write back. I'm so lonely. When you're not here, I feel

like my heart has a gaping hole in it. It feels like something is missing. Come fill the space in my heart—

Gosh, who are you? I wanted to scream into the void.

○

Were you able to figure out what's making the carrier pigeons act so weird?

Apparently, Gardenia was the type who couldn't rest when she wasn't working. She was already doing her job when I came to the post office around sunrise the following day.

It made me feel like I was doing something wrong, like I was slacking off or something.

Not the slightest clue. I can't take it anymore. I just don't understand. Gardenia had her head in her hands.

For the time being, I swapped with her and started working, but she must not have been satisfied with that. She spent her whole break searching for something.

How about resting on your break?

No way. I must fix the problem with the carrier pigeons as soon as possible. If they aren't working properly, it will cause trouble for everyone.

She was right, of course.

Incidentally, it's causing trouble for me, too. I handed her the strange letters that had been misdelivered to me twice in one day.

Gardenia leafed through the pieces of stationery and chuckled in surprise.
Elaina, you man-eater!

Come again?

They're obviously mistaken deliveries.

I think it's possible that someone sent them to you, Elaina. You're very beautiful, after all. I could almost hear her rambling bashfully.

It's not possible.

I mean, it's only been a few days since I came to this city. I don't recall

encountering anyone who could have fallen for me in that time.

All right, I get it. I'll look into this matter, too, okay? Though the complaints about delivery mistakes are really piling up, so yours will have to be on the waitlist.

Ultimately, the rather questionable love letters that had been delivered to my place were just another piece of postal business.

A few moments later—

Graaaaaahhh!

*Gardenia, who even did her shouting in writing, had simply been flipping through the instruction manual for the tiny brimmed hats worn by each carrier pigeon. *Can't you read like a normal person?**

If I study this, I think...I will understand the cause...I should! I think!

By the way, the pigeons were attacking her today as well.

How about resting for a while? I asked. She was getting pecked at again.

I'm fine. I have to do my job.

.....

Why are the birds so mean to Gardenia? They don't pay me the slightest bit of mind, but they're showing quite an unsparing attitude toward her.

Did you do something to incur the hostility of the pigeons?

I didn't incur any hostility! We love each other! Droppings dripped onto her.

.....

One of these days, I'm going to grill them on a stick.

They didn't seem to love each other. In fact, I think it's safe to say they hated each other.

We were working in one-hour shifts, and it was my turn to take a break. Well, I say I took some time off, but there wasn't really anything to do. To kill time, I started reading a book.

Gardenia being Gardenia, she never said anything out loud. Only beating

wings could be heard through the post office.

.....

To get to the point, I was completely unable to focus.

They were just so annoying.

The off-duty birds must have mistaken Gardenia for food or something, because they relentlessly followed her around, pecking her relentlessly. Even around me, carrier pigeons were loitering.

Tch...I won't lose...to the likes of you!

Beside me, Gardenia wrote brave things as she waved a blunt instrument around. She didn't even graze them, by the way.

..... I was a little conflicted on whether to go and help her, but my hands were tied.

Directly before my eyes—atop the table piled with instruction manuals for the brimmed hats—a single carrier pigeon had taken up its position. From the way it was cooing as it cocked its little head, I got the sense that it was thinking, *Hey. Hey, you. You know what'll happen if you move, right? Right?*

...Um, what do you want? Obviously, its tiny bird brain couldn't process my written question, and the carrier pigeon kept tilting its head.

And then, after a moment, the pigeon began pecking at the pile of instruction manuals. Almost too aggressively. Rather violently, in fact.

It looked just like it was cursing at me, like, *Hey. This is you. If you move, this is what'll happen! Hrargh!*

Is that a threat? I bet it is, isn't it? I see how it's going to be.

Thanks for the warning.

So I wouldn't move. I returned to my reading.

I suppose my mild temperament displeased the pigeon. With a noisy flap of its wings, it landed on top of my shoulder.

..... I wrote.

What? I stared the pigeon down.

Then it began pecking at the page I had open, chirping all the while.

Peck-peck-peck.

“.....?”

I had a sudden realization. *Could it be trying to tell me something?*

The pigeon was acting differently than before, tapping the book gently with its beak, so as not to damage the page, and then pecking all over the two open pages.

The pigeon was hitting specific letters.

One letter at a time to spell out words.

It said, *Read the instruction manual.*

Read the instruction manual.

.....

Huh? Why?

There was no way I wasn’t going to read it now that I had been instructed to look at it. The same pigeon had started to repeatedly stomp its feet on the table, as if it wanted to say, *“Do you know what’ll happen if you don’t read it...? Hah! This is what I’ll do! Take that!”*

Have you ever considered becoming a woodpecker?

Anyhow, I decided to read the instruction manual for the pigeon hats.

The inside was filled with diagrams that I didn’t really understand. I read it, but that did nothing to help me figure out what was going on. The one who wrote the thing must have been quite brilliant, as the hats seemed to have been carefully crafted down to the last detail. Not that I understood even the tiniest bit about how.

What am I going to get out of reading this?

I flipped through page after page.

In the end, I thumbed through the book littered with inscrutable diagrams,

and many more that were covered with line upon line of incomprehensible technical jargon.

It took an awfully long time before I finally arrived at the end: the afterword.

And there, on that page, my hand stopped. My eyes fell onto its lines.

Here is what was written there:

“It’s the nature of living things to adapt to changes in their environment, but I wondered if these changes couldn’t be brought about by human hands instead? The carrier pigeons are the pioneering experiment in my research. By having the hats placed on them, the pigeons can understand human writing and recognize their duties. With this device, it is possible to deliver mail by pigeon: a revolutionary system that will eliminate the need for human postal staff.”

What’s so revolutionary about that...?

“To get the pigeons to learn words, I recommend all postal employees conduct conversations by letter. By doing so, I believe the speed at which the pigeons develop language awareness will increase. Ultimately, the day will come when the pigeons deliver the mail for us on their own—without the use of hats or magic spells.”

What’s this?

“Further, the hats are designed not only for use on the pigeons. The devices in this manual have been installed in the hats that the human employees wear as well. The ones for use on the postal employees, when worn, cause them to lose the ability to converse except by writing and think of nothing but work. I’ve taken this step to make it easier and stress-free for humans to communicate only in writing.”

Say what now?

“However, these employee hats have several shortcomings. First of all, one cannot remove the hat by their own will. Obviously, because they can only think of work. Furthermore, since their magic is constantly being depleted, it is projected that they will die of overwork without alternating personnel to rotate the hats periodically. Local commanding officers and higher-ups should bear this strongly in mind as they deploy personnel. No matter what, working alone

must be avoided. Fin."

And that's where the afterword ended.

This doesn't seem like the kind of thing you should keep for the afterword. Assuming that what is written here is the truth, I suppose that explains what's going on...

Stop! Don't poop on me! Stop it now!

Gardenia was working for the sake of the pigeons, but her work was being obstructed by them.

What if the pigeons aren't just expressing their dislike for Gardenia, but trying to make her take off her hat? What if these delivery mistakes are actually a calculated move by the carrier pigeons to make her read the instruction manual?

"....."

Gardenia paced back and forth across the post office, channeling magic.

I walked up to her and ripped off her hat.

"...Gardenia. Are you the type of person who reads the author's afterword?"

"Huh? Not really. I don't really care to read about the writer's opinions."

Gardenia tilted her head, staring blankly at me in puzzlement and spoke those words with her own mouth.

.....

Just...make sure to read the afterword, okay?

○

"Hah-hah-hah! Go on. Drink as much as you like! I'll treat you today!"

Loud laughter could be heard from the bar even in the middle of the day. In the corner of the empty establishment was a lone man with a beer belly, face red from drink. Sitting with him, other men with bulging guts were packed around the table. Looking closely, I saw that all of them were flooding their beer bellies with yet more beer.

It seemed the stars had somehow aligned this day, and a meeting of useless

scum had been convened.

“Oh, thank you! But, Mr. Director, is it all right for you to be drinking with us during the day?” asked one of the men around the table as he tugged at his white mustache.

The post office director laughed. “Not a problem! We’re using witches to operate the post office, so there’s no need for me to work, you see. You could say my job is managing social relations through merrymaking!”

A nonsensical theory put forth by the portly man, but the other portly men just joined in with shouts of support, as if they held the same opinion.

“If you insist!”

“That’s our director!”

“Thank you for treating us!”

All these jerks seemed to be soaked through with alcohol from head to toe.

“Don’t you feel any guilt over foisting your job off onto a girl?”

He didn’t seem to notice that someone had intruded on their conversation.

“Guilt? I haven’t felt that in a long time! Plus, she wanted the job. So why not put her to work? I don’t have the right to stop her!”

Interesting. Interesting, indeed.

“She doesn’t want to work. She’s being forced against her will. Aren’t you mistaking the two? According to rumors, it seems those special hats keep people from thinking of anything but work. Is that true?”

“Sure is. But there’s nothing I can do about it if she doesn’t remove the hat of her own volition! Hah-hah-hah!”

“I heard another rumor that it’s impossible for someone to remove the hat on their own.”

“.....” At this point, the director seemed to realize that the faces of the portly men around him had gone pale.

He seemed to realize that an uninvited woman had slipped in beside him. “... How long have you been there?” The director’s cheeks suddenly broke out in a

cold, oily sweat.

That girl, dressed like a postal employee, had long, sleek, ash-colored hair and lapis-colored eyes. Her getup was out of place in a bar in the middle of the day.

"Uh, I've been here the whole time?" She tilted her head.

"H-how did you know about this place...?!"

She chuckled at the portly director, who was flummoxed and flustered. "The carrier pigeons told me about it. Apparently, they're very smart and can even recognize people's faces and movements. Convenient, hm?"

She pointed outside the bar.

On every available surface on the other side of the glass—on rooftops, in the middle of the avenue—stood carrier pigeons wearing tiny brimmed hats, glaring at the director.

Among the pigeons stood the figure of a postal employee, wielding a blunt weapon in her hand.

"...Um."

"By the way, Mr. Director. I've come to deliver a letter to you today. I am a postal employee, after all."

He looked like he wanted to say something, but didn't. The ashen-haired postal employee slipped a single scrap of paper into the man's fat hand.

".....What's this?"

"Don't you know?" Wearing a devilish little smile, the ashen-haired postal employee said, "It's a threat."

And who could that postal employee possibly be?

That's right. She's me.

○

During this terribly busy period—the princess's birthday parade was a week away—a terrible person hurried to surrender himself to the authorities, throwing the city into an uproar.

That was as it should be, for that person was none other than the director of

the post office, who oversaw the delivery of mail by way of carrier pigeon, the symbol of the city.

The director confessed his crimes, stating that, with full knowledge of the fearsome power that resided in the brimmed hats that he supplied to postal employees and with full intent to abuse that power, he had employed a single girl on a cheap salary and left her responsible for the operation of the entire post office to cut labor costs and bolster his personal discretionary funds.

Wow, what a fiend.

When he went to confess, for some reason, the director's whole body was covered in bird droppings, and though he looked undeniably worse for wear, he kept completely silent about whatever had happened to him.

Furthermore, he announced that he had drastically reconsidered the way the post office was to be run and that, from now on, postal employees would only be expected to carry out their professional duties as pigeon caretakers.

"So that's that. Good for you."

I lightheartedly read the article aloud, sprinkling in a little dramatization with the newspaper's account.

Inside the birdcage-shaped post office, the carrier pigeons were swooping through the air. If I had to tell you just one thing that was different from the previous day, it would have to be that not one bird—and not one person—was wearing an uncomfortable hat.

Serves him right. It's a reasonable punishment. He deserves the death penalty.

Even with her hat off, one girl was still writing down all her thoughts.

"Gardenia, there's no need to write your words down on paper anymore."

Well, nobody in my family lineage can speak, to tell you the truth. It's hereditary.

"But earlier when I took the hat off of you, you spoke out loud."

I have no idea what you're talking about, she wrote as she laughed through her nose. I've decided that being a silent character is part of my identity, so I'm going to continue writing things on paper. Thanks for your understanding.

“But...”

This is awkward. I mean, I have met other people who are nonverbal before. So you’re not that unique. Are you okay?

Well, I’m really just joking. She snorted in laughter and set the pen and paper down.

“I want to communicate in a way the carrier pigeons can also understand, you see. That’s why I write things down,” she told me. “After all, if they can remember words, then the pigeons might become good conversation partners for me.”

The pigeons had learned many words, but they could not speak the human language, which meant they had no way of talking to us.

That must have been why she decided to write everything down. It was something nice to give back to the carrier pigeons who had come to her rescue.

...And I suppose she put the pen down because she’s embarrassed to say such a thing openly in front of them.

“...Thank you, guys,” she muttered in a very quiet voice that only I could hear, looking up at the ceiling.

It came out like a breath, which was drowned out immediately by the sounds of the wings of the birds flying around inside the post office.

The birds themselves couldn’t hear her words. Her sentiments didn’t make it through to them. But her expression looked a million times brighter.

There was no response from the birds.

Only some droppings that rained down on her.

“.....”

“.....”

“...Uh? Why did this have to happen now of all times?”

“I thought it was a sign of affection?”

This particular brand of love really is for the birds.



CHAPTER 3

Castle Town Fresia: Plumeria in a Cage

This went down on the third day of my stay in the Castle Town Fresia.

Rising above the low row of eaves stood the castle, stretching straight toward the sky as if to pierce the clouds. Inside its tallest tower was me.

When I glanced outside the wide-open window, I could see the blue sky stretching forth. If I looked closer, tiny townspeople milled around below me.

“Isn’t it pretty? The view is really spectacular. It’s doesn’t surprise me that you’re captivated.”

The words spoken from behind my back seemed gentle, but the tone had an icy edge to it.

When I turned around, there was a girl with pink hair wearing a jewel-encrusted dress, staring at me. She was very, very beautiful, the girl who reigned literally at the top of the city. Her name was Plumeria.

The princess of the land.

“I’ve heard rumors about you—that you had a hand in exposing the evil deeds of the post office director. Is that right?”

Her cold eyes were fixed on me. I felt goose bumps and a shiver down my spine.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

For now, I chose to feign ignorance. For some reason, I suspected she might get angry with me.

“...Please don’t misunderstand. I did not summon you here to rebuke you.” She sighed. “Also, I can’t say it would be wise to tell a lie in this place. You would hate for your journey to end here, wouldn’t you?”

“.....”

A smile that was far too cold for her to be joking spread across her face.

I had been summoned and had ascended to Princess Plumeria's private chamber, but we were not the only ones there. Behind me stood a number of skilled soldiers, holding weapons at the ready.

From the princess's words and actions, I could sense a very dangerous nuance. Something along the lines of, *If they felt like it, they could easily slice your head off.*

Scary!

"Allow me to tell you the business on which I summoned you today," she began, now that I was keeping silent. "Look at this."

I was handed a single envelope.

I took out the letter, which had been folded in half, and opened it. There, in small, neat letters—awfully modest in comparison to the size of the paper—was written a single sentence.

This year will be the final year that Princess Plumeria's birthday parade is held.
—Ayame, the Great Phantom Thief.

In other words, it was a warning.

Indirectly, it was trying to suggest...

"It means my life is being targeted."

Exactly.

...Wait, wait, wait. The Great Phantom Thief?

Is that something you call yourself? Is this person right in the head?

I shuddered to imagine the face of this Ayame person, the individual who wrote tiny words with total earnestness and handed this letter over to a carrier pigeon to be delivered to the castle.

"Yes... It's only reasonable to shudder. When this letter was delivered to me, I, too, was so frightened, I couldn't stand it."

Oh, I was just trying to keep from laughing. Pardon me.

"...The enemy calls themselves the Great Phantom Thief, right? That doesn't really sound like someone who's out to murder you, does it?"

“This Great Phantom Thief is a professional among professionals. It’s said their prey never escapes. It’s likely that, in deciding to target me, Ayame means to snatch away my very life.”

“But listen. It doesn’t sound like they’re after your life at all—”

“How debilitatingly distressing.”

“...The thing is, nobody is trying to kill you—”

“Elaina. I want you to track down this Ayame character before the day of the parade. Won’t you accept this commission and save my life?”

“...Umm—”

“Of course, this is not a request that you can refuse.”

“.....”

“If it’s money you want, I’ll pay you any amount.”

Flexing her wealth and power to advance the conversation, Princess Plumeria took my hand in hers and, with a sense of increasing recklessness, delivered the following proposal—an order, to be exact.

“I hear you are employed at the post office. Quit your job immediately and come work for me.”

So you’re telling me to become your servant? I see, I see.

.....

The princess was being a little too pushy, and I couldn’t help feeling like there was a catch.

“Your response?”

“You know what’ll happen if you refuse, right? I’ll have you slaughtered.” ...I couldn’t be sure that was exactly what she was implying, but judging by her iron-tight grip on my hand, I suspected any sort of refusal might cost me my head.

“What is this Ayame person like?”

“I have no clue.”

“...Is there anything you do know?”

“.....”

Ah, you don't know anything, do you...? I see, I see, I see—

“...Well, I'll do my best,” I answered.

“I'm glad to hear that,” said the princess as she let go of my hand.

That didn't stop the tingling sensation in my fingers, which had weathered her crushing grip. As I massaged my poor hand, as if showing it appreciation for its service, she whispered into my ear.

“Should you happen to find the Great Phantom Thief, tell no one, and bring the suspect straight here.”

After that, she spoke to me openly, while glaring coldly at her soldiers.

“This matter is not to leave this room.”

And then she drove me out of said room.

“...So that's what happened. Starting tomorrow, I'm going to transfer and work as a servant to the princess. In other words, I've got to quit my job here.”

After that, I returned to the post office and submitted my letter of resignation during our chat as we finished up work. By the way, the expression *servant to the princess* sounded rather degrading, and I didn't like it. It made me frown.

Gardenia and I had the same sour look on our faces.

People who can't keep a job for long have no future.

Not that there's a future in being forced to keep this job either...

“If I refuse, I think she'll have me killed. I had no choice.”

Is it all right to tell me all this, even though the princess swore you to secrecy?

“Gardenia. That's what girls say when they want you to tell someone about it.”

What's that mean?

“It means that women are difficult creatures.”

That makes me a difficult creature, too. This is me trying to stop you from leaving, Elaina. Gardenia puffed out her cheeks and made an angry sound as she forcefully pushed the resignation letter I had handed her back toward me.

“No, um...I was planning to quit this job in a few days in any case, so...”

You can’t.

What do you mean, I can’t?

“Look, we might be ‘postal employees’ on paper, but we’re really just bird feeders now. You can do it alone, right?”

Plus, the job doesn’t require a mage any longer, so this was bound to happen one way or another.

No way. I like you, Elaina. You’re too good of a person to split from now. It would be too painful to separate. It would be sad. Cruel. Unbearable. That would make me want to die. Or rather, make me want to quit, too.

“Those don’t strike me as the words of someone who once told me that people who can’t keep a job for long have no future.”

Not having you is the same as having no future.

“Stop. That’s too heavy...”

That’s basically how our discussion went, but in the end, she did accept my letter of resignation, even though she sulked reluctantly the whole time.

Do you promise to come see me even after you stop working here?

She did, however, tack on one condition to my resignation.

“Of course.” I wasn’t sure if we would be able to see each other or not, but I had no intention of turning her down.

That was how things stood as we finished our work for the day.

“Coming in!”

With this exaggerated greeting, the doors of the post office were suddenly flung open, and a number of soldiers appeared, carrying packages.

“.....? Uh, welcome...?”

.....?

We tilted our heads in unison at the sudden visitors, and their leader bowed to us.

"This is the post office, right? If it won't interfere with operations, we'd like to distribute a special announcement throughout the country. This is a direct request from the king."

In other words: *You don't have the right to refuse. Thanks for your cooperation.* I could just imagine him saying it. Apparently, it wasn't just the princess; the people of this country, including the soldiers, were all the pushy type.

Since we just needed to give the soldiers' flyers to the pigeons, it didn't really make any difference to me whether we distributed them or not.

Anyway, at that point, the soldiers handed over stacks of folded newspaper inserts that were printed only on one side.

"....."

.....

We gently opened the wafer-thin newsprint. Gardenia and I looked at each other.

There was something familiar about the contents of this special announcement.

THE ASHEN WITCH ELAINA, SUBJUGATOR OF THE POST OFFICE DIRECTOR. WILL SHE STRIKE AGAIN AND BRING THE GREAT PHANTOM THIEF TO HEEL?

Following this title, which seemed like it was specifically written to appeal to the tabloid audience, were a series of facts: that I was a traveler, that I was currently employed as a postal worker, and that I would be hunting for the Great Phantom Thief in a bid to protect the princess. It was all out there. It concluded with a photo of me that had been taken who knows where.

Whatever happened to personal privacy?

I stared, bewildered, at this new development, and Gardenia even forgot that she was on the clock.

"So the very person who swore everyone to secrecy has spilled it herself..." she said out loud. "You sure that's okay, Elaina?"

"....."

It seemed the princess was going to be, as I had suspected, very difficult to deal with.



The following day, I walked to the castle from the inn, but since I had already been outed as the witch who had taken the post office director to task and who was hunting down the Great Phantom Thief on behalf of the princess, whenever I passed someone along the road, they gazed at me curiously.

It was unavoidably awkward.

"Hey! You're Elaina, right?"

To make matters worse, it was always the weird ones who called out to me.

I ignored them, though.

"Heeey! Wait! Don't ignore me! Ah, I didn't even tell you my name! Sorry, sorry. I'm Iris. I work for the city newspaper."

Apparently, my pursuer was someone named Iris. Her purple hair, bundled into a single ponytail on the back of her head, flicked to the side as she walked. Her white blouse and black trousers were very, very simple, even formal, just like a newspaper journalist. I could see she wasn't worth my time, so I ignored her.

"Say, would you mind if I asked you a couple of questions?"

I ignored her harder, trying to convey that I would mind.

"Just a moment, really! It'll be over in thirty seconds!" She went on, but if I stopped to talk to her, I knew I would be held up for more like thirty minutes, not thirty seconds, so I refused to look at her.

"I promise! Just thirty seconds! I'm serious. I only have two or three questions." She kept on talking, but I just knew that once she asked one question, the floodgates would open, so I paid her no attention, of course.

I'll do just fine without getting caught up in something even more annoying

than I already am. Thanks very much.

I was going to take refuge in the castle to shake off Iris. Happily, she seemed to have given up at some point along the way, and when I looked behind me right after entering the castle, there was no one in sight.

“...Whew.”

If she keeps hounding me, I might need to ask to live in the castle... Or maybe I should ask them as soon as possible...?

“Um, why did you out me like that? Thanks to you, I’ve had strange people following me around all day. What a nightmare. I should also say I think it was crazy to put out that announcement after telling me to keep quiet. So please let me live here in the castle, starting now.”

I had been shown to the princess’s room at the sky-high summit of the castle, and I immediately started venting my grievances. With a dismissive flip of her pink hair, Princess Plumeria just replied: “I apologize for causing you such an inconvenience. But I can’t allow you to live here.”

Her attitude wasn’t particularly apologetic, but then again, a person who stands literally at the top of her kingdom is probably blind to the feelings of the common folk.

“If I could just get some first-rate meals and a spacious single room, I won’t need anything else. Please.”

“I see. Not happening.”

“I’d also be fine just being allowed to stay in your room.”

“That’s the one thing I absolutely cannot permit.”

“Come on.”

“...You want to sleep with me?”

“Oh, I don’t really care if you’re here or not.” I was getting a little frustrated, but all I wanted was to try to sleep in this lofty place. As a traveler, that was my MO.

“That’s quite a way to talk to a princess!” She shrugged. “...Why is it that you

want to stay?"

"It'll be easier to protect you if we're always together, won't it?"

"The soldiers are always by my side. There's no need for a witch escort." Princess Plumeria didn't seem the least bit inclined to accept my company. "Plus, I was sure I asked you to search for the Great Phantom Thief."

Plumeria shot me down flat, and it didn't seem like she was going to budge.

"...By the way, I haven't gotten an answer to my question from earlier yet."

"What question would that be?"

"The question of why you decided to advertise the fact that I'm searching for the so-called Great Phantom Thief to the whole kingdom."

I believe it was the princess herself who told everyone that this was supposed to be kept secret.

"....." After glancing quickly at the soldiers who were standing behind us, she answered me at last. "The special announcement was ordered by my father. He told me it would be the best way to keep the Great Phantom Thief in check."

"....."

"It was never my intention for things to turn out like this. You must understand that."

Supposing it hadn't been her intention, then who could have leaked that information? I was sure the only people here besides us yesterday were her bodyguards.

Could they have tattled to her father or something? What if they were working against the princess?

The soldiers were always watching over the princess's movements in this place, so it wasn't so difficult to believe that they were more than simple escorts and were something a bit different.

"And where did you say your father is now?"

"He's retired below."

The princess looked down at the floor—almost as if she were hanging her

head.

Upon descending a long spiral staircase from the princess's room, one arrived at the father's retirement retreat.

I had made a request to the guards, and they had secured me an appointment right away, permitting me to have an audience with the princess's father. I heard from the soldiers that he had ruled the land before the princess and that he still had a hand in the city government despite his supposed retirement. It seemed the old man still had life in him.

I was shown to the deepest parts of the castle.

His room was even more luxurious than I had expected, especially for someone in retirement.

When he saw me, the elderly man let out a shout, stood up from his very expensive-looking chair, and approached me for a handshake. "Oh! You must be the Ashen Witch. I've been looking forward to meeting you!"

"My pleasure." I squeezed his hand, then let go immediately. It was kind of oily.

"I'm sorry for causing you trouble with the matter of the post office director. Delivering mail by carrier pigeon is an ancient tradition in this city, but we had no idea what was really going on behind the scenes."

"Don't mention it." The incident at the post office had simply been a matter of correcting one idiot. "Anyway—"

I've come to ask you all kinds of things about Princess Plumeria.

That was what I was about to say...

"It's not only the matter of the post office director. I'm sorry you were suddenly handed the unreasonable task of searching out the Great Phantom Thief. That was something Plumeria decided all on her own. I learned of it for the first time from the soldiers, so I couldn't immediately jump into action. I'm sorry. If I had known about it beforehand, I could have prepared you a place to live."

"....." So it was the soldiers who'd leaked it.

"She's been this way forever. Never consults anyone on anything. I don't know what she's thinking. She doesn't even seem to enjoy hosting her parade."

Though members of the public liked that she was cold, the people who had to deal with her on a day-to-day basis didn't seem to feel the same way, apparently.

To the masses, the princess existed only at a distance, so she must have looked to them like nothing more than a beautiful ruler with no flaws. Even her chamber at the top of the highest tower served to keep her physically separated from everyone else.

By the way—

"Why does she live so high up?"

"Hm? You didn't hear that from Plumeria?"

"She doesn't tell me anything." *And apparently, that isn't new.*

"Is that so...?" The former monarch nodded. "This isn't something we talk about publicly. I'll ask you that you don't say a word to anyone—"

And then he explained:

"...Several months ago, a thief snuck into our castle. The one called Ayame, the Great Phantom Thief, who sent us the warning letter about Plumeria's birthday parade.

"The crook went around the castle, stealing a large quantity of gold and jewels. But even petty thieves ought to know better than to creep into our castle. The culprit was obviously discovered and seized by the palace guard on the spot.

"She called herself by the colorful name of the Great Phantom Thief, but she was actually a young lady about the same age as Plumeria.

"Ayame was locked away in the dungeons under the castle. Her actions didn't warrant the death penalty, but breaking into the castle was a grave offense. I needed several days to think of a reasonable punishment.

"The incident happened during those several days. I don't know what method she used, but before anyone realized what was going on, Ayame slipped out of

her jail cell, took Plumeria hostage, and fled the castle. She made threats like, 'If you come any closer, the princess will lose her life!' as well as demands like, 'Prepare us an escape coach!'

"In the end, we had no choice but to let Ayame escape—

"After that, Plumeria began living up in the tower. At least she knows she's safe there, and she has the soldiers as well."

But now, for some reason, the Great Phantom Thief was after the princess's life.

Nobody knew what her objective was, or what exactly she was planning to steal, but at the very least, the name of the Great Phantom Thief Ayame was not something that the former monarch of this city could ignore.

"We must capture the Great Phantom Thief, no matter what methods we have to use. I have no intention of allowing an incident like that to happen ever again." Then the former monarch looked directly at me. "I'm begging you, Lady Ashen Witch. Please find Ayame."

Something strange was going on.

Assuming that the king was telling the truth, the person known as the Great Phantom Thief should already be known to Princess Plumeria.

If that was so, then why hadn't she told me anything about Ayame when she commissioned me to find her?

Could she have lied when she said she *didn't know anything*?

At any rate, even though I had been told to hunt for the Great Phantom Thief, I was working blind. I ran through all kinds of schemes as I left the castle and proceeded down the main avenue, but it was simply absurd to expect to track down a single person in this expansive city.

For starters, I've been outed by the former king, which means the Great Phantom Thief is probably already in hiding.

"....."

Not to mention this makes it extremely hard to move about the city.

"Ahh, I'm so hungry...but the editor-in-chief told me not to come back until I've interviewed Elaina... Oh, I want to return home..."

Iris, the newspaper journalist who had chased me all the way to the castle, was as persistent as a pesky stain.

I proceeded to march down the road, then bought some bread at a roadside stall to distract my hunger. I could hear her complaining the whole time as she flickered in and out of my vision in reflections off windows.

Is this girl a stalker or something?

"Hey, sis... Is it time to eat yet?"

To make matters worse, she had a small child with her. The very young girl spoke in a syrupy-sweet voice as she tugged at Iris's sleeve. From the way she spoke and acted, I could guess she was her younger sister, and from her ragged appearance, I could guess they lived in serious poverty.

"I'm sorry... I want to go back home, too, but...can you wait until I finish my work?"

"Awww, I'm hungryyy... I want to eat bread. Why is our family so poor...?"

"I'm sorry... If I worked harder at my job, you wouldn't have to suffer."

"I'm hungryyy. Siiis...I'm hungry!"

"I'm sorry...sorry..." Iris's eyes grew moist as she stroked the girl's head. She never broke eye contact with me the whole time. I watched this extremely calculated, almost unbearable exchange take place.

Honestly, I'm not the kind of person who is usually won over by these kinds of emotional displays. If anything, I'm more the depraved type who would throw my bread on the ground and make a mockery, like, "*I thought you said you were hungry? Go on, eat!*" But in this one instance, the circumstances were different.

"...You just need your interview, right?" Without facing them directly, I spoke to Iris in an exasperated tone. "I'll do it. If I do it, you'll be okay, right?"

I mean, what do I have to lose?

"Ah. Really? Hooray! We'll be able to fill our bellies with food!"

"You did it, Sis!"

Gone were the pitiful attitudes of the sisters. The two girls were hooting and jumping for joy.

"But you need to give me some information, too—information about the Great Phantom Thief, Ayame."

We agreed to an exchange of information. If we did that, then I suppose an interview would be all right. You could think of it as an alignment of interests.

"What do you say?" I asked.

"Sure. Oh, here's your pay. Looking forward to working with you again."

"Call me anytime. I'm your girl for any doleful kid roles. That's my area of expertise."

Iris handed a gold piece to her "little sister," who walked away, whistling a little tune. To my surprise, just as she was leaving, she said, "Ah, it's so easy to trick out-of-towners!" and flung off her tattered clothes.

"...And that was...?"

"Oh, yeah. An actor."

"....."

Unbelievable.



In reality, Iris seemed to earn a reasonable income. Her house, where we headed for the interview, was a large, freestanding building that faced the main avenue.

In the drawing room, she took out a memo notebook.

"Now, about your earlier promise. Tell me a few things about yourself, Elaina."

"...I mean, what is there to say, really?"

I don't feel like I've been through much that anybody would want to write about. I guess I could tell her about being summoned by the princess and ordered to find the Great Phantom Thief, or about getting the details of my

assignment plastered everywhere by the former king. But in short, I've got nothing special to talk about.

Won't this article turn out incredibly dull? A little worried about this possibility, I told her about those things that had crossed my mind.

“...Interesting.”

Iris nodded in understanding after my explanation of the events that had transpired so far. “So that means you were originally planning to search for the Great Phantom Thief under the veil of secrecy, Elaina.”

“Yeah, that's right.” *Though that plan is a bust, thanks to the former king.*

“Now, this land is supposedly ruled by Princess Plumeria, but the one actually running the place is the former king. Apparently, she isn't ready to rule yet, so the old man has a hand in almost everything. This time, it seems his meddling has proven disastrous. Thanks to him, I expect it's gotten much harder for you to move around the city.”

“Yes. I'm in a real bind, with people like you following me around everywhere.”

Iris responded to my pointed remark with a dry smile and then lined up several articles on the table. “Well then, next is information regarding the Great Phantom Thief that you're after—”

All of them were clippings of newspaper articles.

“To speak frankly, there is no one who knows the true identity of the Great Phantom Thief. However, we know that she seems to hold some affection toward common folk. The Great Phantom Thief has so far only stolen from nasty businessmen, swindlers, and the like. And Ayame has distributed all her stolen goods to the people.”

To make a long story short— “She's a noble thief?”

The newspaper articles even included photographs. Her face wasn't visible under her black hood and mask, but her physique was slim, and she seemed to have a similar body type to me.

As I flipped through the documents, I cocked my head to the side. “By the

way, it looks like the Great Phantom Thief hasn't made an appearance for several months...?"

The last photo was from several months earlier, and recent articles were all plain text, without photos. Although the incident had not been made public, the Great Phantom Thief's attempt to rob the castle coincided with a drop off in eyewitness reports. After that, it had been nothing but half-remembered sightings, or copycats imitating her crimes, or rumors about plausible-seeming death theories.

"Looks like she washed her hands of the burglary business, huh? Or got bored of it."

"All right, in that case, why did she issue a letter of warning this time?" I asked.

"Why ask me? I have no idea," Iris answered me without much thought.

Ultimately, I still didn't understand the Great Phantom Thief Ayame's identity or anything at all about what she was thinking. Far from it, in fact, the mystery had only gotten deeper.



In the end, without any idea what the Great Phantom Thief might be up to, or what Princess Plumeria might be thinking, I went around searching aimlessly through the castle town.

"If you have any firsthand information, I'd like you to tell me right away. Can I count on the carrier pigeons?"

Since I had to make use of every method available to me if I was to be of any assistance despite my limited information, I had immediately come to request the cooperation of my friend Gardenia.

I'll go ahead and tell the pigeons about it, but don't expect too much. After all, they're mostly occupied with delivering the mail.

"I know that— Sorry. I know I'm asking for the impossible."

It's fine. It's not really any trouble for me. And it shouldn't be too difficult for the carrier pigeons to look out for a woman in an odd getup while they go about their jobs, she wrote.

“Thanks so much.” I bowed once, politely, then after killing some time in the post office, I walked around town.

“How ‘bout it? Any good info?” As I expected, as I walked down the main avenue, Iris appeared from who-knows-where to ask me about the present state of my investigation. It was like I was fated to have another encounter with my stalker.

Nevertheless, my reply was as it had been before:

“Not a thing to show for my efforts.”

Nothing you’d be interested in anyway.

“Aw, that’s too bad.” She looked like she had known I was going to answer that way. “By the way, I’m also investigating it from various angles, and just like you, I’ve got zilch.”

“Yeah...?”

“Seems like she’s been in hiding recently.”

“...Because that darn king circulated that stupid newspaper without thinking about the consequences.”

“You can’t say that in front of the king, you know? Or it’ll be off with your head!” Iris giggled.

“How did it go? Were you able to learn the whereabouts of the Great Phantom Thief? I suppose you were able to gather quite a bit of information with me issuing that announcement in the newspaper, hm?”

I had trudged through the city until my legs were stiff, then returned to the castle, completely exhausted. When I did, the former monarch came out to greet me.

“.....Uh, yeah. I mean, after a fashion.”

I put all my effort into averting my eyes. Thorny words were already halfway out of my throat. *Huh? No thanks to you, I’ve made absolutely no progress! Not even the slightest bit!*

“That’s wonderful! I have great expectations! No matter what it takes, you

must protect my daughter from that Great Phantom Thief!"

He was burning with his sense of duty as a father, or maybe as a king. In either case, he took his leave.

"Well then, I'm very busy with preparations for the parade, so I'll be going."

A stream of soldiers followed behind him.

"....."

He looked strangely fierce for someone talking about his daughter's birthday celebration, but I suppose that could be blamed on the Great Phantom Thief's antics.

"...So my father is all worked up about protecting me from the Great Phantom Thief."

Apparently, Princess Plumeria never came down from the city summit, so when I visited her room, she grilled me about what the former monarch was doing.

Those were the words she had grumbled when I answered her.

With her back still turned to me, facing the table, she spoke coldly.

"Elaina, you just focus on carrying out your job."

"I'm doing it. You don't need to tell me. Relax."

"And your progress?"

"Before I tell you, can I ask you one thing?"

"...What?" She did not turn around.

"What do you want to do once you find the Great Phantom Thief?"

"....." She didn't even answer me.

"You're not going to open up to me, are you?"

After a few moments of complete silence, her hands stopped whatever they had been doing. "...I'm sorry. It's not that I don't trust you."

"Then what is it?"

“...It’s just, I don’t know anything about the outside world.”

“That’s too abstract. I don’t understand what you mean.”

Stop trying to dodge the question with profound-sounding nonsense.

I was getting fed up, when she turned around and said, “I don’t know who, or where, or how to trust. And so, I don’t open up. I don’t even know how. That’s all there is to it.”

Looking into her eyes, I finally realized something.

Her gaze was neither cold nor calculating.

“...Is that how it is?”

She was frightened.

The world outside was terrifying, and yet, the sights were so dazzling, she feared she might be blinded by them.

To me, she seemed just like a little bird, looking out at the world from the safety of her cage.

○

That evening, I had a visitor at the inn where I was staying.

“Thought I’d stop by.” Gardenia smiled bashfully and waved.

What are we? Girlfriends?

I beckoned her inside. “What are you here for?”

“Well, I’m not really here for anything,” she admitted, taking a seat in the living room. “Something’s come up that I need to discuss with you, Elaina.”

“.....” *Well, well. Could this roundabout introduction be what I think it is?* “Did you find her? The Great Phantom Thief?”

That would save me a lot of trouble. I waited for her to talk, feigning indifference while my heart was jumping out of my chest.

“Mm-mm. Sorry. Nothing on that front. Actually, I just remembered our other conversation.”

“.....” *Well? What do you want?*

"Elaina, do you remember this? You gave me this letter, two or three days ago." Gardenia laid a single letter on the table.

The envelope with elegant gold leaf contained a love letter addressed from a mystery sender to a mystery recipient and had been mistakenly delivered to my room earlier.

...Come to think of it, I think I asked Gardenia to investigate the issue of the mistaken delivery for me.

I had just this moment remembered our previous conversation about the letter.

"Did you find something out?"

"Yeah. You know, it took me a while because I tackled this one after I had dealt with all the other misdelivered letters, but I looked up the addresses of the sender and recipient of this letter just earlier. I came today to tell you the results."

You made a special trip here for that?

For someone who was prone to blurting out complaints like, "I'm so tired," and "I want to quit," she sure was a workaholic.

"...Thank you. So what are we up against?"

"It seems that, as expected, this letter was not meant for you, Elaina." And then she said, "I didn't recognize the name of the recipient, but the sender is exceptionally difficult."

At that point, I would have drifted off and stopped paying attention, but then Gardenia said the name.

"____"

Indeed, it was the name of a very pesky person with whom I was already very familiar.

At that moment, I felt like all the separate threads of this story began to tie together.



The following day, I headed directly for the highest room in the castle,

without wandering through town at all.

The princess sounded like she hadn't been expecting me. "How did your hunt for the Great Phantom Thief go?"

She narrowed her eyes as she turned around. As if I was really bothering her. Apparently, she was clinging to her desk again today, secretly writing, and she didn't seem to want to do anything else.

"I wanted to see you before I went hunting. I'd like to hear from you about your real motivations."

"Use all the tricks you want. I don't intend to speak to you about my situation."

I was ruthlessly cut down. "Is that so?"

"Yes—"

Fair enough. It seems like your lips are sealed. But I'm not so good-natured as to trust in a companion who won't open up to me.

"Uhh, ahem," Standing directly behind her, I opened a certain sheet of paper. It was the mysterious love letter.

"I like you. I love you." I carefully read out the prose that would make anyone cringe.

"...What? Are you touched in the head?"

"Recently, I haven't gotten any replies from you, but I want you just to know how I feel, so I'm forgoing etiquette and sending you letter after letter."

".....?"

"Please answer me. I'm so very lonely. Ever since we met, I think only of you. I want to live alongside you. As long as I'm with you, no matter what happens, life will be full of wonder."

"...! Uh...that letter..." She might have recognized this passage, because the princess's face gradually became tinged with red, but I ignored it.

"When you're not here, I feel like my heart has a gaping hole in it. It feels like something is missing. Come fill the space in my heart—"

“H-hang on!” She finally seemed to have realized what I was reading. “That’s my letter, isn’t it?! Why do you have it?!” In a flustered panic, she attempted to snatch the letter from me, but I ignored her.

I ruthlessly continued to read the letter as I dodged her.

“Oh—when I think about you, I can’t sleep at night. My chest pounds and burns—”

“Rude! What do you think you’re reading out loud?! Ugh!” Her eyes, which had remained chilly until a moment earlier, were now brimming with tears, and her face was as red as a ripe apple. “Come on... Stop it! Please, stop!”

At this point, I stopped ignoring her pleas.

“...Who were you sending this to?” *It’s certainly a very passionate love letter.*

“Tch! T-that is...”

Oh, you’re reluctant to say?

“...I vividly remember the several days we spent together. Your voice, the sensation of your hands, your lips, the warmth of your skin—”

“Aaaaaahhh! Wait! I’ll tell you! Stop reading! Don’t read any furtheeerrr!”

Just like that, I finally got her to confess her true motivations.

I wouldn’t have had to embarrass her if she had been honest with me from the beginning.

The princess forced the soldiers out of the room, glowering at them.

“I have to deal with this disrespect right now, so all of you get out! If you come back in, it’ll be off with your heads!”

After she had driven them from the room, we got down to business concerning the truth about the time the Great Phantom Thief had snuck into the castle—the story of what happened several months earlier, which I had come to hear.

The person to whom Princess Plumeria had sent the letter was none other than the Great Phantom Thief herself.

“...Tch... How did you get that letter...?”

"Well now, the circumstances surrounding my receipt of the letter don't really matter, do they?" She seemed unaware that delivery errors were a frequent occurrence.

Haven't you got an extensive view of your realm, perched up here in your lofty tower?

"So how did you come to send a letter like this? I can guess from the contents that you've been corresponding for quite a long time."

"....."

Oh, you're reluctant to say?

"Let's see... 'When I think about you, I—'"

"Fine! I'll tell you!"

I had thought she was an aloof and moody princess, but apparently, if I pulled on her reins, she was very easy to handle.

Reluctantly, the princess told me the truth of the matter.

"...When she snuck into the castle several months ago, that was the first time I had ever spoken to a girl my own age. From the time I was small, I have lived my whole life inside the castle, and I've never known anything of the outside world. I go out into the city once a year for the parade, but aside from that, I just look down on it from above, and there's always been a sea of separation between me and the common people."

And so, when she heard from the soldiers that the Great Phantom Thief was a girl about her age, the princess had slipped down to the dungeons to converse with her.

"When I first met her, she seemed to have misunderstood me. She seemed to think I tricked men and enticed them into sending me money and things. That was also the reason why she had snuck into the castle."

It was a story I had heard from Iris as well. But it was a misunderstanding, of course.

"I'm sure you're aware of this after having been here with me for several days. I'm certainly not the kind of person to do such a thing, and I don't have

any interest in a love affair."

Oh, that can't be true. Maybe I ought to read another passage from your letter?

"And so I told her it was a misunderstanding, and after that, I got her to tell me why she was playing the mysterious thief. From that day forward, we kept corresponding with each other. Every day, I would creep into her jail cell and get her to tell me stories of her life. Like about the time she punished a corrupt merchant or shut down an immoral business... She was a hero to the common people.

"I decided there was no way I could allow her to go to the gallows. This person is not someone who should be in jail, I thought. That's why I set her free."

In other words, the former king's recounting was somewhat inaccurate.

The Great Phantom Thief had indeed snuck into the castle and distributed the stolen lucre throughout the land. She had eventually been arrested, but even so, it wasn't necessarily true that she had taken Princess Plumeria hostage and made a clever getaway.

In reality, it was the exact opposite—

"I told her that she could get away if she held me hostage. That's how she got free."

"..."

The relationship between the two girls had not ended there. After the Great Phantom Thief had escaped from the castle, Ayame and Princess Plumeria began a letter exchange. Princess Plumeria kept living her life inside the castle, forced to move to the top of the tower as a result of the breakin.

Despite this, she pined for the outside world more strongly than ever before.

That's why she had said in her letter that she wanted Ayame to whisk her away.

"But I stopped receiving letters."

Because they were mistakenly delivered to me.

To make matters worse, a few days after contact between them had stopped, the warning from the Great Phantom Thief had been issued, and the mood inside the castle immediately got tense. The soldiers became even more watchful, and it became impossible to either send or receive letters.

In the end, Plumeria had passed the days without any means of communicating with the Great Phantom Thief.

That must have been why she had put me in charge of the investigation.

Since the breakin had been handled in complete confidence, the princess had been unable to tell me anything at all about the Great Phantom Thief's characteristics. It wasn't like she could have told me right there in front of the palace guards, "I haven't been able to get in touch with my beloved, so could you search for her? Here's where she lives. Got it?" So she'd had to be clever about it, believing that subterfuge was the only route left.

Princess Plumeria's letter had not been delivered, and neither had the one that I assumed the Great Phantom Thief had sent to her, and in the end, the two of them had no option left but to force the issue. The Great Phantom Thief had issued her warning, and the princess had used me.

"I'm happy she issued the warning and declared she was going to carry me off—however, as a result, my father is beset with worry. And that's how we got to this state of affairs," Plumeria explained.

Really, the best way for Plumeria to find happiness was for the Great Phantom Thief to come steal her away.

"....."

I looked down at the letter in my hand.

The sender was Princess Plumeria.

And the recipient was—



Princess Plumeria's birthday parade was held with somewhat tacky pomp and circumstance.

There were groups of carriages rolling down the main avenue and companies

of soldiers who each had their own musical instruments in hand, playing music as they marched in perfect formation.

The song they performed was festive, even annoyingly loud, and didn't suit Princess Plumeria's cool disposition, but the common people seemed to be enjoying it as it was.

Glancing over the advancing rows of the parade, I could see people hanging out of the windows of every house, standing by the side of the road, or chasing after the procession, smiles on their faces.

Their happy shouts carried on the music and made it all the way up to the castle.

“.....”

However, this parade, which could be seen from the castle, was missing its guest of honor, Princess Plumeria.

Not because she wasn't participating.

Not because she hadn't come down from her perch.

This year's parade, as the Great Phantom Thief had told everyone, was sure to be the last. Today had been Princess Plumeria's last day in town. She had disappeared.

“...Our official statement was that the princess will not make an appearance, because she's receiving medical treatment. But I wonder how long that excuse will hold...”

The king simply looked down silently at the bustling crowd.

“All right, let's go.”

After we had finished our lengthy conversation, I took Princess Plumeria's hand.

“What...? Huh? Go? Where?”

The princess's eyes were wide with surprise, and I answered her as I pulled out my broom. “To see your girlfriend.”

“...You know where she is?”

"Yep." I flashed the letter at her.

The address is written right here. And the real name of the Great Phantom Thief.

Come to think of it, this was a pretty simple matter.

After all, hadn't there been a suspicious person hanging around from the very beginning? Someone who had approached me and followed me around, trying to pry information out of me through all kinds of methods.

It wasn't all that strange to think that when I had been assigned to guard Princess Plumeria, this person—who hadn't been able to get in contact with the princess and who was impatient to confirm her true intentions—had come to me.

"But...my father will never forgive me. For being so selfish." She looked at me sitting sidesaddle on my broom then hung her head.

She lacked the courage to take her leap of faith.

"Do you want to keep living inside the castle forever? Or do you want to become an ordinary girl?"

"....."

"By the way, if I may be so bold... The world is not so kind to sheltered girls who don't know anything about their land or their people...and are not fit to lead a country."

Most of the second-generation rulers who run rampant through our world are idiots, spoiled brats who just ride their parents' coattails.

I extended my hand to her. "From a place like this, you can't really see the world or the people very well, can you? So let's go to the girl you love."

"....." But she fell back one step. Then she spun around and faced the table. "...If I were to go, then what would happen to this land? Their ruler would be gone!"

"Do you think this land is so unstable that it would all go to ruin just because of a change in management?"

There were girls working terrible jobs, complaining that they were tired, that this was hard, that they wanted to quit. There were underhanded newspaper journalists trying to get the next big scoop using any means possible.

Somehow, watching their king squander resources to throw lavish parades for his daughter, I suspected the people wouldn't mind a change of government.

I suppose you can't even see that yet—

“...Right. I hope not.” Plumeria nodded, then collected the bunch of papers that had been carelessly scattered on the table.

She tapped them together gently, folded them in half, then placed them into an envelope.

“Might I ask you to do one last job?”

“What might that be?”

As she climbed onto the back of my broom, she stuck the envelope into my pocket.

“This is the letter that I was planning to hand to my father on the day of the parade. I wrote it because I didn’t want my father to worry after I had been carried off by the Great Phantom Thief.”

“.....”

“Please, Elaina. Won’t you please give this to him? Please?”

She wrapped her arms around my waist.

An ever-so-slightly embarrassed smile spread across her face.

“Didn’t you know? I used to work at the post office.”

Consider it done. I nodded.

And then the little bird flew out of her cage.



“...So I didn’t understand anything about my daughter after all.”

In contrast to the boisterous celebration going on below, the voice of the former king was subdued.

I had a chance to give the princess's letter a quick once-over. In her words, he found both the truth about what had happened between Plumeria and the Great Phantom Thief and her gratitude for everything he had done to raise her thus far. Also written was an apology for her betrayal.

...And a statement that, sooner or later, she hoped to return to the castle.

"I wouldn't say you didn't understand anything."

In the end, this former king, on top of being the man who controlled the country, was a father with a daughter at a difficult, moody age. Sorrow was practically radiating off his back as he bent low under the sadness of his daughter's absence.

"To a girl like her, who knows nothing of the outside world, it looks like a beautiful place where anything and everything is new," I helped explain. "That's all it is."

"....."

"She was still too young to take responsibility for the country. She's just a young girl."

Plus, fathers have wanted to shelter their daughters, and those daughters have always wanted to see the outside world. These desires have clashed since time immemorial.

That's what this was about.

"Your Highness. Precious things are easily broken." *If you preserve them without a scratch, they become brittle and weak.* "She'll go see the outside world and come back a little sturdier than she is now. You just have to be patient until then," I told him.

"What will become of my daughter now? I've only met the Great Phantom Thief a few times. Truthfully, I have no idea what kind of person that woman is."

"It's all right. She's a good person."

Though she's got a bit of a crafty nature, I never said out loud. I swallowed the words back just in time.



A witch walked down the main avenue flooded with people.

Walking next to her friend, the postal employee, who she had run into on the streets, the witch was headed out of the city.

Her duties here had already been concluded. There was nothing left for her to do, and no longer any need for her to interfere in anything. She was walking slowly, gazing at the anticipated parade.

"Elaina, send me letters even after you leave, all right? I'll be looking forward to them."

"I'll write if I feel like it."

"I read in a book that women say that when they don't want to do something."

"....."

"Write to me, okay?" The witch's friend was a little overbearing.

"...Uh, fine." *I was going to write without you nagging me.* Elaina looked up in exasperation and saw carrier pigeons soaring through the air.

As they drifted lazily across the sky, it seemed like the birds were taking the day off work. Rather than swooping from job to job, they looked like they were floating right over the parade.

"Looks like the birds have enjoyed this day as well. We're going to be working extremely late tonight."

"I guess they learned how to play hooky..."

"Well, I suppose it would be all right just for today. I'm playing hooky, too, anyway."

"Get back to work."

"I actually have a surprising amount of free time, now that I'm just feeding them. I'm thinking of taking on a side job."

It wasn't so much the conversation of people who regretted their parting. On the contrary, the words exchanged were nothing if not passive and relaxed, like in normal times.

They probably didn't want to think about their upcoming separation.

"...All right then."

"....."

The witch gazed over the city while listening to her chattering friend, who was unexpectedly talkative outside of work.

All kinds of people could be seen in town, gathered for the parade.

People watching the parade. People doing their jobs as usual. People working the parade. People walking with their friends. People strolling with their sweethearts. People moving alone.

"....."

Just then, the witch walked past a certain pair.

It was a pair of girls around the same age—one with a swishing, long violet ponytail, and the other with pink hair, freshly cut short, fiddling with the ends of her hair bashfully as they walked.

The witch had met one of them somewhere before and thought she had met the other one, but with a different hairstyle.

But she didn't call out to them.

The witch was thinking of a newspaper journalist and a princess.

These two girls, walking along happily, were not those people. They were ordinary girls.

It would have been insensitive to intrude on their relationship.

"...Good-bye."

And so, the witch mumbled words of parting to no one in particular.

"...What did you say?"

The witch shook her head at her friend, who looked puzzled.

"...Thank you."

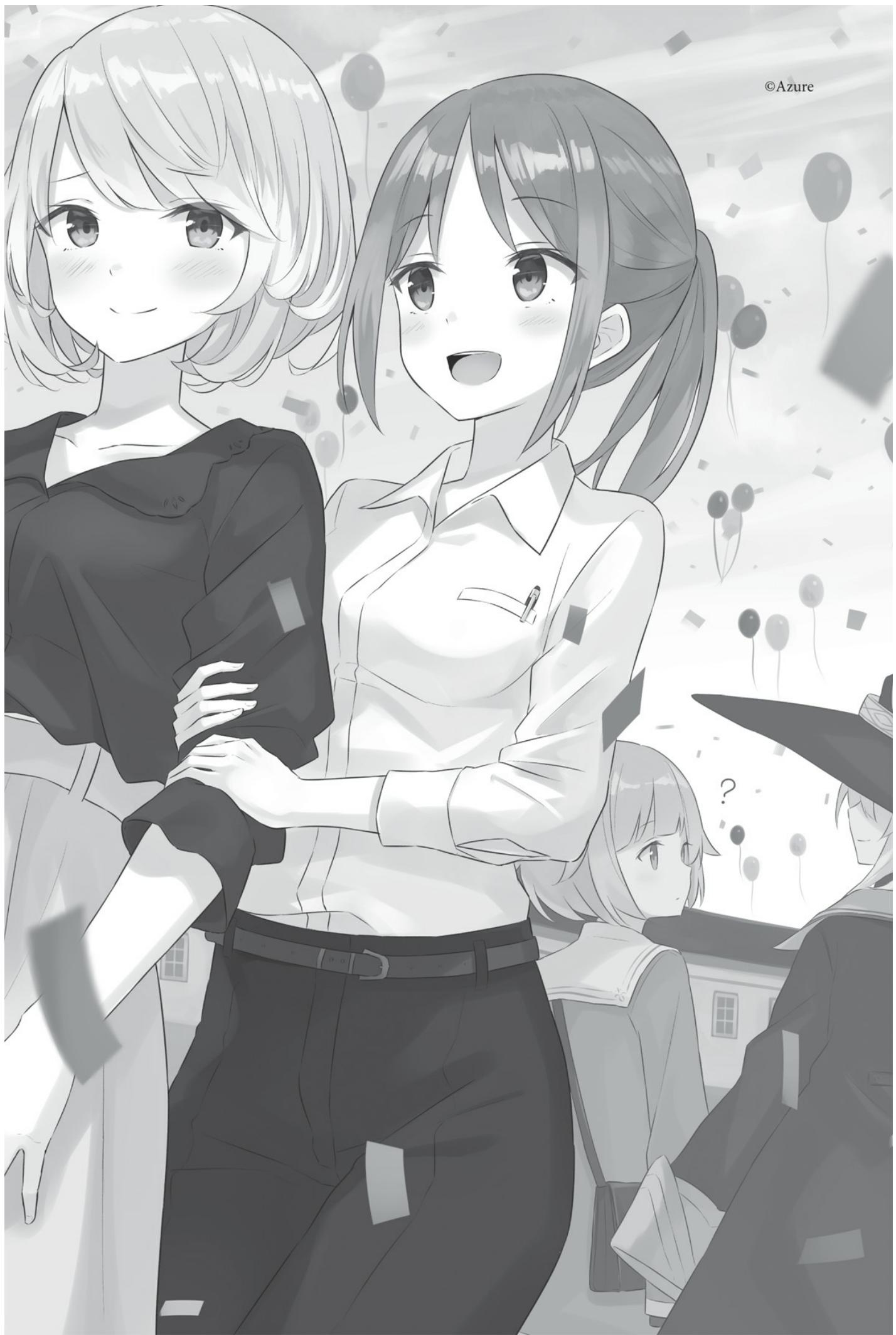
She had the feeling that someone had said that behind her.

The witch broke into a smile as she proceeded down the main avenue to return to her travels, and the friend walking beside her had a suspicious look.

The witch walked on, thinking of how someday the time would come to tell her friend the truth about the missing princess and the Great Phantom Thief.

By the way, just who could that witch be?

That's right. She's me.





CHAPTER 4

Two Teachers

Late in the afternoon, an old acquaintance of mine came to visit.

As far as I could remember, it had been a long, long time since I'd had visitors in this place, which served as both a study and a sitting room. In fact, I think my last guest might have been my favorite pupil, who had visited quite a while ago.

“Sup.”

From the other side of the rickety door was my old friend, appearing unexpectedly and calling out to me in a fondly remembered voice. Trailing long, beautiful hair that shone softly like stardust, she entered the room exhaling plumes of smoke and closed the door behind her.

“It’s been a while.”

I bobbed my head in greeting from my side of the desk, and she sighed.

“Working in a cramped place as always, huh,” she noted, and sat down on the couch. She puffed out more smoke.

The Midnight Witch, Sheila, was still a heavy smoker. And she reeked of tobacco.

“So you still haven’t given up cigarettes?”

How about quitting?

“It’s not a cigarette. It’s a pipe.”

“Didn’t you used to smoke cigarettes?” I tilted my head, and Sheila scratched her cheek, looking just the slightest bit embarrassed.

“Yeah—my pupil gave me this.”

My, my, they must want you to die young. You’re beloved by all.

“You took on a pupil?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

"It's the first I'm hearing of it."

"Never could find the right time to tell you," Sheila made a noise that was half snort and half laugh, then inhaled through her pipe. "Speaking of my pupil, she's apparently an acquaintance of yours. Her name's Saya."

"Saya..." I turned the name over in my mind for a moment. "Ah!"

Elaina spoke of her when she visited this country a while ago. That's the girl who Elaina was tutoring so that she could become a witch's apprentice, right? And now she's Sheila's pupil.

"The world's a small place, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it. By the way, I met yours, too."

"Goodness me."

"When I told Saya, she seemed incredibly jealous."

"...Please tell her to keep playing nice with Elaina."

"She's so in love with Elaina that she thinks she can't live without her, so I don't imagine that'll be a problem."

"Please tell her to play nice in...moderation."

"I don't think anything I tell her'll make a difference." Sheila looked up at the ceiling.

All of the smoke had gathered as a sort of haze near the ceiling, slowly curling like clouds stirred by a gentle breeze. As she stared at the drifting smoke, she put the pipe in her mouth again and blew out a white breath.

"By the way, do you know what day it is?"

The clouds on the ceiling were disturbed by a new plume.

"Of course."

Every year on this day, my old friend and former roommate came to visit me, and after we updated each other with all the new details of our separate lives, we took a vacation together.

This was our annual tradition.

Whenever Sheila came to visit me here, I would suddenly realize that it had been a year. Since we met like this every year—and since I knew we would meet again next year in the same way—I never felt nostalgia or any intense emotions, even when I did spend time apart from her.

“You ready?” Sheila asked. “I can help you pack if you need it. I’m guessing you haven’t started, like every year.”

“Can I tell you one thing first?” I answered, while staring blankly out the window.

“Hm? What?”

“This is a no-smoking room.”

Sheila looked shocked for a moment, but then she broke into a tiny smile.

“...You’re a little late!”

“I just never could find the right time to tell you.”



This is the story of something that happened when I was still traveling with my teacher.

“Say, Fran? I think I want to take on a pupil.”

While we were walking down some road in a country somewhere, my teacher had said, “Oh, come to think of it,” as if it were of no import, and then led into this conversation.

A pupil?

“Um, aren’t I your pupil...?”

What is this woman talking about?

“Yeah, yeah, you’re my pupil, of course! You’re my pupil, but I’ve been thinking I might like another one.”

Could that mean what I think it means? That her firstborn is all grown up and taken care of, so she wants to make another child? Sounds like one of those baby-crazy parents. Not that I would know.

“...Well, I don’t really mind too much. I am your pupil, nothing more and

nothing less. I think you should be able to decide these things on your own.”

“My, my. But wouldn’t you be angry if I didn’t tell you?”

“You say, but you’ve already taken on a new pupil, haven’t you?”

That’s the kind of person my teacher was.

She sought my approval whenever she’d already made up her mind. In other words, by the time she was approaching me to consult a matter, it was a certainty that she had already taken the second pupil.

“I guess I have.”

I knew it.

My teacher said, “It’s all right, Fran. She’s a really nice girl. I’m sure that you’ll like her, too.”

“.....”

Could that mean what I think it means? This must be like when a parent gets remarried, but their new spouse has their own child, so you suddenly start living under the same roof with another kid that you don’t know, but the parents try to console the children and say everything will turn out fine.

Well, I thought it would probably be all right.

It’s not necessarily a bad thing when your family gets bigger, right?

“So where is this new pupil?”

“I was just about to go and see her.” My teacher resumed walking, with me in tow.

“.....”

I remember it didn’t take us long to get there. My teacher came to a stop in front of a certain building, pointed to it, and said her new pupil was waiting there.

My eyebrows furrowed. “...Um, miss?”

“What is it?”

The building was in ruin.

“Are you planning on taking on a ghost as a pupil?”

“No, no, she’s a nice, completely normal girl.”

If she lives in a place like this, I don’t think she can be particularly normal.

Light tumbled in through the crumbling ceiling. From atop a mountain of rubble, a single girl stared down at us.

She had golden hair that sparkled softly like stardust. She fixed her blue eyes on us.

She looked pretty much like a mage would look. She was wearing an unassuming white robe and a pointed hat. But there was nothing upon her breast. Apparently, she wasn’t an apprentice or anything, just a regular novice.

By the way, she was holding a cigarette in her mouth. A delinquent, huh?

“Hey, you’re late, miss.”

This girl seemed to know nothing of manners. She wore a bold smile as she gazed at our teacher. “You’ve got some nerve to keep me waiting,” she said as she came down from her rubble mountain.

“Sorry. It took me a little time to persuade my pupil.”

“Could you please stop lying through your teeth?” I requested. I mean, she’d basically sprung it on me during our walk here.

“Huh. So this is my senior pupil, hmm...? She looks pretty weak.”

“.....” So this girl is my junior? She’s so rude from our very first meeting. What is this world coming to?

“Eh? What’s your problem? Don’t make faces at me. You wanna have a go?”

On top of that, she seemed to have a post-apocalyptic attitude, ready to leap into battle the moment we made eye contact.

Is this what this world is coming to?

“Miss. Where’s the good girl you were talking about? She’s been spitting venom ever since the moment that we met.”

“Fran, that stuff’s called tobacco.”

“No, not that.”

I know tobacco is really nasty. It causes all kinds of damage and has absolutely no benefits whatsoever, and she’s polluting the air around her. On top of that, she’s got a mean streak. And yet you find it allowable even though she’s spewing two kinds of poison?

“Well, anyway, I’ve decided to accept this girl as your junior pupil, so the two of you are going to get along, all right? Oh-hoh-hoh!” My teacher laughed.

“Nice to meet you. Um, your name is?” I extended my hand. I thought I would shake hers as a show of friendship.

“No name that I’m gonna tell you.” She slapped away my hand.

So, this is a common handshake in this region. Good to know.

“This is Fran.” My teacher snaked her arm around my shoulder. “And this is Sheila.” She placed a hand on my junior. “The two of you get along now, okay?”

“Die, shrew.” Sheila spit on the ground. It looked like it reeked.

“...Miss, this is hopeless,” I complained.

My teacher just laughed as usual.

And this is how the curtain lifted on our journey, all three of us.

The relationship between me and Sheila, frankly speaking, was so bad that it could be succinctly expressed in the single word: horrible.

We were simply not a good match. In every respect, we were complete opposites.

“Modding your broom to fit your own style is just the best—obviously. Whaddaya think of this baby? You’re head over heels, right?”

Sheila had applied all kinds of modifications to her broom, like attaching a handle and a chair back. She’d added some musical horns and flashing lights—maybe she was trying to fish up some firefly squid?—plus all kinds of things to make it go faster. It must have been what people mean when they talk about magical remodels.

“I mean, I think you can use your broom just as it is. Are you stupid? I mean, it

doesn't even look like the original broom anymore, does it? Are you an idiot?"

"Huh? You pickin' a fight?"

"Is that all you know how to say? Are you stupid? Are you a dummy?"

"You're the one who keeps repeating yourself. Not much in your vocabulary, eh?"

"I'm just stooping down to your level, with your limited lexicon."

We started glaring at each other, and just before the situation could devolve into a fistfight, our teacher forced the two of us to stop. But that's not where our poor compatibility ended.

For example, when we went out to eat—

"Fish or beef?"

When our teacher asked whether we would rather eat meat or seafood, I immediately answered, "I'd like fish," and Sheila said, "Meat, duh."

We glared at each other.

"If you want seafood so badly, eat by yourself. Our teacher and I will eat meat."

"Huh? You eat by yourself, then. I will eat fish with our teacher."

"Ehh?"

"Huhh?"

Ultimately, the three of us all ate separately that day. By the way, our teacher apparently ate bread. She was the commendable sort of person who preferred bread to either meat or fish.

Sheila and I clashed with each other at every turn.

"Fire spells or ice spells—which should I teach you today?"

When I replied, "I'd like to learn ice spells," Sheila raised her voice. "Huh? Fire of course! Are you kidding me?"

"All right, how about we split the difference and take today off?"

Ultimately, we slacked off for the day. I think our teacher probably wanted to

do nothing anyway.

“If a mage is without her wand, she can’t do anything. So you must have some techniques in case your movement is restricted, or for times when a weapon is taken up against you.”

It was extremely rare for her to teach us anything that was not magic. She was asking us what sorts of skills we wanted to learn.

“Okay, teach us some martial arts.”

“Well then, please show us how to handle a bow and arrow.”

“Ehh?”

“Huhh?”

Ultimately, she came up with an incomprehensible compromise: “All right, we’ll split the difference and I’ll teach you how to use knives. First of all, hide your knife under your skirt. This is a throwing knife, okay? Then, when you go to pull it out, lift your leg all sexy-like and—”

She hit us with a lesson on knife handling.

To give another example, we quarreled even after we had finished an assignment.

“Esteemed witches! How swiftly you solved this incident for us. As a reward, I’d like to present you with a choice between these two boxes.” Set up in front of our eyes were a large box and a small box.

Well, I thought, I must take exception to your arrogant attitude. I mean, it’s supposed to be a reward, and here you are making us choose one over the other, but I suppose...

“The small one is best,” I answered.

“It’s the big one, obviously! Use some common sense!” Sheila snarled.

“Huh? It’s an unwritten rule that in situations like this, you should choose the small one.”

“What’re you saying? Of course the big one’s better.”

“Huhh?”

“Ehh?”

After that, we glared at each other for a while.

Ultimately, our teacher approached the client. “It’s a reward, so it’s natural to give both, isn’t it? Are you trying to insult us when you say that we have to choose?”

The episode ended without any trouble.

The two of us were like water and oil. We absolutely did not mix. We collided, separated, and it was unthinkable that we would ever get along.

The rift between us grew ever wider.

“I think you’re the only person I’ll never ever get along with.”

“My, my, what a coincidence. I also feel I could never get along with you and only you.”

That was the one point on which we agreed.

The relationship between us was horrible, yet we continued our travels together. Oddly enough, though we clashed at every turn, we never once reached a settlement. When it came to magical ability, we were evenly matched.

Our teacher just smiled and watched as we fought all the time.

“...Miss, why did you take Sheila as a pupil?”

One day, I asked her this question when Sheila wasn’t around.

“Curious?”

I thought there must be some deeper reason. For once, our teacher didn’t smile her ambiguous smile, but rather stared back at me quietly. It had been a long time since I had seen her look so serious.

I nodded and waited for her to speak. Why on earth could my teacher have taken Sheila as a pupil? Could it have been because she had magical talent? Or maybe because she was being blackmailed...?

I had all kinds of speculations running around my mind. My teacher clapped a hand down on my shoulder and said just one thing.

“It’s because she’s a good cook.”

“.....”

Apparently, Sheila had exploited my teacher’s appetite.



The relationship between us was horrible all the time.

It got so bad that we couldn’t even have a proper conversation if our teacher didn’t get in between us, but we were stuck together on this journey.

Then, one day—

“Welcome. This is the town of Qunorts, the Free City.”

We arrived at a small port city situated on the coast. The faint scent of seawater drifted over the town, where houses with orange roofs and

unassuming white walls had been built with their eaves all in neat rows.

It was actually a beautiful little city, but we were not in such a great mood. All along the road, we had passed a huge number of signs and billboards on display with discriminatory phrases like, DEFY MAGES! and MAGES ARE NOT TO BE FEARED! and MAGES ARE DEVIL'S CHILDREN! and so on.

You could say it was incendiary.

"What's this place's deal? Are they trying to pick a fight with us?"

Ordinarily, I would be ready to disagree with anything Sheila said just because she had been the one to say it, but in this instance, I could not help agreeing.

"...It seems we aren't welcome in this country," I said.

"I wonder..." In contrast to the two of us, who were making no effort to hide our displeasure, our teacher remained quite composed. "Although there may be hints of that here, we shouldn't write off the entire city. If that's your stance, you're no different from the bunch who hung up all those posters and signs."

"....."

"....."

We looked at each other in silence, and she continued, "There's someplace that I'd like to drop by, if that's all right."

We stopped walking.

UNITED MAGIC ASSOCIATION, QUNORTS BRANCH.

Before our eyes was a building with a sign written in a script that looked almost shy.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, venerated witches—"

Our teacher may have been a traveler, but she was also a skilled witch, and so she was frequently called upon by the confidential organization known as the United Magic Association.

From suppressing insurrections to transporting baggage, the jobs she was entrusted with had an incredible range, but our teacher basically did not turn any of them down.

“Spare me the niceties. How much does the job pay?”

“Well, first, I’d like to give you a description of the commission—”

“How much does it pay?”

“.....”

The reason was simple. She was obsessed with money.

“...Ten gold pieces.”

“Humph.” She was nodding apathetically at the staff member of the United Magic Association, but inside, her heart was leaping for joy. “All right, and the description?”

Her ulterior motive made her seem rather rude and unpolished, but this country was apparently facing a situation at the moment that they couldn’t resolve without relying on her.

“In our city, there is presently a criminal organization using an antique shop as a cover for their illegal activity... You all might have caught sight of their work around town? The posters and signs slandering mages.”

According to the representative from the United Magic Association, the staff at the antique shop was a clichéd mob of thugs working as robbers and pickpockets in town. There was none among them who could use magic, and for that reason, they were more against mages, who had special powers, than the normal crowd. They had apparently harassed and slandered the United Magic Association on countless occasions.

I see, I suppose ordinary thieves would consider mages to be a threat.

However—

“If you’re getting harassed, then you can just go and retaliate, can’t you? I mean, they can’t even use magic, right?”

Beside me, Sheila asked out loud the question I was thinking.

It was a reasonable concern. What reason could there possibly be for going out of the way to pay a group of outsiders to resolve the situation?

“We’ve confronted them many times before. It’s very hard to tell you this,

but...as embarrassing as it is, we've never been able to stand up to them even once, to say nothing of arresting them."

"...Is there some reason for that?"

The staff member nodded at my teacher. "They've got some kinds of strange tools. For example, invisibility cloaks, swords that can cut through anything, guns that never run out of ammo, matches that induce hallucinations—"

Because of the antique dealers' ability to skillfully manipulate these mysterious objects and use them to toy with the mages, he said, the public had practically lost all trust in the United Magic Association.

They were doing the same things as magic—perhaps even more—without using magic, relying instead on these cryptic objects that could conjure special energies, he told us.

Since they were plastering up inflammatory posters and signs wherever they pleased, it seemed certain the people in this city no longer had faith in magic users.

As the clerk had finished his browbeaten tale with a look of exhaustion, he turned his gaze toward our teacher. "Can't you do something about it...?"

"....." She was keeping intently silent, and her eyes were not focused around us, but somewhere far away, as if she were looking across the ocean. It was as if she had suddenly come to understand something.

After a brief pause, she offered a short snort. "Understood. I promise this matter will be completely resolved."

"Thank you very much! If a skilled witch such as yourself promises to resolve the matter, then even that—"

"Oh no. Not by me." She cut the enthusiastic clerk down. "These two will solve the problem, right?"

She placed her hands down on our shoulders.

.....

Excuse me?



Immediately after we'd checked into our hotel, our teacher cheerfully clapped her hands. "All right. Allow me to explain the rules!"

It was as if she were kicking off some kind of game.

"Starting today, the two of you shall trap and arrest the Antique Store Posse. They may be in possession of certain bothersome tools that would cause trouble for an ordinary mage, but those won't be any problem for two pupils of mine, right? After all, you're no ordinary mages."

She had a really nonchalant way of speaking, but her words seemed to be saying: "*Failure is not an option for any student of mine.*" To rephrase it unkindly, she seemed to be telling us, "*Whoever doesn't pass gets the boot.*"

"Hmm—so in other words, you've got no need for the one who can't resolve the matter, and you want her to quit being your student? I like the way you think." Beside me, Sheila grinned and offered those nasty words.

"....."

Apparently, as horrible as our relationship was, we were both thinking the same thing.

"Interpret it however you like. The time limit is three days. Show me what you can do before that time has passed."

Our teacher neither confirmed nor denied her intentions. With that, she left the room.

And so the curtain rose on our three days.

"Eeek! Wait! Wait! I'm sorry! It was all my fault! Please just spare my life—"

The man I had chased into an alley raised both his hands in the air. His teeth were chattering, and his eyes filled with tears.

This must be what it means to be a cornered cat.

"I'm not going to take your life. I'm after that weapon of yours."

I had my wand pointed at the sword in the man's hand. He was a member of the Antique Store Posse and the owner of a sword that could cut through anything.

After collecting some eyewitness testimony in town, I had gone directly to the scene of the crime and ended up running him down.

“Hey, wait a second!” A voice came from behind me. “I’m the one who first laid eyes on that guy. I’ll be taking his weapon.”

When I turned around, Sheila was pointing her wand at me.

“I am the one who chased him down. Which means I have the right to claim the spoils.”

“No, I used you to chase him down. Which means I’ve got priority. Understand?”

“I don’t understand, and I wouldn’t hand him over even if I did.”

“Ehh?”

“Huh?”

We glared at each other for a little while, but as always, we were at an impasse.

“.....”

“.....”

We didn’t bother finishing the argument once we realized the cornered man had escaped while we had been absorbed in our bickering.

The three days of our contest passed at the same pace.

Whenever one of us would chase down a member of the Antique Store Posse, the other would get in the way.

For example, when Sheila chased down one of the owners of a gun that never ran out of bullets, I went and interfered. Another time, when I caught one of the men who had an invisibility cloak, Sheila came to usurp my achievement.

“What’s with you? Are you *trying* to get in my way? Or do you just want our teacher’s approval?”

We clashed at every turn.

“Shut up! This has nothing to do with you.” Sheila blew toxic purple smoke in

my face.

“.....”

“.....”

We glared at each other.

“...Humph.” I turned away.

Ultimately, since we kept getting in each other’s way, we didn’t manage to collect a single one of the extremely important special weapons.

If things keep going like this, I won’t even manage to get my hands on any of them, and our teacher will run out of patience. I was fueled by these worries.

Then one day—

“You there. You’ve been going around trying to take down the Antique Store.”

I was sipping hot coffee and reading the newspaper alone at a café, searching for more information, when a voice came from the table directly behind me.

Inside the café, which I could see over my newspaper, was a waitress hard at work, an affectionate couple who seemed oblivious to their surroundings, a man in a suit who clearly had too much free time, and all sorts of others.

I was certainly not alone, so at first, I thought the voice might have been calling out to someone else at some other table.

“Hey, I’m talking to you. Fran? Or whatever your name is.”

Oh, me? I turned around when my name was called.

I saw long red hair. The other person was facing away from me, toward an empty table. They were looking down, and the hat they were wearing obscured their expression. Slowly, the person turned toward me, until nearly half of a woman’s face became visible, and she quickly turned away again.

The only thing I had seen were her long, sharp canines.

“Where did you learn my name?”

“Well, the details aren’t important, are they?” The nameless Fang Lady laughed loudly. “More importantly, how’s it going? Is your assignment going

well?"

"Does it look like it's going well?"

I held up the newspaper so that she could see. On the page was the headline: LEADER OF THE ANTIQUE STORE POSSE ANNOUNCES, "WE WILL HAVE THE HEADS OF THE MAGES WHO KEEP ATTACKING OUR MEMBERS." To the surprise of no one, Sheila and I had completely failed to keep a low profile. This unknown leader—we knew neither his name nor his face—was apparently quite angry with us.

"Huh. Looks like you've gotten yourself into quite a dangerous situation. Did you pick a fight with that gang?"

"No, but this works in our favor."

"Hmm? Why's that? Your life is on the line, isn't it?" Even though I couldn't see her eyes, I could somehow tell that Fang Lady was furrowing her brow.

"It means they're coming to me. It'll save me the time and effort of searching for them," I continued, holding the newspaper in front of my face. "The problem is there's a chance that my junior pupil will get there first. She's a bold and disagreeable girl, but she's fairly capable, so she might take down the Antique Store before I can."

"Huh... Someone's confident..." Fang Lady mumbled to herself. "By the way, do you know all the particulars about the Antique Store Posse?"

"The particulars?"

"Who the members are. The purpose of the organization. The location of their base. How they go about acquiring their tools."

"I'm not interested in any of that. I just need to crush them, right?"

"Uh-huh." She looked like she was nodding. "Total, reckless self-confidence —"

It sounded like someone was snapping their fingers.

I didn't know who had snapped or why, but I felt slightly uneasy the instant I heard the noise and raised my face from behind the newspaper again. Then I knew it was all over.

“.....”

Surrounding my table were the waitress and all the customers pointing weapons at me. They were armed with swords and guns, and even knives and forks.

“Let me give you one piece of good news.” Directly behind me, the woman with the fangs sounded like she was smiling. “You don’t have to worry about your little friend taking down the Antique Store before you get the chance. Because we’ve already captured her.”

“.....”

“Oh, and don’t even think of resisting. Make one suspicious move, and we’ll take off your head right here.”

“.....”

That was the very first time I realized my own stupidity.

Maybe I had been blind to this because of the three-day time limit, or because of my growing frustration with my junior, or because of my inflated ego. At this point, I didn’t know which of those might have been the cause. They had probably all worked together to lead me to this rotten end.

“Take her away. Deal with her.”

The one thing I can say for sure is that, back then, I was a hopeless fool.

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“...You gotta be kidding me. They caught you just like that?! What an inept senior you are.”

“...They caught you before me. What an utterly useless junior you are.”

“.....”

“.....”

Our words lacked the usual vigor. Not surprising, considered we’d been taken prisoner in the Antique Store Posse’s base of operations.

We were in a dim room. The air was a little damp. Orange light trickled down from a ceiling lamp, causing the particles of dust that danced through the room

to sparkle.

In the middle of the room, we were surrounded.

Rope was wound around our arms, restraining our movement down to our wrists. I didn't think I could do much like this. The lower half of my body wasn't bound, so I could probably have run away, but I had just been told that they'd kill me if I moved, and their weapons were pointed right at us. The phrase *nothing else could be done* seemed entirely appropriate.

"You mages are always like this, always getting in the way of our work with your weird powers. I can't stomach it. I really can't." The woman with fangs was here. "Nevertheless, you really are a pitiful lot. As if we would lose to two shrimpy little apprentices!"

Fang Lady heaved a huge sigh. This woman, who appeared to be the leader of the Antique Store Posse, looked at her comrades as they surrounded us, holding weapons at the ready, with cold eyes.

And then, she looked at us, too.

"Seems you two are quite the talkers. We overheard everything, you know? How you're having some kind of contest to hunt down our members. What is that? Do you think messing with our livelihood is some kinda game? Huh?"

Fang Lady placed her finger under Sheila's chin and tilted her face upward, looking down at her with a cool expression.

Sheila stared back, looking angry as always. After glancing over at me for just a second, she said, "...It was never a game. We wanted to take you down."

And then she spit a big wad of phlegm right in Fang Lady's face.

It looked like it stank of nicotine and poison. Her spit looked so toxic, I half expected Fang Lady to get lung cancer on the spot. I'm pretty sure it increased her risk for a heart attack or stroke.

Sheila was rude as ever, even in the face of mortal danger.

"Huh? Do you think you can disrespect me?" Fang Lady's eyebrow twitched.

"P'tooie." Sheila spit at her again, utterly merciless. It really did seem rank.

“Don’t mess around! Don’t you understand the position you’re—”

“P’tooie.”

“Hey. That’s quite enough out of—”

“P’tooie.”

“.....”

“P’tooie.”

“.....Ewww.”

Before I knew it, the corners of Fang Lady’s eyes were gradually filling up with tears. More likely spit. No matter which one it was, it looked like it reeked.

Sheila’s persistent attacks may have succeeded. Fang Lady muttered, “Ugh... gross.” She disappeared from the room...or so I thought, but she just wiped her face off and came back again.

“...Humph! What a joke! You there! Deal with these two! Immediately!”

In that moment, as she was barking out orders, every eye in the room was gathered on Fang Lady.

That moment itself was the best chance we were going to get.

Thud. The rope restraining our arms fell to the ground. It was lucky we remembered the sneaky knife skills our teacher had taught us once as a compromise.

“—Ah-hah!” Sheila grasped her wand and blasted the weapons out of Miss Fang’s henchmen’s hands.

“—Okay!” I did the same, incapacitating them.

They were open about their hatred for mages, but just like mages, if they didn’t have their special weapons, they were nothing but ordinary people.

Could it be hatred born of semblance?

“Wha...!” Our surprise attack seemed to have worked. The expression on Fang Lady’s face told me that much. “W-what are you doing? Take those little witches down right now!”

Ignoring her panicked commotion, we fought on.

In the henchmen's hands were swords and guns, shields and spears, and all kinds of other stuff. There was no need to go out of our way to kill them; as soon as we stripped them of their weapons, they lost any kind of will to resist.

One after another after another, we confiscated their weapons. We collected every one we could see.

The weapons piled up on the ground. Perhaps because we were faced with real danger, we had forgotten all about our contest. We had snatched their weapons from them one by one, while guarding the ones we had already collected in between us, behind our backs.

—Apparently, we underestimated the situation.

It would probably have been easy enough to take each one of the criminals down on their own. We could have even turned it into a competition. But we didn't have the time to spare.

Rather than thinking that Sheila was revolting, or resenting her audacity despite being my junior, or anything along those lines, I was thinking only about survival.

I'm sure she must have been thinking the same.

“_____”

It was certainly a strange feeling.

Even now, I remember it well.

The girl I hated had become very reliable—even though we were always in disagreement. Even though we were always fighting. Even though she was always my exact opposite.

The two of us were like a mirrored pair.

It had taken us much too long to realize that simple fact.

Before I knew it, we had managed to pile up many weapons and tools beside us.

By the time it was all over, we were completely exhausted, and Sheila and I

sank to the floor, back to back. We had drained nearly all our magical reserves, our breaths were ragged, and we were dripping with sweat, but we lacked the energy to wipe it away.

We had bound the members of the Antique Store Posse with rope, but we didn't have the energy remaining to haul them to the branch office of the United Magic Association.

“...Let's carry them off after we rest for a little bit.”

I could feel Sheila nod in response. “Agreed.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Hey you,” Sheila muttered. In a small voice, as if she were talking to herself, she spoke to my back. “Why are you learning magic under that teacher?”

“...Why shouldn't I?”

“I'm just asking. Don't raise your eyebrows at me.”

“Oh, can you see my face?”

“I can tell somehow, even without looking.”

“.....”

I questioned her right back. “Why did you decide to learn magic from our teacher?”

“I don't really have any particular reason—”

The story that she told me then was the kind of thing you hear all the time.

In the country where she and I had met, Sheila had been an orphan, but she had lived by herself, strong of will.

She had studied magic on her own and used it for pickpocketing, extortion, and other rather questionable activities. She had met my teacher on one such day.

As usual, she had been using magic to steal wallets, but unfortunately for her, her target of the day was my teacher. Sheila could use magic but had no

schooling, so she couldn't have known just how powerful a ranking witch could be.

She was caught in the act by my teacher.

"That's when she filled me in. There are people in this world called witches, which just means they're strong mages. And when you become a witch, you're able to get a good job right away. She told me I could stop living like a stray cat. And so I decided I wanted to become a witch," she explained.

"See? It's not such a great reason, is it?" Spitting out the words like she thought they were stupid, Sheila snorted. "And how 'bout you?"

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“My name is *Fran*.” Then I answered, “I don’t have any great reason either—”

If I were to write it down, my story would take only a few lines.

“There are no witches in my hometown. So if I become a witch, I’ll be the only one in town. I’ll be set for life, yes? That’s why.”

“.....”

“The reason I decided to study under our particular teacher is even simpler. When I kept failing the advancement exam to become a witch’s apprentice, I got her to tutor me in spellcasting, and I passed. So when I was looking at becoming someone’s student, I apprenticed under her.”

“...So you became her pupil for selfish reasons.”

Well, I suppose if you boil it down, that’s the case.

Behind my back, Sheila let out a quiet laugh.

“...What the heck? You and I are the same, aren’t we?”

“.....”

We had always had our backs to each other, facing opposite directions.

Maybe we had always been closer to each other than to anyone else.

“Guess so.”

I realized I was laughing. The warm body against my back was trembling, too. I wondered if I had started it, or if she had. I still wonder which it was.

Somehow or other I felt like I knew, even without looking.

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Everything after that was easy.

Starting with Fang Lady, we personally locked the Antique Store Posse away in prison, via the United Magic Association branch office.

She and her gang hadn’t done anything particularly bad like murder—only petty theft—so their crimes were not that serious.

“Even by the weightiest estimate, they’ll just be sentenced to several years of hard labor, huh?” Our teacher shrugged.

She told us that the mysterious tools that the Antique Store Posse had used had been brought in from an island country through one of the ports in the Free City Qunorts. She also said that she had visited that island country once before meeting me and Sheila—and that's why she had recognized the tools.

According to the laws, taking the tools out of the island country was prohibited.

"...That's why we needed to gather them all up and return them to the island country. Good job recovering them, you two."

Our teacher sent the recovered equipment back, accompanied by a letter that read: *We recovered these for you, so hand over the reward, okay?* It seemed like she knew important people there.

Yes, yes, thank you for your hard work. (From now on whenever you find something, go ahead and destroy it on the spot. Don't go to the trouble of sending it back. It's a nuisance to have you demanding money every time!)

A letter to that effect was sent back, along with a rather sizable sum of money.

In other words, we were paid by two parties—both the United Magic Association and the island country.

How underhanded. How cunning.

"See? Travelers can earn money this way."

Our teacher laughed to herself.

This underhanded, sleazy way of getting money wasn't something that I wanted to learn from her. Unfortunately, it seemed to have been inherited perfectly by her daughters.

This was what they called genetics.

From there, our journey continued.

Sheila had always been comfortable swimming with the tides, so she quickly became a witch's apprentice and had a corsage pinned to her breast, just as I had.

The two of us together, under our teacher's guidance, were taught in time all the dirty ways adults made money, along with some very respectable spells suitable for reputable mages.

We traveled along like that for about half a year.

In the end, when our teacher was about to return to her hometown, the two of us received our names as witches.

"Fran, your hair is black, right? So you're the Stardust Witch." She pinned a star-shaped brooch on my breast.

"Sheila, your hair is shiny, right? So you're the Midnight Witch." She pinned one on Sheila, too.

We tilted our heads, wondering how on earth our teacher had come up with those names.

"My hair is black so I'm the Stardust Witch? What does that mean?"

Shouldn't I be the Midnight Witch if my hair's black?

Shouldn't Sheila be the Stardust Witch, with her blond hair?

Aren't our names reversed?

Our teacher smiled, looking like she had been waiting for me to ask exactly that.

"Midnight and Stardust set each other off to an advantage when they're together."

"Uh, I don't quite understand what you mean."

"....." Our teacher had sulkily fallen silent.

Glancing sidelong at our teacher, Sheila said, "...In other words, the two of us will stay together even if we're apart, or at least, that's the message that she's put into the names. That's what she's trying to say." She looked at me in exasperation.

"....." Our teacher's cheeks had turned quite red, so Sheila's guess was probably correct.

Ah, how simple.

“But why did you derive our names from our hair color?”

I tilted my head again, and our teacher flashed another smile before answering me.

“Because it’s cool.”



After our journey with our teacher was over, I went back to my hometown and became a schoolteacher. Surprisingly, Sheila started working at the United Magic Association.

She got such a respectable job that you would never imagine that she had once earned her daily bread through pickpocketing and blackmail.

I wonder if I should expose her someday once she reaches a high standing? Just kidding.

“...You’ve changed, haven’t you?” Sheila asked.

“Both of us have aged,” I replied. It was a line more suited for an old woman.

As if she was surprised by what I’d said, Sheila let out a white puff of breath as she walked along beside me under the autumn sky. “Are we really old hags now?”

Ah, of course she had a comeback.

“Anyway,” Sheila continued, “from where I stand, you’re the one who looks like she’s changed.”

“I do?”

I’ve always looked like this, haven’t I?

“Before, you were always quick to argue with me,” she said. “But now you look like an old lady fully enjoying the retired life.”

“How mean...”

“I kinda miss the rambunctious side of you.”

“Are you lonely?” I asked.

“Not particularly.” Sheila answered. “Really, though, I do like our relationship

now better than before when we did nothing but fight. It's...comfortable."

"...You really have changed."

Sheila snorted. "I suppose we've both grown up."

We had each walked our own paths after finishing our journey together.

But we had never grown estranged.

Once a year, the two of us met. We weren't really obligated to go on this trip, and on the other hand, we weren't walking around clinging dearly to each other twenty-four-seven either.

Somehow or other, we had decided together that this was the right level of distance.

"Well then, shall we go this year, too?"

I looked up at the sky. Every year since our travels together had ended, I had rather looked forward to going on a trip with Sheila.

So the two of us climbed aboard our brooms and left the city.

The deep green grass rustled. The wind blew strong and chilly, letting us know that winter would be here shortly.

"It's the new moon, I think." Flying on her broom next to me, Sheila looked up at the sky.

I followed her lead, and her gaze. I was captivated.

The stardust sparkling in the midnight sky was very, very beautiful.



CHAPTER 5

Cute Makes Right

Let me tell you about a strange city that I visited during my travels.

“Welcome—” No sooner had the gate guard seen my face than he froze in place. “H-how cute! Surely you’ll be the next big sensation! You’re the cute girl of the new generation! No question!”

“...Huh?”

“Please, go ahead and enter! We welcome you with our whole hearts!”

“Uh. S-sure...”

I passed through the gate, feeling utterly confused. The scene on the other side wasn’t any less bewildering.

“Guys! Look here! A cute traveler has shown up!”

“A cute witch? That’s the strongest combo!”

“She certainly is cute!”

“Look this way for me!”

“She’s really outstanding—one in a million!”

“I just want to smother her with love!”

I was set up on a stage in the town square, dragged out in front of the residents.

“...Ehh.” I cringed at the crowd, to be honest.

What is this?

When I asked for the reason, I was told that whenever the townspeople find a cute person, they immediately put them on display and offer prayers to them. The whole city had been built around this practice evidently.

Is this what idolatry is?

I guess they wanted to know what kind of person I was, because a series of

rapid-fire questions came flying at me. I offered extremely perfunctory answers.

“Hello! Please tell us your age!”

“No thanks.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?!”

“I don’t, and I never will.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?!”

“No.”

“Can I shake your hand?!”

“I hate touching strangers, so no thanks.”

“P-p-please marry me!”

“Please get lost.”

As you may have already surmised, my personality is not especially cute. Plus, I was already fed up with the whole terrible spectacle. I thought maybe if I made my displeasure clear, my questioners might get bored with it.

However—

“.....Incredible!”

Too bad.

The citizens practically gushed with admiration at my harsh words. The more I admonished them, the more I was praised for my “cute abusive language!” If I tried to work a scheme over on them, I was worshiped for being “so adorably cunning!” To get straight to the point, as long as I was cute, apparently anything was fine. That’s the kind of culture it was.

But if you’re permitted to do anything, you start to get used to the idea that you can do whatever you like, right?

Taking advantage of the kindness of the people, I did exactly as I pleased for a little while. Admit it. Living in such a place is the ultimate dream, even for a billionaire, isn’t it? That’s what I thought, and I lapped it up for a while.

One day, however, I woke up, and all the citizens started criticizing my

behavior.

“I’m tired of your abusive character.”

“Oh, you’re not trending anymore.”

“You’re old news.”

Uh-oh. What might have transpired here?

The reason was simple and clear. A new girl had come into town.

“She’s an angel...!”

“Look! A pure girl who doesn’t treat us poorly!”

“This is truly what a girl should be.”

“An outstanding specimen—one in a million!”

“I just want to smother her with love!”

The citizens took no further notice of me.

I had been left behind in a corner, relieved of all duties, as everyone actively ignored me. In the end, I was practically chased out of the city.

It seemed their policy was that “cute makes right.”

But their idea of right and their whole culture went through complete overhauls.

Just like the fashion cycle.



CHAPTER 6

A Honeymoon and the Lily Flowers of Happiness

Flower fields unfurled themselves under the sky.

Red, blue, yellow, purple, white. Blossoms of every color stood shoulder to shoulder, swaying unsteadily. As they bobbed their heads, they emitted a scent that was enough to make passersby sigh.

The clouds drifted through the sky, casting shadows over the fields. The spring breeze was slightly cold, and it blew in strong gusts, stirring up the flowers. A hint of cool air mixed with the warm wind, and it felt so nice that if someone were to close their eyes, they would instantly drift off to sleep.

The broom's passenger felt her lids begin to slowly droop.

"You mustn't fall asleep, sister."

Just as the girl closed her eyes, her little sister—in charge of steering the broom—tapped her on the shoulder, waking her.

"...I wasn't sleeping!" The girl let out a yawn that resembled a sigh.

"But you looked like you might." The other girl, puffing out her cheeks, stared fixedly ahead. "There are flower fields here, so that means we should be there soon."

The two were travelers.

The younger sister steering the broom was named Avelia. Her white hair grew long enough to touch her waist, and she had a single black ribbon wound around her head. She, clad in a white robe, was a mage. Hence, the reason why she was handling the broom.

"But the view is so pretty... It's making me sleepy."

Behind her sister on the same broom was an older girl, Amnesia. Her hair was white, too, but it was cut short, and on her head was a thick black headband.

Amnesia was wearing a white robe that was identical to her sister's, but she could not use magic. She had a single saber garnishing her hip, which was

somewhat ill-matched to her robe.

"You're probably sleepy because you stayed up late last night." Avelia glanced at her sister in a way that was a little icy. "I told you to get to sleep early because we had an early morning today, didn't I?"

"I did sleep early. And I woke up early." More specifically, she had slept and awoken in the afternoon.

"That's called an afternoon nap."

"Leaving all that aside, where are we right now?"

"....." Avelia, pouting when her sister ignored her, stared straight ahead. "Seems like we'll arrive soon. Probably."

The flower fields meant they were closing in on their destination.

"I'm so excited," Amnesia said lazily from the back of the broom.

"We're not going there for vacation," Avelia answered in a slightly sulky tone, but her lips softened.

Ahead of the girls lay a unique city.

A lovely place, completely enclosed in flowers.



The place was called Flower City.

It would be no exaggeration to say that everything there was covered in flowers. They were the only thing I could see as we were walking down the road.

There were so many flower shops lined up that it looked like they might outnumber the cafés and restaurants, but upon closer observation, many of them were just private residences decorated with a wealth of flowers. The town was so covered in flowers, it made me think that the people here must really love them. But then again, perhaps the flowers signified the household's fortunes—like the more flowers, the wealthier the house? The displays were so splendid, it really made me wonder.

"Look, Big Sis! This one, and this one, too! All flowers!"

When she saw the state of the place, my sister scurried giddily around, pointing at the houses, carrying on about the varieties of flowers she found there.

My little sister had white hair growing down to her waist, wearing a robe of the same color. With her hair and robe swooping as she darted through the place, she looked not unlike a butterfly being lured in by nectar.

Come now. Where did my calm little sister go? I swear she was just here.

“It’s dangerous to frolic too much, Avelia.”

She turned around when I called her name.

“Big Sis, if you say things like that, we’ll never be able to find the Lily of Happiness, no matter how long we’re here.”

Oh, look. My rational little sister is back. Back to normal.

“...Mmm, that said...” I mumbled.

Our true purpose for coming to this country was not to sightsee. Of course, that was one of our aims, but we had come to solve an urgent problem we were facing.

That was, as my sister stated—

“We must find the Lily of Happiness and immediately procure funds. I’ll need your cooperation, Big Sis. Otherwise, we’re going to sleep hungry tonight.”

To summarize, we were currently searching for a specific flower so we could make some quick change. To simplify further, we were looking for the Lily of Happiness.

I didn’t think we were likely to find it among the many blossoms on the city streets.

We’d been told it was “a lily that appears before those who love beautiful flowers, and it never withers. It beckons happiness, and it’s super cool.” This was a rumor of questionable merit that we had coincidentally overheard in a foreign country, so we honestly had no idea if it was even true.

As soon as we overhead the rumor, we thought to ourselves: “If we sold that

lily, we could make a lot of money, huh?”

“Definitely.”

We were only novice travelers, and we had soon run into a bind when it came to making cash. To be honest, when we left the Holy City Esto, we really hadn’t taken along enough money to last us for a long voyage. Once we became travelers, we were constantly in need of funds, so we had drained our small savings very quickly. In short, we were really in a pinch.

I should have asked Elaina about how she makes money...

“Anyway! You need to be stupidly happy looking at flowers, Big Sis! Then the Lily of Happiness should appear.” Avelia was bouncing around. “Wow! There are flowers here, too!”

Gah! She’s too cute...!

“Come on, you too. Hurry!”

“.....” For the time being, I forced a show of enthusiasm and approached a flower shop. “Oh my gosh! These are beautiful! How much are these flowers?”

This is so embarrassing. Kill me now...

“...Which ones?” The owner of the shop stuck her face out, looking quite annoyed.

“Huh? Um...these?” I had just been making stuff up, so I was stumped when asked to clarify.

“Uh, those are weeds.”

“.....” Taking a closer look, I realized those flowers weren’t decorating the front of the store, but blooming on the weeds growing on the street.

How misleading!

“If you like, I’ll give them to you for free. Honestly, they’re a nuisance...”

“.....” To gloss over the somewhat awkward atmosphere that had settled over the place, I smiled a little. “Um, does this shop have anything like the Lily of Happiness?”

The owner shook her head exasperatedly. “I get asked that a lot.” She

continued, “I don’t have any here. Maybe you’ll have better luck elsewhere.”

We ended up making the rounds to all sorts of shops, but it was all utterly in vain.

There were some people who tilted their heads in confusion. “The Lily of Happiness...?”

There were some stores that handed us artificial flowers. “Ah, how about this?”

As if we’d fall for that.

In the end, we didn’t find our flower. It seemed to be a flighty thing, vanishing from sight like the sun behind the clouds. It was enough to make me cock my own head, wondering: *Does such a flower really exist? ...Wouldn’t we earn money faster if we worked normal jobs...?*

“It’s so hard to find!”

That evening, we were comfortably installed at a local inn, but Avelia was in a terrible rage after spending all day walking around, smiling, to no avail. She was furiously rolling around on top of the bed, flailing angrily.

Stop! Stop! The bed is going to break!

“It wouldn’t be a rare treasure if it could be found that easily, would it?”

If the lily appeared before anyone who pretended to love flowers, you’d see it for sale at a bargain price in every flower shop.

“Big Sis, let’s try a different tactic tomorrow.” Avelia raised her head from where she had been lying facedown on the bed. “Sticking together is not very efficient. We should try to gather information separately.”

“You’re right.” I didn’t reject the idea. Acting like I was obsessed with flowers in front of my sister was all kinds of difficult, so I was on board!

While we were at it, I had a suggestion.

“Say, Avelia. If it’s all right with you, I think I’d like to try working a little while we’re here.”

“Huh? Why?” My little sister was super cute as she looked at me blankly with

big round eyes.

Suppressing the urge to smile, I put up my index finger and spoke with a resolute demeanor. “Think about it carefully, my sister. The two of us are searching for the Lily of Happiness, right? But there’s a chance that we might not find it, right? And if we can’t find it, we will be left penniless, right? Wouldn’t that be awful?”

“...! So you’re saying you’re going to make money for us by working?! That’s my big sister!” she shouted.

“I know, right?”

Go ahead! Praise me more! I’m the type of person who gets better with praise.

“So starting tomorrow,” I continued, “I’ll make us money, and Avelia, you’ll search for the Lily of Happiness by pretending to be obsessed with flowers. This way you can do your search without panicking about our funds!”

“You got it! Thank goodness... As your younger sister, I was worried about what I would do if you became a slacker who always rode on the back of my broom and hardly worked...”

“You’re so mean.” *That was why she was so happy?*

“So how are you planning to make money?” She quickly went back to looking serious.

“Don’t worry. Leave it up to your big sister. I’ve got a plan.”

I wouldn’t make a suggestion without one in place.

“...And you’re not just foisting everything onto me and running away because you’re embarrassed to play the part of a girl who loves flowers, right?”

“I w-w-would n-n-never do that! I made my suggestion after I considered everything!”

“...Something’s fishy.” Avelia’s eyes were narrow as she stared fixedly at me.

“C-come on. Just watch. Tomorrow, I’m going to gather some capital for us. So you work hard and find the Lily of Happiness, Avelia.”

“Hm... I’m not really satisfied with that explanation, but I understand. I’ll do

my best.”

Avelia slipped into bed, looking reluctant. She seemed to be quite sleepy after walking around all day.

“Well then, good night...” she said with a yawn, already half asleep.

“Good night,” I replied. “By the way, wanna sleep together?”

“Oh, I’ll pass.” Even if she was half asleep, her rejection was unmistakable.

“.....” I went to bed in a huff.



When I woke up in the morning, my big sister was clinging to me, so I peeled her off. I had found it hard to sleep, and I guess this had been the problem.

My sister was the type to toss and turn—and maybe even torpedo—in bed. Even if she was tied up with a rope or something, she always managed to unbind herself in her sleep and get out of her own bed. I don’t think anyone has ever been able to stop her from doing this.

I woke my big sister up right away. “Wake up.”

I shook her shoulder violently, and after a little while, she opened her eyes.

“Ah...! Why am I in Avelia’s bed...?”

“It’s because you’re a fitful sleeper.”

“...Is your face flushed?”

“Y-you’re imagining things.”

In any case, this is how our second day in Flower City began.

“Beautiful flowers—a passionate red! These blue flowers are as lovely as the ocean! Ah! These are yellow like the sun! Ahh...my heart feels pure again...”

I walked through the town acting like an idiotic girl, both arms spread wide, looking like I might burst into song any second.

“Ahh...! I’m just so jealous of the people in this city who get to live their lives surrounded by these flowers!”

Whenever the people around me shot glances my way, I never failed to play it

up. "I just loooove flowers!"

By the way, that earned me more blank stares and a "What's with that weirdo?"

"Mr. Flower Seller! What's this flower?"

"Those are weeds."

"..... What great weeds!"

Weeds again? Well, that was a waste of time.

At any rate, I made my best effort and walked through the town.

"Aaah... This flower is really, um...something..."

I tried. But thinking of ways to praise flowers around the clock was harder than I'd expected.

"Oh, you have so many flowers... These ones are, you know..."

Lily of Happiness... Come out, come out, wherever you are...

"...Wow, beautiful..."

I can't do this anymore...

".....Sigh."

I reached my limit around lunchtime. I plopped down on a bench in the town square and sighed, utterly exhausted. "*It's a lily that appears before those who love beautiful flowers, and it never withers,*" according to the stories, but what the heck did that mean? *Those who love beautiful flowers?* That's where they lost me.

First of all, I had spent half the day playing the part of the girl who loves flowers, but not a thing had appeared before me. *Were the stories really true...?*

I sighed again. ".....Haaaah."

However, that noisy exhale just now was not mine.

The person who had let out that sigh—far deeper and heavier than my own—was a girl who had taken a seat beside me.

She was beautiful, with striking waves of golden hair. From the hem of her

sand-colored trench coat stretched slim legs clad in black tights, and I could see she had a fantastic figure. Her silhouette was so slim, it made me wonder if she might not be wearing anything else under the coat.

“.....I want to die.”

Then she let out another deep sigh, wearing a worrying expression like the world was coming to an end.

Humans had short memories, so when I caught sight of someone who was more depressed than I was, I quickly forgot about my own troubles.

“...Um, what’s the matter?” I asked the girl sitting beside me, whose name I didn’t know, without thinking too hard about it.

She looked a bit surprised but turned her scarlet eyes toward me and nodded.
“...Ah, I’m in a bit of a bind.”

“Oh-ho.” This was triggering the overachiever in me. “If you like, you could tell me your problems. Despite appearances, I’m often told I’m a good listener.”

Since my previous job as a defender of the public practically required me to know everyone’s business—for their own safety, of course—whenever I come across someone looking troubled, I always feel the need to get involved. That’s just who I am.

In other words, people say I’m nosy. Really, I’m cursed with curiosity.

“Oh... Are you sure...?” She giggled. “Then I might take you up on your offer.”

Now, at that point, a normal person would have surely said, “Huh? Why should I tell some random stranger? Are you crazy? Are you trying to get me to join your cult? Take your soliciting elsewhere!” and spit in my face like a camel, but I could guess from the way she looked that the girl before me wasn’t like that.

She seemed so defeated, I was guessing her judgment might be a little clouded.

As she looked at me, she let out another lifeless sigh. “...I’m on my honeymoon right now.”

“Oh.”

Hmm? I have a hunch this might be about a toxic relationship.

“But I’m not getting along so well with my partner...”

“Oh-hoh!” *I love hearing these types of stories!*

“...Why are your eyes twinkling?”

“You’re imagining things.”

She stared at me suspiciously.

“So which one of you is having an affair?” I probed. “Is it you? Or your husband?”

“I haven’t said a single word about either of us having an affair!”

“Okay, okay, don’t worry. I’m used to hearing these kinds of things. Of all the people who come to consult with me, I’d say at least half of them are troubled by their marriage entering the dead zone due to infidelity. Either their spouse’s or their own.”

“And the other half?”

“.....Um, well, they...”

“Ah, from that response I basically understand. Oh-hoh-hoh.” The girl laughed, and I could see just a little bit of life returning to her face. “You’re quite innocent, you.”

At the same time, I could feel a little color coming over my own features.

Come to think of it, we haven’t even introduced ourselves yet.

“By the way, my name isn’t ‘you.’ I’m Avelia.”

“Goodness, you’re right. Pardon me, Avelia.” A little late, she told me her name, placing a hand on her own breast with a graceful gesture as she did so. “My name is Chocolat. Lovely to meet you.”

There didn’t seem to be too big of an age gap between us, but her mannerisms were strangely calm and dignified, indicating her high social status.

She perfectly exemplified elegance.

Just like a princess.

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“Oh, you’ve really helped me out, little lady. Here’s your pay.”

When I reported to the owner of the flower shop that I had finished my work, he quickly scanned the front of the shop, then merrily handed me some money. It was small change—no more than a child’s allowance—but for me, on the brink of starvation, any amount of money was a real boon.

“Hooray! Thank you very much! Call me again when the weeds grow back, okay? I’ll clean them up in an instant!”

I happily squirreled away the money in my wallet.

The job that I had undertaken was something anyone could do, but it was one that no one would be eager to take on.

I was a weed mower.

The plainest, most unremarkable job, pruning out the blossoming weeds beside the flower shops, which were so confusingly similar to their wares. However, if I kept working, I could eventually make a lot of money doing this. They say little drops of water make an ocean, so many bits of weeds... Hmm. I guess piles of weeds are just piles of weeds.

“All right then, I’m off to the next shop!”

See ya! I left the shop and bounded down the road.

I’d say I was already seeing some return on my part-time work, even though I was only a beginner. Already, I could feel my wallet was a little bit fatter than it had been this morning. Enough so, in fact, that it made me wonder... *If this keeps going, maybe we won’t need to search for the Lily of Happiness after all.*

Gripping my wallet, I ran around town for a little while longer.

“Hey! What the heck is this! Where is this blasted Lily of Happiness?!”

A thunderous voice was booming from the flower shop I was heading to next. An angry woman, fuming with her hands planted on her hips, had fixed a furious expression on the shopkeeper, who was bent over humbly.

“There’s no such thing, is there? Were the rumors false? Don’t mess around with me!”

She had fiery red hair. From what she was screeching about, there could be no doubt that she was visiting from elsewhere, but she was dressed in a Chesterfield coat and jeans, a truly ordinary outfit. I thought she looked different from the people who wandered from place to place for work, like travelers and merchants. She must have been a fellow traveler. She was wearing a sword on her hip, though.

Maybe she came from afar seeking the Lily of Happiness?

“Um, I told you, madam... This is just a random flower shop, so...we don’t have any...”

“Tch...! Where on earth can it be...?!” The unnamed visitor scratched at her cheek in vexation.

Ahh... As I thought, it’s not so easy to find, huh...

It was starting to seem more and more likely that Avelia and I would never be able to find the legendary flower, even if we turned over every stone in this country.

Wouldn’t it be faster to earn money working a normal job?

The old shopkeeper shook her head. “I’ve heard those rumors, too, but you know... I’ve never seen a shop selling them. I wonder if they really exist...?”

Oh no, seems like this place doesn’t have the Lily of Happiness either. Where on earth can it be...?

“Um, excuse me for interrupting your conversation...” I said to the old shopkeeper. “Are there any weeds growing around this shop? I’m a traveler making a living by mowing the weeds in this area, so—”

The shopkeeper greeted me. She was probably thinking something like: *A welcome escape from this bothersome customer.*

“Oh! I’m so grateful... A welcome escape from this bothersome customer...” she mumbled in a quiet voice.

What a terrible shopkeeper...

“.....” Miss Redhead had been glaring intently at the old shopkeeper but shifted her hostility to me when I cut in. I could feel her sharp glare on my face.

Like a beast who's caught her prey, huh?

“...Hm?”

As I was thinking that, those eyes veered away from my face, slowly sliding down past my chest, all the way to the tips of my toes.

“...Um, what?” This was strange and a little uncomfortable.

“What’s your name?”

“.....” This was also strange and a little uncomfortable. “...When you ask someone their name, you need to give your own name first. How rude.”

“...My name is Rosamia.”

I see, I see. Not that I’m interested.

Since she had given her name, there was no way I could avoid answering her.

“Okay. My name is Amne—”

Before I could finish, a powerful blast of wind tore past me, grazing my cheek. My hair blew across my face, and I felt a chill on my skin.

I didn’t have any time to smooth my disordered hair...because the woman in front of me was now brandishing a sword, holding the point level with my face.

I had no idea how we’d gotten here.

“Ah...what?”

So she is a beast who's caught her prey?



The story that Chocolat told me was a very sad tale of a lovers’ quarrel.

To put it clearly and concisely, Chocolat and her husband had been having difficulties in their relationship for the past month.

The two of them were traveling to countries around the world, calling it their honeymoon, and one month earlier, they had arrived in a certain country. It was a totally unremarkable place, but she told me that they were happy as long as they were together.

However, while they were sightseeing there, there had been an incident.

Chocolat had become friendly with another traveler.

This is what Chocolat told me about meeting that other traveler.

“Sometimes, I would walk around town by myself, and that’s when it happened. I chanced upon another young traveler who had lost her way.” She said that the visitor had been a very mysterious person. “The journeyer had white hair with a thick headband, dressed like a knight—but lacked any armor. Instead, the traveler wore a robe like a mage and was equipped with a saber, so I think this person was probably a knight. I have a bit of a weakness for knights. They’re so incredible. My heart was pounding. And so I decided we should become friends.”

...That sounds kind of familiar, but let’s hear her out.

Anyway, while she was showing the traveler the way, Chocolat started to open up to her new companion, and their relationship did not end on that day. They became fast friends and continued to meet up whenever they had spare time.

“...But that traveler really was a strange person, you see, whose memory was wiped clean after a day. The journeyer was apparently trying to get back home but didn’t even know where that was. Each new day would mean missing memories, including everything about me. I thought, I can’t just leave this poor person alone.”

So in an effort to help her one way or another, Chocolat spent a lavish amount of money researching information about the Holy City Esto, which was where the lost lamb was trying to go.

...That sounds awfully familiar, but let’s hear her out.

“In all ways possible, I found out everything I could about the Holy City Esto and acquired a map. I handed the map over, with ‘Here-ish!’ to mark the destination, and the traveler was extremely pleased.”

But Chocolat’s husband was not so happy about this exchange.

Apparently, Chocolat had hidden her friendship with the traveler from her spouse. According to what she told me, her husband was a knight who had once been her royal bodyguard, and Chocolat felt sure her spouse would grow

jealous upon hearing that she had become friendly with a traveler who was also a knight.

And so Chocolat had kept their meetings a secret.

However, after Chocolat had given the map to the traveler and they had all left that country, her husband asked Chocolat, "...Have you lost interest in me?"

Her husband knew that she had met the traveler in secret, that they had become friends, and that Chocolat had secretly made and handed over the map.

And so he grew terribly depressed, and their relationship began to suffer. They continued their travels, but they found themselves spending less and less time together, engaging in fewer and fewer conversations. Before they knew it, a whole month had gone by.

During that month, the two of them overheard a certain rumor.

The Lily of Happiness.

There was a fairly dubious tale that anyone who got ahold of it would find true happiness, but Chocolat had a hunch that it might be the only way to get their relationship back to normal.

For the past several days, they had been searching for the flower during their stay in this city.

"But we can't find anything..."

She was disheartened.

Their relationship was never going to go back to how it used to be, was it? That was all she could think. I had spoken to her right as she had sat down on the bench, feeling hopeless.

Ah, I see.

I suppose that's a much more respectable reason, isn't it? Completely different from searching for the Lily of Happiness to make a quick buck.

By the way—

"...Um, I'm going to ask you something unrelated to what you've been talking

about."

"What's that?"

"...Was that traveler a girl? Why would your husband be jealous of you becoming friends with another girl?"

Chocolat answered nonchalantly. "My husband is a girl, too."

"....."

Ohh, I see...

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"Prepare yoooourself!"

The sword being brandished against me grazed my cheek and whizzed through the air. I never imagined someone would be swinging a blade, threatening lives, but dodging this woman's weapon quickly put that notion out of my head.

Huh? Why is my life in danger in a flower shop? I couldn't help but wonder.

She was attacking me without rest. I didn't have time to voice my question. If I lost focus for even an instant, my head would go flying.

"What's wrong? I expected better swordplay from the woman who stole my lover!"

You say that but... "I don't know who you are..."

"Don't you play dumb with me!" The sword swung down at the top of my head—and just before it hit, I blocked it with my scabbard.

"Why won't you draw your sword?!"

"Because my sword isn't for killing people!"

And it's not like I can cut you down without understanding why.

"In that case, why do you carry it?"

"To pull weeds?"

"You little...!" There was a grinding sound. I couldn't quite tell whether it was from her teeth or our crossed swords. The force behind the blade bearing down

on my head increased.

“.....”

I had recovered my memories, but as to the conflict between me and this Rosamia woman before my eyes, I had absolutely no idea. The circumstances had me wondering, *First of all, who is this person?*

I probably committed some careless blunder against this woman's sweetheart while I was suffering from memory loss, but...

“...Um, I don't think that I've interfered with anyone's love affairs during my travels.”

“Don't play stupid!”

She plowed into me, and I flew backward. There was a loud noise like a large boulder had split or something, and the bricks paving the ground had been pulverized.

I stared at her blankly, thinking that a log or a club, some kind of blunt weapon, would suit her better than a sword, and she scowled at me.

“A month ago, you met a beautiful blond girl.”

“Beautiful...blond...? One month ago...?” *How vague...*

I opened my mental diary. Previously, I had read it almost every day, so I had naturally memorized the contents.

One month ago...I believe that would have been right before I encountered Elaina, back when I was still reading my diary entries almost every day...

“...! Ah! That girl!” Suddenly, I knew whom she meant and clapped my hands in delight. “You mean Chocolat, right?!”

“So you *did* meet her!” She brandished the sword, sweeping it sideways to slice through my torso. I dodged it.

“Wait, but isn't Chocolat a girl?”

“She is. What of it?”

“Uh, just, earlier you said she was your lover...”

“She is my lover.”

Huh? Umm? I feel like there's a misunderstanding...

“I was sure from the way you were talking earlier that I had mistakenly made a move on your sweetheart or something...”

“Incorrect.”

“Ah, I thought so. So she's not your sweetheart.”

“She's my wife.”

“Oh, so you're married...”

Interesting. I'd always assumed romantic love was between a man and a woman, but maybe love between two women or two men was customary in other parts of the world. Maybe that was the worldwide norm. A global standard.

“That's normal in my country.”

“Oh, yeah. It's just...I always thought love could only blossom between a man and a woman, so I didn't approach Chocolat with any bad intentions or anything, and of course, I never had even the slightest thought of taking her away from you, Rosamia—”

“Are you saying that my princess isn't eye-catching?!”

“No, that's not what I mean! You're so annoying!”

Quit it already! I'm leaving!

Nothing would be solved by continuing this argument with someone who simply refused to listen.

I turned on my heel and ran as fast as I could.

Let's bring this to an end with a proper escape!

“Wait! Waaaaaaaiiiit!”

I continued pounding against the pavement, pressed onward by her angry shouting.



This city sure is noisy.

I have a hunch that something dangerous is going down.

At the same time, I feel vaguely anxious, though I have absolutely no idea what it might be about.

“...What should I do, Avelia? What on earth should I do?”

The uproar of the city must not have been reaching the ears of Chocolat at all, as she sat next to me fretting. She let out sigh after romantic sigh, like a maiden sick with love.

She asked me the question, but I was at a total loss.

“How about discussing the situation with Rosamia for starters?”

That would probably be the quickest way. By which I mean, there's really no other way.

“If I could do that, I wouldn't be having this problem!” Chocolat scolded. “But when it comes to Rosamia, no matter how I explain myself, she gets upset and won't listen! She keeps saying, 'But you looked like you were having so much fun when you were with that girl...’”

“Wow, what a pain she is.”

“That's right! She's a pain! But I love that part of her, too...”

“.....”

Maybe if you told her that, she would be in a better mood.

“All right, then I think you should prove your love to her.”

“Meaning what?” Chocolat tilted her head in puzzlement.

I put a hand on her shoulder, and with a solemn expression, I said, “You have to kiss her.”

“What?”

“I don't know if it's jealousy or what, but you need to shut her up when she's going on and on like that. Then she'll be quiet.”

“Oh no. Kissing in front of others... That's...immmodest...”

Well, I didn't tell you to do it in front of me or anything, so...

"Exactly where is Rosamia right now?"

When I asked, Chocolat, who had been fidgeting with embarrassment, instantly switched back to the blood-drained expression she had been wearing just a moment ago.

"We're...separated, for now. It was getting awkward... I'm sure I'm the only one searching for the Lily of Happiness... She's probably searching for other girls, disappointed in me..."

"..."

She was the picture of emotional instability.

"...All right, let's go find her."

"Huh?" Chocolat, widening her eyes, stared at me as I stood up. "W-wait a second! Right now? I'm going to kiss her right now?"

"Listen, I never said anything about doing it in front of me—" I let out an exasperated sigh.

The tumult of the city was ringing in my ears, even louder than before.

It was starting to get really noisy, and that's when I turned around and strained my eyes to look more closely, wondering what on earth was happening.

What I saw there explained why I was feeling vaguely uneasy.

"Aaaaaaaaaahhh!" Someone with white hair was running this way.

"Wait, yooooooooooooouuuuuu!" Someone with red hair was giving chase.

...Oh, my sister was being chased by this redhead.

"Uh..."

Let me see, my big sister's job involves being chased around by a lady with red hair?



There were two faces that I recognized ahead.

One was my younger sister. She wore a confused expression, as if she was saying, “*What the heck do you think you’re doing, Big Sis?*”

The other was a friend who had taken care of me one month earlier—Chocolat.

But I didn’t have the time to be happy to see her again. If I continued running toward them, there was a chance they’d get caught up in Rosamia’s rampage. I had a feeling that neither Avelia nor Chocolat would make it out unscathed if that happened.

And so—

“Rosamia!” I stopped and spun around. “Let’s stop this already. I really didn’t have my eye on Chocolat at all. It’s a misunderstanding!”

“Don’t lie to me! You were trying to make my princess your own, weren’t you?!”

“No, I seriously wasn’t. Please, listen to me...”

I was getting fed up with her when a voice came from behind me.

“Rosamia! What are you doing? We’re just friends! We don’t have that kind of relationship!”

“But, Princess Chocolat...you cast me aside to go have what seemed like a very fun time with her.”

Well, I do remember chatting with her and passing the time, sure, but—

“But I honestly don’t have any romantic feelings toward Chocolat!”

And I mean it.

“My heart doesn’t beat for anyone other than you, Rosamia!” exclaimed Chocolat. “Well, I did get a little fluttery when I saw her looking like a knight, but...” she added quietly, and I pretended I hadn’t heard her.

However, Rosamia only responded by shouting back abuse. “You’re lying! Just admit that you’re tired of me!” It seemed maidens in love were difficult creatures to handle.

The girl behind me seemed truly hurt. “What a cruel thing to say...” Her voice

was meek. "I've been terribly heartbroken ever since we had our falling out. That's why I've been searching through this country for the Lily of Happiness, to get us back on good terms—"

"The Lily of Happiness...!" Rosamia stopped short. "I've been searching for that, too! So I could get back together with you, Princess..."

"Well! I was certain you had gotten over me and were out hunting for another girlfriend..."

"There's no way I would do that! You're the only one for me, Princess!"

"S-same! I'm not interested in any woman besides you, Rosamia!"

And then—

""I love you!""

The two of them spit out the embarrassing line in unison. I couldn't look.

Oh, I'm getting secondhand embarrassment.

"Ah!" Chocolat covered her mouth with both hands as she turned bright red.

"Ah!" Rosamia hid her growing smile behind her arm.

What is with these two?

In the end, this couple had both wanted to overcome the tension between them by acquiring the Lily of Happiness, which would return their relationship to normal.

I see, I see.

...What an anticlimactic end.

"So it was all a misunderstanding...I'm sorry. I was certain that..."

"It's my fault...I jumped to the wrong conclusion...I'm sorry..."

The two had completely reconciled.

Rosamia sheathed her sword and walked toward Chocolat, who inched hesitantly toward her partner. By the time they were facing each other, I think they had forgotten entirely about the two of us watching.

"There really is no one else for me but you. I love you, Rosamia."

It was like Chocolat had no idea that Avelia and I were even there. The two of them were deeply submerged in their own world.

"I love you, too! But...when you get friendly with other girls...I get jealous." In Rosamia's case, she was keeping us in check by menacing us with a flash of her sword.

I told you I'm not after her!

"No matter how friendly I get with someone, no one will ever matter more to me than you. Not before, not ever."

"....."

"....."

"...Princess."

"...Rosamia."

What's with this atmosphere?

"Princess Chocolat, please, never turn an eye to anyone but me from now on... I can't live without you..."

"Rosamia, I've never looked at anyone but you from the very beginning. Amnesia was my friend, but I never liked her like that... I've always had a thing for people dressed like knights, but look at me, Rosamia. You and Amnesia are as different as heaven and earth."

"Princess..."

"Rosamia..."

Why did she have to drag me into this?

"Big Sis, don't get too worked up." Avelia planted a hand down on my shoulder to console me. "I like you a lot, you know? Isn't that enough?"

Who said I was worked up?

Poor, pitiful me, being neglected over here. As if they cared nothing for my plight, Rosamia and Chocolat were burning with love, holding each other in a sultry embrace for all to see.

When the two of them started kissing, I covered my sister's eyes with both hands.

"I can't see."

"It's too soon for you, Avelia."

"Humph." She wriggled around, trying to remove my hands, struggling against me for a little while, then finally gave up and let out a sigh. "...Well, I don't really understand it, but somehow it seems like we solved the problem."

"...We sure did."

I wish we'd gotten something for our trouble after getting dragged into this strange misunderstanding.

"So...I don't think they realize we're still here..."

"No, I don't think so. Love is blind, after all."

"They don't seem blinded..."

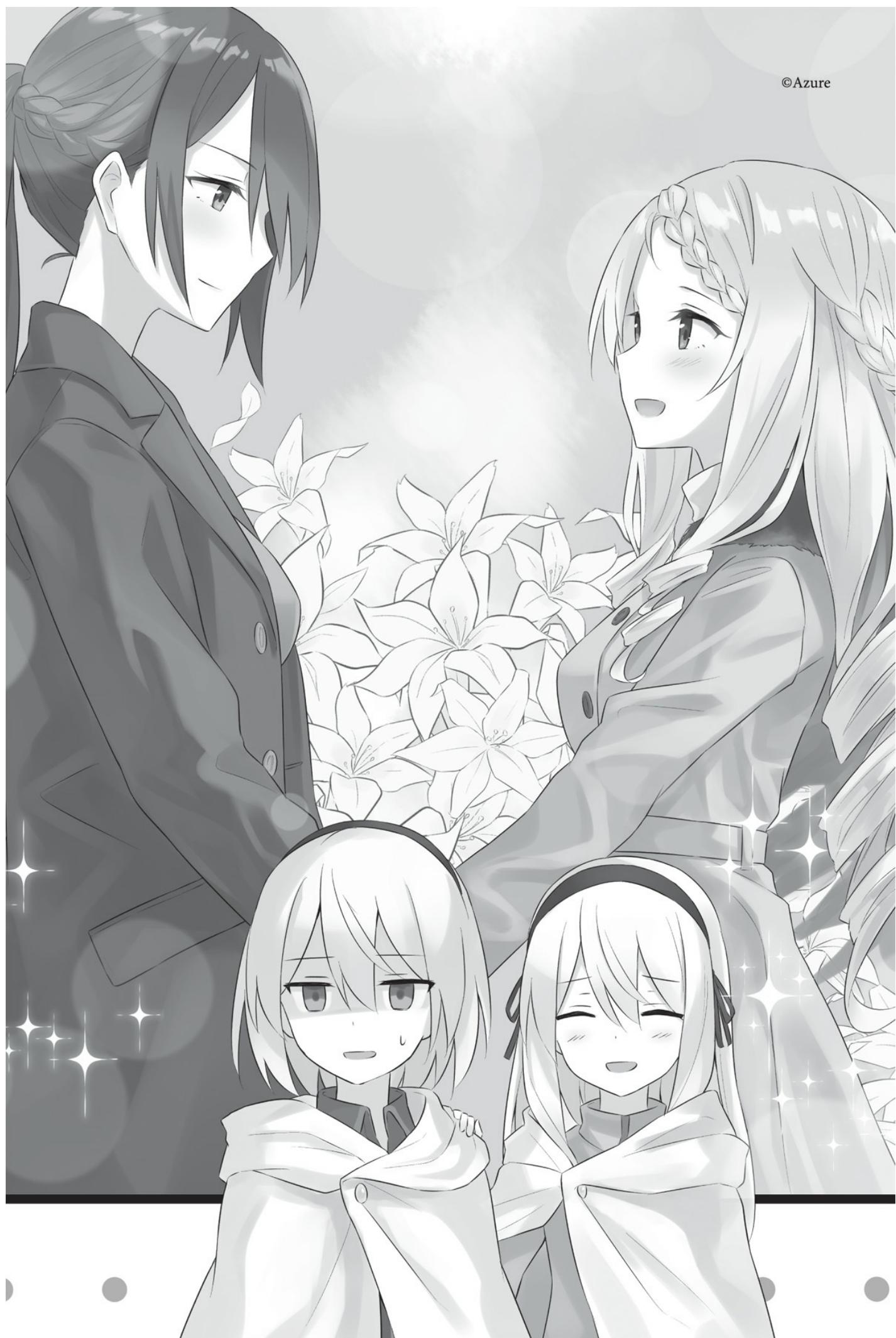
"You only have eyes for your partner." I let out a sigh as I watched the two of them from afar. I could practically feel the heat radiating from their ardent embrace.

My sigh was in relief at having finally arrived at a resolution to this whole confusing incident.

...I was also a little disappointed that we had not found the Lily of Happiness.

"What are we gonna do about money...?"

I really should get Elaina to teach us more about her moneymaking schemes...



In the end, we never found the Lily of Happiness.

But the reality is that even though we hadn't found any such thing, our pressing financial concerns got swept away right there in that city.

"We caused the two of you a lot of trouble. Here, this is a token of my gratitude. Please take it."

After their relationship was back to normal, the couple told us that apparently Chocolat was set to become the queen of some country somewhere. As thanks to the two of us for saving their marriage, Chocolat gave us money.

...A staggering number of gold coins.

"Um, we can't possibly take all this..."

It was too much money, so my older sister, always courteous, gently tried to refuse it.

I mean, what on earth is she thinking, giving us so much gold as "a token of gratitude"? Isn't that too much gratitude? Are Chocolat and her wife secretly trying to woo my big sister after all?

"No. This is how grateful I am. Please, do take it."

Isn't that too much gratitude?

"Oh, but..."

"It's fine."

In the end, we accepted the money that was forced on us.

One way or another, our fundraising problem had been solved.

We never did find the Lily of Happiness. The rumor had just taken on a life of its own, and in the end, we never even caught sight of such a thing.

We left Flower City, and as we were bobbing unhurriedly along on my broom, my big sister looked vacantly up into the sky and said, "I think perhaps such a flower never existed in the first place."

"What do you mean?" I tilted my head questioningly.

"Elaina once told me something: 'Travelers with filthy hearts and merchants will tell you lies to make a sale, like that some worthless rubbish in their wares is a legendary item, or that it's very popular abroad.'"

"Uh-huh."

"So what I'm saying is that the flower probably never existed in the first place..."

"....."

If that's the case, then it means that we got completely set up by a stupid lie. Nothing could make me angrier.

"Well, I suppose we ought to be a little more careful about gleefully believing everything we hear."

"...I suppose so."

My big sister had probably half believed, half doubted the rumor about the Lily of Happiness from the very beginning.

...Being a traveler sure is hard.

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"...Yes, that's what I'm telling you. This is the Lily of Happiness. It comes from the Far West...or was it the East? Ah, maybe it was the North... No. The South? Well, it doesn't really matter where, but in any case, there is a place called Flower City, and in that city, the flower is a local legend. It's really amazing!"

By the side of the road in some country somewhere, a witch with ashen hair was selling flowers.

One flower cost one gold piece, an absolutely absurd price, unbelievable really, but that witch—that traveler—was brazenly selling her flowers nonetheless.

"Come on, miss... You say all that, but...isn't it too pricey? For a flower?"

Her male customer was looking back at her with a dubious expression.

Despite that, she wore an intrepid smile.

"There's a reason for the price. Once you have this flower in hand, you will

find happiness. For a single gold coin, your life can be bright and rosy. This is a lily that lets you see roses. Isn't it amazing?"

"But it's a flower. Won't it rot?"

"This flower never decays."

"What kind of flower never decays?"

An artificial one.

"These lilies have mysterious powers and only appear before those who seek them. It will never rot. That's what makes them truly special."

And ordinary fake flowers.

They were ordinary fake flowers, but this witch was selling them for an extraordinary price, weaving unbelievable tales. These artificial flowers could be purchased at a nearby general store for one copper each. Trash, basically.

"Uh-huh... Well, I suppose I'll try buying one..."

"Thanks for your business!"

The girl filled her purse with ill-gotten gold—a traveler with a filthy heart, busy fattening her wallet. Just who could she be?

That's right. She's me.



CHAPTER 7

The Yellow Flower of Happiness

“That flower you’re selling—is it a Happiness Flower?”

It happened as I was selling artificial flowers in the middle of town. A traveler holding a large suitcase stood before me. “I heard a rumor about a Happiness Flower that will never wither.”

“Yes, that’s right. How about it?”

I cocked my head, and the man took an artificial lily from my hand. He touched the petals with his fingers, flicked them, and brought them close to his face to inhale the flower’s aroma. As soon as he was finished, his expression became severe, as if he had smelled something rancid.

“This is fake,” he objected. “It’s not even a real flower.”

It was, as he conjectured, an imitation—just a regular artificial flower.

Oh my.

“You speak as if you think a Happiness Flower truly exists.”

“Well—” The man nodded as if he did know, and there wasn’t a hint of deception in his eyes.

Huh, seriously? There is such a thing? Oh-hoh!

“If you’re interested, you can go and see for yourself. The Happiness Flower—lovely and sublime—grows far to the west... Uh, or was it the east? Oh, maybe it’s north... No, south? Well anyway, somewhere around there.”

“.....”

There was something suspicious about the man’s story. But he continued in a flurry, recounting the whereabouts of the flower and calling it by its full name: the Yellow Flower of Happiness. Which was, according to him, a solitary flower that blooms only one to a flower field.



"The forest is cramped and the trees are overgrown, so it's easy to get lost, but if you follow the signposts, you should be able to get there quickly—to the flower field, that is."

The man who had told me about the Yellow Flower of Happiness had also told me how to find it.

As he had said, I found the signposts and followed them through the forest.

"Hmmm..." It was strange. The signs that I passed by had all been beheaded and were lying on the ground.

It was as if they were rejecting any visitors to the flower field.

I had a feeling that this was a bad omen.

"....."

And unfortunately, that bad premonition of mine was largely on the mark.

I flew through the forest for a short while, before finding my way to the place where the flower field was.

Or where it should have been.

"...It's all withered."

It was a tragic scene.

Where there should have been a field of beautiful flowers stood nothing but dried-out, earth-colored husks. There was not a single yellow blossom, or anything else alive, really. Just the shriveled-up remains of flowers.

"Whaaa..."

I was terribly disappointed. I had really been looking forward to this, and now what exactly had I flown all this way for? My shoulders drooped dejectedly as I alighted from my broom.

The dead flowers crumbled dryly as I walked over them.

By the way, near the flower field was a small village.

It looked like the villagers maintained the flower field. On the other side of the place that had been a flower field stood a sign with the name YELLOW FLOWER

VILLAGE. This one hadn't been torn down and still properly indicated the road to the settlement.

The same sign stood in front of a small gate that I reached by proceeding through the forest a short while.

"Oh, welcome, Miss Witch! Welcome to our village."

When I got down off my broom in front of the village, a lone man came out to greet me.

"Yes, hello." I nodded once and put my broom away.

"Did you also come to see the flower field over there?"

"Do I look like I did?"

"I can tell from your expression." Apparently, I looked more disappointed than I thought I did. "The field has been in that state for two weeks now."

"That's too bad. I was looking forward to seeing the flowers."

In that case, I suppose the Yellow Flower of Happiness is out of the question?

"The travelers and sightseers who came here in the last two weeks have all said the same thing—I, too, feel that it's a real shame. It was a precious attraction."

"I'm sure."

"I hope it comes back soon, but..."

"....."

The Yellow Flower Village was now the Withered Flower Village.

I suppose they haven't taken the sign down because they're hoping the yellow flower might bloom again, huh?

"Why did the field get like that? Gross negligence?"

The villager shook his head. "Nothing like that, I'm sure of it. We would never allow the pride of our village to wither that easily."

"Who is managing the field?"

"Well, I am now. Before, a different person was doing it, though."

“So that person messed up?”

“No, he didn’t. He took perfect care of them. But the flowers withered even so.”

“And you don’t know the reason why?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“...Hm.”

I thought it was quite a shame. I had missed out on the flower field that I had been so looking forward to seeing. It would have to wait for another time.

The mysterious thing was that even though the flower field—the village’s sole attraction—had died, this villager did not sound worried at all. He was acting as if it were somebody else’s problem.

With the flower field gone, they should have been busy planting new seeds or creating a new sightseeing spot, so why was he so detached from this whole situation?

Don’t you get it? Your village will die, too, unless you do something.

“By the way, Miss Witch,” the man said, “while it is true that our village’s flower field has been like that for two weeks now, there’s still more to see here.”

Hm?

“Meaning?”

“You can no longer see the flower field. But in its place, something even more amazing has appeared. I never noticed it before the field withered, though.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s decorating my house. Will you take a look?”

I tilted my head quizzically. “What on earth do you have?”

“The Yellow Flower of Happiness,” he revealed. “A miraculous flower that never withers.” He looked at me as if to say, “*Isn’t that amazing?*”

“Interesting.”

I don't think there was any surprise on my face.

We passed through the gate into the Yellow Flower Village, and I marched behind the man.



Inside the village, homes dotted across the land, but there were no people.

I wonder if this is what "ghost town" means? Wait, this is a village, so does that make it a "ghost village"?

Anyway, there were absolutely no people to be found, not even figures inside the houses. When I entered any other village, there would be people around somewhere, and even if they were all holed up inside, there would at least be some voices or sounds leaking out onto the streets.

But this place didn't even have a lived-in feeling to it. All the windows of the houses were shut, and there was no laundry hanging out. The village was wrapped in silence; the only noise was the quiet sound of our footsteps.

"As you can see, this village is not that large. It's about the same size as the flower field over there. Though the flowers are all dead, so I suppose it's hard to make the comparison."

"The village is dead, too, isn't it?"

"I'm still here."

"...Why are you the only one in this village?"

"Everyone left. Apparently, most of the people in this village were only interested in the yellow flowers, so as soon as the flower field was lost, they cried out that it was a disaster and that it was the most awful thing that happened to them. Before I knew it, everyone was gone."

"But you stayed?"

"Because I still have a flower."

"....."

We arrived at his house.

"Whoa! It's massive!"

Standing before us was an enormous house, looking comically out of place in the deserted village. Honestly, it was just ridiculous in size.

What's this? Are you royalty or something?

"Hah-hah-hah. Incredible, right?" The man spoke with pride. "By the way, this house used to be the residence of the man who originally managed the flower field."

"Was he royalty or something?"

"No, just your regular rich man. Because he managed the flower field, you see."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, do come in. Please, be my guest."

Then the man opened the door to the house.

Inside the spacious mansion, I was shown to the dining room.

"Please, go ahead. This is a rich man's dining room, and this is a rich man's chair. Do have a seat. And this is a rich man's tea. It's delicious."

"Oh...incredible." Bidden to sit, I took a sip of the tea that was placed before me.

Mmm.

"Suit your tastes?"

"Yes. It tastes like money."

"It's even better with a dollop of honey."

"Oh-hoh. What happens then?"

"It'll taste like honey."

"....." I dribbled the nectar into the tea as I was told and took another sip.

"How is it?"

"Tastes like money."

Well. Let's put down this stupid exchange and the teacup and get to work.

“So then, where is this miracle flower of yours?”

“Miss Witch, please look atop the table.”

I looked.

In a vase, garishly glittering gold, stood a single flower.

And it was yellow.

...Could it be?

“This is it.”

“Ah.”

Not exactly secure...

“Since I’m the only person left in the village, there’s no need to lock it up tight.”

“...But if you leave it sitting here like an ordinary flower, it might be stolen in an impulsive moment? By an evil traveler or someone.”

“That’s no problem. This flower possesses the incredible power to bring good fortune to its owner. It won’t be stolen. Because if this flower were stolen, that would spell bad fortune for me.”

“.....? I’m sorry, I don’t really understand what you’re saying.”

I’m sure I was wearing a very skeptical expression.

The man put on a wide smile and sat down across from me, sandwiching the flower vase between us. “Ever since I acquired this flower, my life has been headed in a fantastic direction. To tell you the truth, before I got this flower, I was just a worthless deadbeat.”

“Huh.”

He told me dispassionately of his life until now.

According to him—the flower field had withered two weeks earlier, but it wasn’t like all the florets had suddenly died on the same day.

At first, the blossoms facing the outside of the field had shriveled up all at once. This was a baffling phenomenon, but the manager at the time just cocked

his head in confusion and didn't take this development seriously.

The following day, flowers farther inside had withered.

As the days went by, the rest of the flowers dried up gradually. As if stricken by some pestilence from the outside, they lost their lives.

As you would expect, the manager at the time eventually recognized the danger and, though a little late, took what countermeasures he could. Apparently, he tried all kinds of tactics. But no matter what he did to the flowers, he couldn't save them. Bit by bit, they all inevitably wilted.

In just two weeks, the whole field had turned brown.

This man, who had been a deadbeat, heard a rumor that the field had wilted and, for some reason or other, decided to make his way there.

Sure enough, the flower field was dead. Everything in it had drooped. Cementing it as a pitiful scene, a sign had been erected: **ENTRY PROHIBITED**.

The man ignored the sign and stepped into the field. That was when he discovered, in the very center of the field, a single unwilted flower.

"It seemed obvious that this one flower was defying its withering fate to the very end. And so I took it home. I took it home and stored it in a flower vase."

"....." *You mean you straight-up stole it?*

I was interested in the rest of the story, so I stayed quiet.

"From the day I brought that flower home, I've grown happier and happier. The nasty lot of villagers that used to abuse me and call me a deadbeat got sick one after another, or their marriages soured, or they started to quarrel among themselves."

"....."

"On top of that, I was entrusted with the management of this mansion, which stands in the center of the village. It seems the man who owned it ran away. Well, in short, I'm no longer a deadbeat."

"But the management of the mansion...didn't include the flower field, right?"

"Right. But it's been two weeks since the flower field withered. I'm the only

person in this village. Surely it's not an overstatement to say that I've already been entrusted with the care of it as well. Oh, this really is all thanks to this one flower. This one single flower was the turning point for major changes in my life."

"....." I felt like I had just sat through some sort of suspicious seminar. "So then, in the end, are you really happy? Even though there's not a single person around you?"

"Of course I am!" The man leaned forward enthusiastically. The flower on the table swayed gently. "Every single one of the jerks who ridiculed me is gone, you see? Nothing could make me happier!"

By the way...a wise person from long ago once said that there are two types of happiness.

One comes from unforeseen fortune befalling oneself.

And the other—from unforeseen misfortune befalling others.

I remember nodding in understanding.

That's why the misfortune of others tasted so sweet.

Just like the teacup I had set to the side, it was sugary, like nectar.

○

I left the village that same day.

I didn't feel the need to be there for long. I didn't think it likely that the man was going to part with his Yellow Flower of Happiness at any rate, and I didn't find the story about his sudden rise in status particularly interesting.

He had risen in the world just by picking through leftovers, like how some have traded paperclips for houses, and his successes only inflated his ego to terrible proportions. The best thing I could do was cut all ties with him as quickly as possible.

And so I flew on my broom again, away from that place, and landed once more at a nearby village.

"Hello there!"

On the periphery of my vision, I could see a lone girl waving at me.

When I stopped to look, the girl asked with her head tilted questioningly, “Are you a traveler?”

“.....”

Now that I took a careful look around, I could see that this village was really a simple camp. The “buildings” I had seen were nothing more than simple, hastily erected tents.

It was probably too shabby to be called a village at all.

“Are you all refugees or something?”

The girl shook her head. “No, we all used to live in a village, but everyone ran away from that place.”

“.....” *Oh-hoh!* “Where did you run away from?”

My interest was once again piqued.

“Do you know of a place called Yellow Flower Village?”

Immediately after she said those words, another voice said, “Ah, I was wondering who it was. You’re that witch who was selling artificial flowers, aren’t you?”

A man had appeared suddenly behind the girl. He was wearing an expression like he could see right through me.

“How’s that other guy doing?” he asked. “Is he still full of himself, living in my house?”

I was led into the tent village and shown to the man’s house.

I say *house*, but it was really just a tent.

Once inside, the man, who was now living in squalor, introduced the woman beside him briefly—“This is my wife”—and smoothly explained himself as well. “And I’m the person who used to care for the flower field.”

He continued, “That man stole the village from us. We managed to escape here. Now, because of him, we are living this way, like deadbeats. It is unfortunate.”

The man was unexpectedly calm and collected.

"That guy is really enjoying his solitary lifestyle, you know."

"Huh... I suppose he's saying he feels refreshed now that there are no more difficult humans around?"

"How very perceptive of you."

"It figures." He shrugged.

"Why did all of you leave the village? Disease was spreading, and human relationships were souring... At least, that's what I heard."

"Mm. That's right. That's what happened. After the flower field withered, we were cursed."

"....."

"Most of the people here are folks who ran away from their misfortune in the village. Though my case is different." He lifted one of the parcels that was sitting along the side of the tent and held it in front of my eyes. "Right now, I'm going around to neighboring lands, searching for seeds. So that we might grow flowers again after this."

"You're planning to grow them again? I heard they started withering all on their own."

Even if you regrow them, won't they come to the same end?

"No, that won't happen. That was caused by the forest. If we cut back the forest a little bit, everything should go back to normal."

"...What do you mean?"

"I suppose you know that the forest hides an almost unlimited supply of magic, right?"

"....."

It's said that what we know as magic is produced by the trees in forests. That's precisely why mages are able to freely manifest their powers if they're in a forest. As a matter of fact, even I completed my magic training while living inside a forest.

However, while all that bottomless magical energy can bring about many

blessings to humans, it can also be very dangerous and cause a lot of harm.

It can give cats the ability to talk or give objects consciousness.

Or it can cause sudden mutations in flowers—

In that way, the magic concealed in forests is a strange thing that can give rise to phenomena that are normally unimaginable.

“What happened to our flower field was because of a sudden change in the forest’s magic. A single flower blooming in the field apparently picked up on that energy and caused the destructive changes you saw.”

“Trying to make people happy, you mean?”

“No, you’re wrong.” The man shook his head automatically, as if to collect himself. “The sudden change that came over the single flower that bloomed in the center of the field was more troublesome. That thing’s not a flower that makes people happy. It’s a flower that brings misfortune.”

He told me he had felt a strange discomfort in the flower field when it first began to suddenly wither. He had left the village right away, wandering from country to country in the area, investigating the cause of the blight.

In one nearby country he had come across a branch office of the mysterious organization known as the United Magic Association, so he commissioned an investigation and had them look into just what could have caused the flowers to start withering.

The witch dispatched from the United Magic Association reached a single conclusion after investigating the site.

“Considering the present condition, it looks like a flower is blooming which causes misfortune for everything around it. This kind of thing is recorded in the ancient texts.”

It seemed the terrible blight that had swept from the edges of the field toward the center was all caused by the single flower blooming at the center of the destruction. In other words, everything within a certain range of it would gradually die. Such was the nature of the damage that had befallen the field.

Hoping to stop it, the man decided to pluck the cursed blossom, but the witch

had said, “It’s best not to touch it so carelessly. That flower will not wither so long as there is something nearby that it can curse, and it can also cause harm to humans. The flowers in the field will all wilt, and once there is nothing around which can be infected, that flower should disappear on its own. So it’s best to leave it alone. It would be a real problem if it were carried out of there, so you should keep anyone from entering the field.”

That’s what he was told.

And so the man decided to leave it be. He told the residents of the village about what was happening, forbade anyone from entering the field, waited for every single one of the flowers to fall, and then left the village again to buy new seeds.

This is where the man had made his blunder.

“When I went to confirm that all the flowers in the field were wilted, that one pesky flower had already been taken away by a deadbeat. Nobody seemed to have told him about the changes that were taking over the flower field. He was always shut away alone, so I guess he never heard what was happening.”

“.....” *I see.*

“We only discovered that he had taken the flower out of the field after illness began spreading through the village. Terrible misfortune befell the villagers, one after another. But we knew if we tried to confiscate the flower from him, the bewitched flower would continue blooming as long as there were targets around it that it could curse. Everyone was afraid of the ominous flower, which was why we weren’t able to snatch it away from him. Ultimately, we decided to leave the village altogether.”

“.....” *So you’re saying it was better to abandon the place?*

“Based on what you’ve said, he’s still somehow alive—but that, too, is only a matter of time. After several days, even he will be claimed by the sickness. He will face his punishment for bringing such a terrible tragedy upon the village.”

It was a simple matter.

The supposed miracle flower—believed to bring about great happiness—was actually a mutant plant that deluded the holder into thinking they were happy

relative to everyone else.

The one man ignorant of that fact was the only person left in the village.

It was a simple story—and a cruel one.

The man in front of me was smiling now.

“Oh, I hope we can return to the village soon.”

What he was really saying was that he wished, from the bottom of his heart, for misfortune to befall the man who had been left behind in the village.



CHAPTER 8

A Certain Girl's Predictions

Somewhere, there was a girl who possessed a mysterious power.

This peculiar individual, head always concealed by a hood pulled down, showed no one her face. She could, to put it clearly and concisely, see the future.

Exactly how long she had been endowed with such a power was not for others to know, but she could see things—the futures of countries, of individuals, of it all.

However, the girl with the mysterious power did not seem inclined to put it to any good use. Maybe she had a cruel heart. Or perhaps she simply hated other people.

One day, the girl pointed at a couple walking through town and said, "You will break up in the next three days."

The couple laughed her off. They had a wonderful relationship. They could never imagine splitting up. Three days later, however, it came out that the man had been having an affair. The couple broke up, just as the strange girl had predicted.

Had it been a simple coincidence?

On a different day, the girl pointed at a boy who was searching for a missing pet cat.

"Your cat will be eaten by a wolf that slipped into town."

The townspeople immediately set out on a huge search for the missing feline. It turned out to be just as the girl had declared. Sure enough, a wolf had snuck into town, and they found the boy's cat in a terrible state.

Surely this, too, had to be a coincidence.

On yet another day, the girl said to a woman walking down the street, "Your husband will only live for one more month."

That woman's husband was suffering from a horrific disease, but she had been keeping it from everyone else. The strange girl spoke just as if she had seen what was to come.

And sure enough, one month later, the husband passed away.

With each coming day, the girl pronounced a new and terrible prediction.

"The new business that you're thinking of starting is going to fail."

"A burglar is going to rob your house."

"You're going to injure your left leg soon."

Her predictions were always ominous.

Eventually, people began to spread rumors that she could see the future. They feared the girl and spoke of her in hushed tones.

Soon, fear—unfocused fear—spread throughout the city. The people were frightened by the girl, and eventually, no one would have anything to do with her, though they couldn't do anything against her either.

For example, soldiers tried to restrain the girl, but she had slipped away, as if she had known that they were coming. When they tried to poison her, she neatly avoided it. Nothing the people could come up with could harm the girl who could read the future.

She always wore her hood pulled far down over her head, so not a single person knew anything about her—not her age and certainly not her face. No one even knew whether this girl—who seemed to spontaneously materialize, seemingly out of nowhere, to lay down some dire prophecy before vanishing completely—was even a citizen.

The people of the city feared this girl whom no one knew. They lived their lives dreading when, where, and to whom she would deliver her next unfortunate prediction.

Then it happened one day.

A lone witch appeared in that city.

Her ash-colored hair was sleek and long. This witch was a traveler and wore a

black robe and a pointy black hat. She could not foresee the future and had not been endowed with any special powers, making her just an ordinary witch.

She passed through the gate into the city.

Just who could she be?

That's right. She's me.

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"Ah. I'm out of money..."

As I paid the toll on my way into Laurent City, it occurred to me that my finances were in a fairly wretched state.

My goodness. Did my wallet develop a taste for gold and gobble it all up? How greedy.

It was a mystery to me why, as a traveler, I lived my life without a plan. I only ever decided to make money when it became unclear if I'd be able to pay for lodging for the night.

How about we plan ahead a little more?

.....

Curing myself of my reckless lifestyle wasn't going to do anything to help the current state of my wallet. It certainly wasn't going to bring money raining down on me.

In any case, I was currently looking at a night spent under the open sky if I didn't do something. To put it simply, you could say I was in a very bad situation.

If that was the case...and if my wallet was at death's door...

"...I guess this is the only way."

It had been a while since I'd done this.

"Hey, you...! You there! How about a reading...?"

In a small alley off the brick-lined street was a suspicious girl holding a crystal of questionable value, waving her other hand over it as she muttered to herself. By the way, she was me.

“You there...” I kept repeating, not to anyone in particular.

“Um, me?”

About one person in ten was dumb enough to fall for it.

“Ah, yes. You over there. You’ll do.”

Let’s just say I meant to beckon you from the start.

“...You lead a troubled life, right?” I asked gently. “Allow me to solve your troubles for you.”

“...Not particularly. And you don’t look like a fortune-teller, but more like a witch—”

“I’m both a witch and a fortune-teller.” I puffed out my chest. “You are troubled. I know that for a fact. You’re pretending like you don’t have anything to worry about, but the truth is that you are carrying a great many burdens... If I put my powers to work, I promise I can make your future brighter!”

That sounded like a scam.

I wonder how many people will take my words at face value? Probably not even one out of ten.

The youth standing in front of me was no exception. “Mm, it sounds interesting, but can you really see the future? Seems sketchy.”

“So you’re saying you don’t believe me?” I could understand his skepticism. “All right. In order to prove my powers to you, I will accurately describe your personality. If I do that, will you believe in me?”

“Huh?”

I must have piqued his curiosity, if only a little bit. The youth sat down in the chair across from me, with the crystal between us.

“...Mmmm...” I waved my hands over the crystal, and chanted, “Money-money-money-money...,” like an incantation, quietly enough that he couldn’t hear me.

The spirit of money was with us.

By the way, she was an extension of me, too.

"I have seen into your very soul," I said. "You're always concerned with how other people see you, right?"

"...Mm, well, I guess?"

"You have a kind heart, and you can't help but lend a hand when you see someone in trouble."

"...That's...probably accurate."

"Sometimes, when you're by yourself, you're stricken with loneliness, right?"

"Oh... That's right."

"You're always worrying about being judged, so you have a bad habit of losing your drive even when you do try to act, right?"

"That's right...! Oh, what should I do, Miss Fortune-Teller?"

"Have no fear. I'm going to solve your problems for you." I flashed a toothy grin.

By the way, the things that I had just said mostly hold true for anyone. Over the course of a conversation, a shrewd fortune-teller can make these universal experiences seem intimate and unique. You could call it a form of low-key hypnotism.

"Please, Miss Fortune-Teller...! Tell me!" The young man leaned toward me desperately. He was clearly under my spell.

"Okay, if you want to become happy, the first thing to do is to pay the fortune-telling fee. We'll talk after that."

"...Oh. It's not free?"

"It's foolish to imagine that you can come by true happiness for free."

"....."

I waved my hand impatiently. "Money, please."

In other words, this was behind a paywall. Money and happiness went hand in hand, after all.

"...Fine. Here." The young man pressed a single gold coin into my palm.

“Thank you!”

After tossing the coin into a box I had set to one side, I began.

“Well then, allow me to solve your problems for you—”

I think that a traveler’s true wealth lies in the encounters she has with people along the way.

“...Nice. A big catch.”

Here in Laurent City, too, it seemed I would be able to repeat that pattern. As the sun set, I found that my wallet had fully regained its heft.

I felt happiest when my wallet was heavy. It’s terrific. It’s the best. I was so easy to please. So long as I have that one thing, I can travel comfortably.

...But it was somehow a little too easy here... This must have been the single biggest payday ever. I guess there are a lot of suckers around these parts.

Of course, I would never pretend to be a fortune-teller and lie as easily as I breathed. I listened seriously to the people’s problems, and only after did I graciously accept their tokens of gratitude. I’m sure there are some brazen folks out there who might mistake my extremely serious business for some crass money grab. The job comes laden with unfortunate misconceptions, it seems.

That’s why it’s important for any fortune-teller to know when to quit. Once you earn enough money, it’s best to remove yourself. Otherwise, you might have to deal with these inconvenient misunderstandings.

And so, I began packing away my crystal to close up shop, checking the feel of my wallet as I did.

“Say, could I have a second?”

Just as I was storing the crystal in my bag, a girl plopped down in the chair and faced me.

Under a black hat, she had her lovely, long, light blue hair tied up in a single bunch on the back of her head. Her eyes were lapis-colored, like the sky that was now losing its light. She was dressed in a formal black jacket and matching skirt. She looked properly warm for the chilly autumn evening.

Oh, another customer?

“I’m sorry. I’m closed for the day. My powers of prognostication fade with the setting sun, you see.”

That was my story anyway. I could never actually read fortunes in the first place.

“Ah, no, I didn’t come to your stall to have my fortune read.”

She waved her hand in front of her face. I noticed she was wearing white leather gloves and holding a notebook.

“...? Well then, what is it?”

Are you here to interfere with my business? Well, I guess I’m just about finished anyway.

I had my head tilted questioningly, and she held her notebook up so that I could see. She had a proud look, as if to say, “*Can’t you see this?*”

“.....?” I stared at the notebook.

Below some sort of emblem or crest was embossed: LAURENT CITY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY.

.....*Oh...? What’s this?*

“Ah. Are you from a foreign country? But you know what this means, right? The Department of Public Safety is, to put it simply, made up of officers who patrol this city and protect the peace. My name is Anemone. And you are?”

“...My name is Elaina. The Ashen Witch. A traveler...”

“Elaina, is it? Yes, yes.” Anemone of the Department of Public Safety scribbled something down in her notebook. “By the way, what was it that you were doing here today?”

“Umm...I was just...about to take a break...”

“Hmm?” Her eyes focused on my bag. “What’s inside that bag?”

“A change of clothes.”

“May I look inside?”

“I exercise my right to remain silent.”

“Come on. You can show me.”

“I have underwear in there, so I can’t show you.”

“We’re both girls, so I think it’s fine.”

“.....” *That’s true, I guess. I knew that already. Right.*

“By the way, Elaina, it’s probably best not to hang around this area too much. There was a report from a resident of the neighborhood, you see, and it sounds like there is a woman around here with a suspicious crystal pretending to tell fortunes and ripping people off. I suppose you should be careful, too, Elaina.”

Didn’t she just describe me? Crap.

“That’s...scary...I’d better get going soon. All right then, I’ll be going.”

“Of course. That is probably most prudent. Before you go, can I look inside your bag?”

“Nope.”

“Sorry, Elaina. It’s not that I suspect you might be the fortune-teller or anything, but this is one of my duties, you see, and I would be grateful for your cooperation. Show me the bag.”

“You—you sure are persistent! I’ll call the police! Officer!” I made a prediction that my lucky deed of the day was feigning indignation and making a hasty retreat.

“Fine, fine. I suppose your anger is only reasonable. But I am the police.”

“.....” My anger sputtered out in a second.

Some luck, huh?

“What’s inside your bag?”

“.....”

I balked for a while, but she brandished threatening words—“Shall I call for backup?” and “If you continue to hold back, I will have to employ more forceful methods, I think.”

In the end, I cracked.

“Hmm...? What’s this?”

Then, unfortunately, there was no need to go fishing through my bag, for the crystal that I had stuffed in there was peeking out, along with my fat wallet. It didn’t take a police officer to suspect that something shady was going on.

“.....That is, um...you know, my hobby is crystal collecting, and so—”

“But, Elaina, you seem to have an awful lot of money. Might you be a celebrity traveler?”

“.....Ah, that’s right.”

“Mm-hm, is that so?” Her expression did not falter in the slightest; she kept smiling and clapped a hand down on my shoulder. “By the way, might I ask you to come with me?”

I’m sure there’s no need to explain what those words meant. First of all, she had already confiscated my crystal and my wallet in her search. I could see where this was going. But I predicted that, just in case, it would be lucky to hang on to the slightest thread of hope—

“Do I have the right to refuse?”

“I don’t suppose you do.”

...And there goes that.



I was certain that the only thing in store for me was torture. I would be thrown in jail, be raked over the coals, and then have all my money confiscated. After getting mentally drained from a scolding over the course of several days—a so-called interrogation—I would be asked in a gentle voice, “You won’t do that again, right?” and made to repent my actions.

The road that Anemone took me down, however, didn’t seem to lead to the jail, or to any place associated with the aforementioned Laurent City Department of Public Safety, or whatever it was called. Far from it, the road gradually became deserted as we went along.

“...Excuse me, but where might you be taking me?”

“Hm? It’s a secret.”

I looked around at our surroundings, but the full moon illuminated only swaying trees and the slow scattering of red and yellow leaves in the darkness.

There wasn’t a sign of human life.

“Um...I was sure you were taking me to the station at the Department of Public Safety or something, but...was I wrong? Or is the station up ahead?”

“I cannot say there is any such thing up ahead.”

“...Then, what is there?”

“Oh? My house.”

Huh? Why?

“Um... Is there, ah, some kind of rule that says that Department of Public Safety agents have to invite criminals to their homes or something?”

“I would not say there is any such rule.”

By the way, why does everything you say sound like a guess? Haven’t you got any confidence in your own words?

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re thinking,” I said.

I thought I was glaring stiffly at her, but I could tell from her expression that whatever face I was making didn’t pack even the slightest punch.

“I suppose I don’t understand either,” she admitted. “But I do think that you’re someone who deserves better than to be arrested.”

She smiled cheerfully.

In the end, I still had no idea what she wanted to do with me as the two of us arrived at her house. There were no signs of pedestrian traffic, and the road under our feet was completely carpeted in red and yellow autumn leaves, leading up to the timeworn house.

“I suppose I should welcome you to my home,” she said. “All right, go on in. There are, I believe, many things I wish to discuss with you.”

Keeping her back turned to me, she went straight into the house.

I didn't even consider the possibility of turning and running on the spot. How naive I am. It would have been a total piece of cake for someone with my powers to disappear.

All right... While she's far enough away, let's make our escape and—

“Oh, of course, I don’t suppose you have the right to refuse.” She held up my wallet.

Apparently, I was now in a situation where she was literally pulling my purse strings.

“.....*Siiiigh.*”

After letting out a huge sigh as my one act of rebellion, I trudged into her house.

As soon as I stepped inside, I was shown to a seat on one section of the sofa with a built-in table, and she tilted her head as she asked me, “Will you take coffee? Or tea?”

“Uh, coffee,” I answered without a hint of nervousness.

Before long, she appeared from the kitchen carrying two cups of steaming coffee. “Here you go,” she said, handing me one.

“Thanks.”

I drank the coffee without hesitation. Just the right amount of warmth flooded my body, driving away the autumn chill. As relaxed as I may have been, however, I still didn’t really understand what was going on.

What on earth is happening here?

I’d done a little fortune-telling—some people might describe it as fraud—and this police-type person had arrested me, except she had taken me to her home instead.

What did I get myself into?

“To put it simply, I suppose you could say I brought you here because there is something I want to ask of you, Elaina.”

She could probably tell I was growing suspicious. Anemone blew on her coffee

and stared at the ripples she created.

“Elaina, do you know about the prophet who lives in Laurent City?”

“A prophet...?”

“Seems like you don’t know, huh?”

I nodded.

“All right, I’ll tell you. In this city, there is a terrible prophet who gives the most horrific predictions. She’s a mysterious figure who always wears a hood pulled down over her head, and we don’t have a clue about her age, or even what her face looks like. But the prophet always predicts doom, and it quickly becomes reality.”

“.....” *Is this some kind of urban legend?*

“I’m sure it’s difficult to believe, but whatever the prophet says, it always comes to pass. For example, if she predicts someone will have an accident tomorrow, then without fail, said person will have an accident. Or if she predicts you’ll be dumped by your girlfriend tomorrow, that’s exactly what will happen, I suppose.”

I didn’t understand why she kept speaking as though she wasn’t sure of anything, but to sum it up—

“So there’s a prophet in Laurent City who only makes disastrous predictions?”

“I suppose that’s it exactly.”

I see.

“So...what about it?”

“You’re a witch, right, Elaina?”

“I am, but—”

“That means you are very powerful, doesn’t it?”

“I guess...” I was bewildered by this whole conversation. I couldn’t even predict where this was all leading.

Anemone looked directly at me. “To get straight to the point, I suppose you

could say I want you to eliminate this prophet.”

.....

Nope, nope, nope.

“Eliminate the prophet? Are you serious?” I asked.” There’s no reason to think that would ever work, no matter what scheme we come up with. She’ll always escape!”

As far as I can tell, the prophet can see the future, right? You want me to catch an opponent who’s always one step ahead? You have to be joking.

“But a witch might be able to do something, right?”

“You’re way overestimating me. Witches aren’t miracle workers. We’re just humans with a few extra abilities and magic to a certain capacity.”

Besides, isn’t it your job to deal with this stuff, Miss Department of Public Safety?

“I suppose I’m making this request because nothing we’ve tried has even come close. As a witch, you must command great magic. Couldn’t you stand up to her?”

“No way.”

“You’ll never accomplish anything if you give up before you try, I suppose.”

“And you’ll never accomplish anything if you give up halfway through and leave the job up to someone else!”

“I haven’t given up, I don’t think. Even now, I suppose I’m moving toward accomplishing my goal.”

It’s obvious you’re giving up without much of a fight. Just as I was about to answer her, I suddenly had a thought. My, my...don’t tell me...?

“Could it be? Are you saying that in exchange for your silence on the crime I committed in town, you want me to catch the prophet and give you all the credit?”

“Yep.”

“Public order in this city is really hopelessly corrupt, isn’t it...?” *Isn’t this*

unethical?

“It would be unacceptable to allow incidents like this one to continue spiraling out of our control...I suppose.”

Now, you’re basically admitting to it...

It was clear that as long as she held a tight grip on my lifeline, I didn’t have much choice except to follow her lead.

The heavens might smile down upon me if I obediently play along...

I wanted to reject the offer, however, since I really could not imagine anything more bothersome than this particular mission.

Let’s decline, but in a roundabout way.

“Well, I don’t mind cooperating with you. Unfortunately, I don’t have any money. Because you’re holding on to my wallet. So I obviously can’t pay for lodging here in Laurent City. Which means that I won’t be able to investigate that prophet of yours. Do you get what I’m hinting at? It’s a problem that will significantly impair any sort of investigation.”

“It’s all right. You can stay at my house, I suppose.”

“.....” *Problem solved...*

“Oh, but if you’re staying at my house, I suppose I have a condition in exchange.”

“You’re adding yet another condition...?” *Someone’s evil.*

“It’s all right. I don’t believe it’s anything too extreme.”

Then, wearing a gentle smile that was poorly suited to our conversation, she made one astounding request, something that diverged wildly from anything we had discussed so far.

“I suppose I want you to tell me the stories of your travels, Elaina.”

Of course, I really had no right to refuse, as she still held my wallet—and therefore my very life—in her grasp.



I shall present my daily schedule from then on.

I would rise early in the morning, roused by Anemone, who woke up at an ungodly hour, and then I ate breakfast while complaining, “But my body is still asleep...” Alas, her expertly made breakfasts were rather delicious, and my body would snap awake from its slumber.

After indulging in a bit of friendly post-meal chat, we would leave the house together. As we approached the main avenue through the city, she would say, “Well, I suppose I’ll leave the investigation to you,” and disappear into the city with a wave.

As instructed, I would carry out my investigation of the prophet, searching until evening, then returning home.

Either people working for the Laurent City Department of Public Safety had a lot of free time, or she was in an administrative position, because when I got home, she would already have returned and—what’s more—would already have finished making dinner.

Then, after having my fill of her home cooking for the second time in a day, I would tell her a story to thank her for the food. After I told each story, Anemone would get wildly excited and beg me.

“Tell me more! More!”

But I would ignore her pointedly.

Reading aloud from my travel diary was terribly humiliating. And so, pretending to be calm, I would shut myself away in the room she had prepared for me to use and wallow in embarrassment at the very thought of sharing my stories, which I had never intended to let anyone else read. I would end my day with my face buried in my pillow, wailing and sobbing and feeling like I would rather drop dead than do it again.

That’s roughly how I spent my days. My drive to live was being ground down to nothing, night after night.

Maybe that was why my investigation of the prophet was not going well.

“Hm? The prophet? Yeah, it’s because of her I lost my wife... Huh? You want to know who the prophet is and where she’s from? I have no idea. I’d like *you* to tell *me*, in fact.”

"Who's the prophet, huh...? Say, I'd like to know, myself. By the way, you wouldn't happen to be the witch who was telling fortunes earlier—hm? That was someone else? You sure do look like her..."

"It's that prophet's fault that I weigh double now! Look at me! Look at this body! This is all because the prophet said I was going to gain weight—huh? It's because I've got bad eating habits! Shut up!"

I frequently interviewed the locals as part of my daily investigation, but this produced no results worth mentioning.

From testimonies, I could assume that the prophet probably did actually exist, but...the rumors had taken on a life of their own, and I couldn't get a handle on the prophet herself.

While I was doing all this, I was faithfully continuing to read aloud to Anemone.

"Let's see... In that country, there were, strangely enough, a whole lot of me, and I met sixteen Elainas in one room. Yeah. It was totally chaotic. And then—"

If I remember correctly, the story I was telling that night was the one about the time I had encountered all the other possible Elainas. This one did well with Anemone.

"How fun! By the way, this is a little off topic, but do you like girls, Elaina?"

"Huh? Why would you ask that? I don't understand what you mean."

"Well, you said that among the many Elainas, there was one who obviously liked girls—"

"No idea what you're talking about."

That night, I slammed my pillow down on the bed.

I think it was the following day.

Figuring that canvassing was a dead end, I decided to go all or nothing and go question the city's elites. In a surprising turn of events, the governor of the realm—the leader of the city was a rather young woman—had quickly agreed to meet with me.

"But I'm sorry to say...there's no one who knows any details about the girl. I'm sure that since she can see the future, she must know some method for disappearing without being pursued. We, too, have tried many times to follow her in hopes of ascertaining her true identity. However, we've still got absolutely no idea who she is or where she's from."

To get straight to the point, even turning to the governor for help was a strikeout.

"Just in case they find anything, I am having the Department of Public Safety go around town and get a feel for whether there is anyone who seems to fit the description, but—well, as you can probably guess, the results haven't been good."

"Uh-huh."

So what you're saying is that's why I was mistaken for a suspicious fortune-teller, hm? I'll never forgive that prophet!

"I'm not sure we'll ever properly identify the prophet—" The governor wore an expression that told me she had already given up. "Though if we could see into the future and know we'll never find the prophet, I wouldn't place this burden on the Department of Public Safety."

"....." *Perhaps my investigation has run aground.*

Of course, on that day, I returned home and read aloud to Anemone.

"...Let's see, so this is the necklace I got from Saya when I ran into her again."

"Oh. You're wearing it now."

"...Sure, yeah. It was a present."

"Elaina, you're definitely—"

"Nope."

At this point, the pillow in my room had been beaten so much that the stuffing was coming out. It was in a terrible state, so I stealthily exchanged it with Anemone's pillow.

She got extremely mad at me.

A few days later, my investigation into the elusive prophet met a new development. When I went to visit the governor to ask for any new information, she was waiting for me with the following report:

“Apparently, the prophet has made another appearance. The subject of her prophecy was the daughter of a city official. She appeared suddenly in the middle of the day, predicted that girl would be taken hostage by a band of brigands before the sun set, and then vanished.”

“Taken hostage...?”

And we don't know what time it's supposed to happen... How annoying.

“Where is the girl now?” I asked.

“She's on alert at home. By the way, Miss Witch, if it's all right, I have a request.”

“.....” I understood what she was trying to tell me. “You're asking me to protect the child from the outlaws, right?”

“It's that obvious, eh?” The governor's eyebrows knit together, and she let out a sigh. “To tell you the truth, I don't think there's any way to avoid the prophecy.”

This would be a good chance to put the prophet's powers to the test—or so I thought. Unfortunately, it didn't look like I would have the opportunity.

“.....”

When I arrived at the city official's house, the outlaws had already forced their way inside. One of them was pressing a knife to the girl's throat, holding her hostage.

Surrounded by agents of the Department of Public Safety, one of the robbers shouted, “Dammit...! How was our plan discovered?! I thought it was perfect—”

The man seemed awfully flustered. But it was also clear that as long as he had the girl as his hostage, the Department of Public Safety couldn't make a move. They were locked in a stalemate.

“...Hup.” From the shadows, I stealthily blasted off a spell, just in time to freeze the brigand's hands in ice.

I found out later that the group of thugs had snuck into the official's house quite a while earlier, posing as butlers and maids, and were attempting to kill the city official.

The situation was resolved without incident, but as I headed for home, I was sure that there was something I was still not understanding.

"...So, in the end, the dragon and the innkeeper were married and lived happily ever after. The end."

"Are you good with anyone who's a girl, Elaina?"

"....." For some reason I couldn't understand anything this girl said.

Ever since the robbers had forcibly entered the city official's house, the prophet had started appearing somewhere each day. It was hard to believe she had ever been in hiding.

"Today, she appeared before a man living alone." To tell him that he had contracted heart disease.

"Today, she materialized before a girl who dreams of being a singer." To tell her that her dream would not come true.

"Today, she emerged before the head of a company." To tell her that the business would go bankrupt in several months.

"Today, she—"

Every time I saw the governor of the city, she would tell me such stories, then I would head for the location of the prophet's latest appearance. By talking to the people who had been singled out by the prophet, I came to understand very well that her predictions were, above all, guaranteed to be true.

The man who lived alone told me sadly, "When I went to the hospital, I really did have heart disease. I'll spend the rest of my life fighting this illness."

The girl who had dreamed of being a singer shook her head. "I'm giving up on singing. I've decided to take a different path."

The head of the company ran around like a chicken with its head cut off. "I've got to find new jobs for my employees before we go bankrupt!"

They were all already operating on the assumption that the predictions would come true.

It must have been because they understood that if they didn't, it would bring even more misfortune.

“.....”

Even so, something about this situation didn't sit right with me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was something about the identity of a prophet who entrapped others in hardship that I could not stop turning over in my head.

“Excuse me. I'd like to research some things about the past words and deeds of the prophet...”

One day, I pressed the governor for more information.

She gladly approved my request but shook her head. “Of course, I wouldn't mind helping you, but the detailed documents are stored with the Department of Public Safety. I'll pass on the request, so would you be so kind as to head over there?”

The governor was a very kind person. “Sorry for the trouble,” she said as she wrote me a letter of introduction.

I set out for the Department of Public Safety that afternoon. After looking over the letter of introduction, the clerk showed me absolutely everything—from the inquiry documents written when the prophet first appeared, all the way up to the present.

“This is all of it! Here you go!”

There were so many documents that if you were to stack them all up, they seemed like they might be about my height. It was dreadful.

I didn't want to investigate in this much detail...

“I heard everything from the governor. You're helping to identify the prophet, aren't you? I'll be at the reception desk, so if you have any questions, please feel free to ask!” The clerk bowed cheerfully and shut me into the documents room.

She seems to be giving me way too much credit.

“...Hmm.”

However, I can’t say that I didn’t get what I was looking for. I scanned through the documents for several hours. Around sunset, I showed my face at reception again.

“Thank you for the materials.”

I bowed, and when I looked back up, the clerk asked, “Sure! Did you find anything out?”

“Yes. Well, to a degree.” I avoided letting any more than that slip, because I hadn’t yet gotten definitive proof of the information I had found. “By the way, is Anemone here? I’d like to see her if she’s around.”

It was already evening, and I was here at the Department of Public Safety, so if she was working, I thought maybe we could go home together.

“...Anemone?” The clerk knit her brow. “...Wait just a minute, please. I’m sorry. I don’t have every staff member’s name memorized, so...” She started flipping through a register.

I waited a little while.

Outside the window, the sun had already set and was in the middle of being swallowed up by darkness.

Before long, it would be night.

We would have to make the final trek through the forest to Anemone’s house in pitch-black darkness.

“Miss Elaina?” The clerk came back to where I was waiting.

Her cheerful demeanor had evaporated, and she looked at me with a clouded face, as dark as the night. She looked perplexed.

“...Is the person you asked for...is she really a Department of Public Safety agent?”

Then the clerk revealed, “You see, there’s no record of anyone named Anemone...”



That night—

As always, after we'd finished dinner, Anemone pestered me into sharing more stories of my travels.

"Elaina, what story are you going to tell me tonight, I wonder?"

Anemone had flopped down in the seat across from me, holding two coffee mugs.

I suppose you're looking forward to another late night making me tell you story after story... Although...

"...Hmm." I flipped through my journal to be sure. I had already told her practically all my tales.

I've already told her every story in here. Maybe we've been with each other for too long.

"Have you got any interesting stories to share?" Anemone tilted her head as she asked me. She looked like she was wondering why I was hesitating. She didn't seem to be harboring any suspicions.

"Sure, I have one."

I certainly did not record every single one of my traveling tales in my journal. I had many more stored in my head...though I was a little bit reluctant to tell her.

"Tell me."

"....."

If she's going to demand it, well then...here goes nothing.

When I had closed the journal and stared directly at her, her deep blue eyes looked back into mine. Just like an abyss.

And then, I told her the story.

"In a certain place, there was a lone girl who had a mysterious power—"

I told her the story of the prophet who told inauspicious futures.



While I was investigating the prophet, I had arrived at one key fact.

Right from the very start, several things about this prophet had roused my suspicions.

For this to work, we'll need to assume that the prophet can predict the future of an individual or even a whole country. Why do you suppose the prophet would only predict calamity to befall others?

And why do you suppose she would go out of her way to incur people's enmity?

Because she could see the future, the prophet must know where it led. At some point, her identity was bound to be revealed, and she would face retribution from all the unfortunate souls she'd trapped in adversity. Even a fool could guess as much, if they had the power to see the future. I, however, refused to believe that was what she was trying to accomplish.

Then why on earth did she do it?

I had mulled all the possibilities over while I'd been fishing through the documents.

There was no end to the recounts of the prophet's past deeds, and I could confirm that her predictions all came true and spelled out grave misfortune for their recipients, who then resented her.

At first glance, it even seemed like the prophet was being evil for evil's sake.

But wasn't it possible to look at this situation from a different angle?

What if worse things might have happened if she hadn't made her predictions?

"You will break up within the next three days."

Upon receiving that forecast, the couple broke up and married other people, and each remained happily married for the rest of their lives, it seems.

"Your cat was eaten by a wolf that slipped into town."

If the adults of the city had not hunted down the wolf, it certainly would have caused even more harm.

"Your husband will only live for one more month."

The couple presumably realized how precious their remaining time together really was.

“The new business that you’re thinking of starting is going to fail.”

“A burglar is going to rob your house.”

“You’re going to injure your left leg soon.”

Such were the words of the prophet, but strangely enough, it seemed something worse would have happened if the recipients had not known that misfortune was going to visit them.

In other words, the prophet was only telling them these things so they could avoid the worst situations, and she was risking blame to do so.

That was my guess.

“...So you’re trying to say that the prophet is not a bad person?”

That was the first time that Anemone had interrupted while I was telling my story.

I replied in the affirmative. “That’s what it comes down to, yes. Though I have no idea why on earth she is doing such a thing.”

Even after I’d fished through all those documents and spent the last several days in this city, that was the only conclusion I had managed to reach. Everything beyond that was completely incomprehensible.

“Even if the prophet isn’t necessarily bad,” I said, “I don’t think she’s some amazing person who has never done a bad deed in her life.”

Anemone looked at me with a cloudy, puzzled expression. “...What do you mean?”

I don’t suppose she knows what I’m about to tell her.

I continued, smiling as much as possible, “I mean, she’s been doing things like bullying travelers while impersonating an agent of the Department of Public Safety, you know?”

And if that’s not a bad deed, what is?



“...I’m sorry. I can’t quite understand what you’re saying, Elaina.”

“In that case, shall I break it down a little bit more? You are the prophet.”

I had stated it in the most basic terms. *Will you understand me when I put it that way?*

“In order to get me to tell you the stories of my travels, you, the prophet, impersonated an agent of the Department of Public Safety. Though I don’t know why on earth you wanted to hear such things.”

“.....”

“I don’t necessarily have any concrete evidence, but I cannot imagine any other possibility except that you are the prophet. There are just so many suspicious things about you.”

Anemone wasn’t even a part of the Department of Public Safety. She, nevertheless, had approached me and ordered me to find and catch the prophet. This alone was more than sufficiently strange.

“...I see.” So it seemed my reasoning—half guesswork—was not totally off the mark. “That’s weird. And here I thought I had cleverly disguised myself... But you found me out.”

“It wasn’t much of a disguise if all I needed to do to uncover you was visit the Department of Public Safety.” *Though I’m certain Anemone could see this turn of events.*

Since she can see the future, she must have known from the beginning that her lie would be discovered.

“Will you tell me about yourself?”

“.....” Anemone answered me with silence, but her expression bore no trace of clouds. She, in fact, looked the sunniest she had.

“You’ve heard everything about my life up until now. In return, I will listen to everything about you. On top of that, I’m going to write about you in my journal, so prepare yourself...”

After keeping silent for a long time, Anemone said, “...All right. You should mentally prepare yourself, Elaina, and listen.”

She placed a hand on her chest and sucked in a deep breath. She looked like she was trying desperately to quiet a beating heart or about to confess her love.

Finally, she fixed her gaze on me.

She stared at me with her beautiful eyes, as she always did when she badgered me for my stories.

“I’ve been yearning for you long before we met—I think.”

And then, Anemone told me the story of her life.

Let us unravel the workings of time using a broom as our model.

If we take its handle to represent the past, then the cord tying the brush end is the present. The brush head, which branches out and separates, we’ll call the future.

Anemone told me that from the time she was a small child, she had always vaguely been able to see things that had not happened yet. She said that, in the same way as scenes from the past might unexpectedly float up in the mind, she saw scenes from the future. She did not herself understand why she had this ability. But she, being able to see the future, came to walk a different path in life from others.

When she was very young, she envisioned her parents going their separate ways, several years down the road. No matter how hard she tried to avoid it, she always saw her father and mother living in independent houses in the future.

She was understandably saddened, and not wanting to stay and watch the future play out, she ran away from home.

After that, she passed through all kinds of countries.

Sometimes, she would imitate a fortune-teller and make money by guessing the futures of passersby. Sometimes, she would try giving advice to the monarchs of certain countries.

Unlike me, Anemone possessed real powers, revered by the people wherever she visited. However, she never stayed in any one place for long, and she never got close to anyone.

Unfortunately for her, she could see the future.

She knew that if she were to remain in one place and continue to tell others her prophecies, then she would come to be treated not as a human, but as something akin to a god. She knew also that if she formed relationships with people, then she would arrive at a future where they split up and became estranged.

Because she could see the future, she lost touch with the rest of the world. She was afraid to build a relationship with anyone. However, she could not ignore her fatalistic visions, and so, as she moved from place to place, she discovered a way to share her predictions.

She would become a prophet to whom no one was grateful.

That was a very simple thing to do. She would appear unexpectedly around town, deliver an unfortunate prediction, then disappear.

She knew that this tactic would allow her to avoid the worst-case scenarios. At the same time, she knew that people would come to hate her. By doing this, she would completely destroy any chance she might ever have at a normal relationship.

“I can see the future that lies ahead, I suppose. I will continue giving dire predictions, and everyone will hate me. I think I can see such a future clearly.”

She spoke matter-of-factly, with a detached affect.

“.....”

Was she fixated on bad outcomes because she could see the future? Was that why she'd become so pessimistic?

“...I could have kept on living that way forever. But you were the one person I wanted to meet, Elaina. Just once was enough, but I wanted to hear your many stories, I suppose.”

“...Why is that? If you can see the future, why should you need to hear them from me? Shouldn't you know how they all turned out?”

She shook her head at my question. Her blue hair, tied up in a single bunch behind her head, gently swished through the air.

"You could say I can only see flashes of the future, momentary glimpses, I suppose. I can't see the whole picture at once."

I hate to bring it up again, but Anemone spoke in a way that lacked conviction, even though she could technically see the future.

I was squinting at her, and she smiled, looking embarrassed.

"My visions were never precise enough to see the details of your stories, but ever since you started appearing before me long ago, you've always looked so happy recounting them to me. For someone like me, who's only lurked in the dark, your stories were so bright—blindingly so—and happy...I suppose."

"....."

"I made all sorts of preparations to meet you, I suppose. I stayed longer than usual in this country, became the target of a police investigation, even stole a uniform from the Department of Public Safety, all to meet you."

"...And then you threatened me and made me tell you stories, huh."

Anemone nodded.

What's going on here? I thought. I didn't think the stories of my travels were such a big deal. They're very boring, nothing but a way to pass the time. Silly little stories, seriously.

"...You're a dummy. A big dummy," I managed to say with the utmost sincerity, voicing the emotions smoldering inside me.

"I can be a dummy, I suppose. Since I got to meet you."

"...Oh yeah?"

I didn't try to console her or anything. I had no reason to speak self-importantly and didn't even have the standing to do so in the first place. I was just a traveler who frankly stated the facts of what happened.

And I might lie on occasion.

"Anemone." I said, "If you can see the future, naturally you must know what is going to happen next, right?"

Without hesitation, she nodded just once, as if she had known I was going to

say that. "You will run out of patience with me and leave today—I suppose. I will cry as I see you off and continue to prophesize doom, I suppose."

As she was saying this, I wondered if the future she had predicted for herself had, in fact, become a reality.

"...You really are a dummy, aren't you? A big dummy."

Sure enough, I did leave her house that day.



Somewhere, there was a girl who possessed a mysterious power.

This peculiar individual, head always concealed by a hood pulled down, showed no one her face. She could, to put it clearly and concisely, see the future.

Exactly how long she had been endowed with such a power was not for others to know, but she could see things—the futures of countries, of individuals, of it all.

However, the girl with the mysterious power did not seem inclined to put it to any good use. Maybe she had a cruel heart. Or perhaps she simply hated other people.

"Tomorrow, you will—"

On the morning that the traveler left, she paid a visit to the city.

The people there surrounded this girl at a distance and stared at her, avoiding her as they went about their daily lives.

But the people of the city knew something.

In fact, they had known for a long time.

They knew she was not a bad person.



"I don't know when it was that I first had my doubts—but we have had them for quite a while now." Those were the words that the governor muttered as she was writing the letter of introduction for me.

Sighing, she dispelled the sense of discomfort I had been feeling this whole

time. "I definitely don't think she's a bad person. Though she does appear to be very skilled at lying."

Frankly, telling fortunes that are guaranteed to be true was certainly not an evil act in itself, no matter how unlucky or disturbing those fortunes may be.

"Is that because when you're given a bad prediction, you can try to prepare for the bad events that might occur in said future?"

She nodded at me. "A short while after she arrived here, many people did just that. All the people who met with her would heed her warnings, and though they still met with misfortune, they avoided the very worst of it."

Come to think of it, the people of this country are all awfully gullible when it comes to fortune-telling. It had crossed my mind on the first day I had arrived here.

"So even a bad future is better to know than not... Is that it?"

"That's right." The governor nodded. "And I'm sure that, although she can see what was yet to come, our prophet has great difficulty seeing what's right before her eyes," she replied.

I knew the governor could not be the only one thinking that. Most of the people living in this city must have been on the same page.

"If I could meet her, I'd like to tell her that if you don't watch your feet, you'll trip."

The governor was gazing out the window.

The other side opened out to the city—undisturbed as always.

The reason the people of Laurent City were searching for the prophet was simply because they wanted to thank her for continuing to help them avoid the worst disasters.

When she made her predictions, the targets did certainly meet with misfortune. However, at the same time, they knew that if they hadn't heeded her prophecy, something even worse would have transpired.

During my investigation, I had felt uneasy about something. Surely that was it. When we had caught the robbers who'd forced their way into the city official's

house, the official had thanked the prophet, even though I had been the one to freeze their hands.

The governor had instructed the Department of Public Safety to investigate the true identity of the prophet only because she wanted to present her with a certificate of gratitude.

That's simply all it was.



I can actually bring this story to a finish with just one simple statement.

"In short, this is just a story about a prophet who kept predicting people's misfortunes but was the most unfortunate of them all."

Her own future had faded to gray, because she was so pessimistic.

That's all this story is about.

"...You're wrong. Elaina...I'm..." Anemone was in visible dismay.

"This is the truth. No, really. Can't you see a future where you can live honestly among the people of the city?"

She shook her head slowly.

Come on now. Don't lie.

"You're just averting your eyes. You've decided arbitrarily that such a future is impossible. You're supposed to be seeing it. You just don't have the courage to walk toward it."

"...You're wrong, I suppose."

"I suppose I'm not."

I had been running around, investigating, carrying all these preconceived notions about what kind of person the prophet might be, but she actually wasn't much of anything. She was just an ordinary girl.

"There's no more need for you to hide yourself. The people of this city know all about you and understand your suffering, and they want to face it with you."

"....." Her lips were trembling.

Her fingertips, which had been extended toward me, moved to cover her mouth. Her legs had been staggering toward me in bewilderment, but now, they buckled under her.

"I'm sure it must have been painful to continue predicting people's misfortunes. I'm sure that always looking over your shoulder must have cramped your neck. But you can look forward now," I said to her.

For a few moments, no words passed between us.

Then, I heard the faint sound of sobbing.

"That's right...I...really was...a dummy...I suppose..."

There's no question there. "A big dummy," I clarified.

Her prediction that I would leave had, sure enough, come true.

She was crying, and I was going to depart the house. She had been right about that.

The only thing that had been wrong about her predictions was that she had been viewing the world from the wrong angle. I didn't think such misunderstandings would happen any longer.

"...What kind of future can you see now?" I asked.

She looked up and smiled slightly.

"Because of you, Elaina—I can't see anything at all."

A single tear fell from her closed eyes.





CHAPTER 9

Two Pupils

"If you continue all the way west, there's a place called the Free City Qunorts, and today, we have a direct commission to transport this to the harbor there."

The black-haired witch—summoned to a branch office of the United Magic Association in a certain country—received these instructions as she had a small box pressed on her by her teacher.

"...What's this?"

The box appeared to be quite old and quite valuable. Not a single seam was visible in its elegant construction, and it was completely smooth to the touch. There was no key in the lid, which looked like it would open with a little force. Nothing made any noise, even when she tried shaking it. The inside had probably been manufactured just as neatly as the overdone exterior.

As the witch examined the box closely, her teacher removed the long pipe from her mouth and sighed out a cloud of tobacco smoke. The witch squinted at the smoke, which smelled truly toxic.

Her teacher said, "I'm going to make a little side trip before I head for Qunorts. You go first and hand that over at the United Magic Association branch office. And don't open it along the way. Got it? Apparently, there's something real nasty inside."

"Aye-aye sir!" She had absolutely no idea what could be inside the box, but her job was just to transport the ridiculous thing. It seemed like easy money.

Easy-peasy.

...This witch chuckled internally to herself. Just who could she be?

That's right. She's me. Saya.

"...Oh, right, right."

Just as I was about to leave the United Magic Association office, my teacher spoke up again from behind.

"Your little sister is in the midst of infiltrating a certain organization in the same city. ...Well, after you get there, I suppose it would be all right for you to have a quick word with her in secret. It's been a long time since you saw each other, hasn't it?"



The land known as the Free City Qunorts, at which I arrived that day, stood isolated on the coast.

There was nothing around it, only swaying grasses. Their pale green extended below the autumn sky, and on the other side of the city stretched the blue of sky and sea. The scenery was absolutely breathtaking, but it looked like I could see it anywhere.

I couldn't tell whether the city itself was of the sort that existed in other parts of the world, too.

It didn't look like there was anything peculiar about the cityscape, and when I passed through the gate, I was greeted by light-colored buildings with square windows—perfectly lined up at equal distance from each other. Based on outward appearance, there was nothing off about it.

Closer inspection revealed the city was facing a little bit of a disturbance.

ARE MAGES DANGEROUS? FURTHER VIOLENCE FROM THE ANTIQUE STORE POSSE, said the headline on a newspaper when I peeked into a bookstore. It took up the whole front page, and a gaggle of older women chattered like a pack of hyenas that had caught the scent of something tasty.

"Oh no... The Antique Store Posse has been attacking mages again, it says."

"Goodness! My husband is a mage, you know?"

"How frightening."

They were anxious over the important matter of the mages.

The only thing I understood for sure was that there was some secret organization operating in the city, and that if I went around looking like a mage, it would probably draw some unwanted attention from this "Antique Store Posse" or whatever.

“.....”

That day, as soon as I had secured lodgings, I took off my robe and pointed hat, changing clothes into a plain outfit of a flared skirt and sweater instead. A very autumnal look.

In this getup, nobody will think I'm a mage.

With that sorted, I walked around town leisurely, my ashen hair swaying behind me, wishing that I might encounter something interesting in this city.

I conducted my sightseeing around Qunorts without making too much noise.

I bought bread at a roadside stall and took a perfunctory tour around town. There was almost nothing worth mentioning about the place, nothing strange or interesting, except that the people walking through town seemed to be afraid of something they couldn't see.

“They’re awfully troubled, huh...”

I didn’t know just how much power that Antique Store Posse had, but at the very least, the mages of the city seemed to be having some serious problems with the group.

I could tell because in the alleyways everywhere, or else in the shop windows, flyers and signs had been slapped up bearing rather inflammatory phrases.

DEFY MAGES!

MAGES ACT ALL COOL JUST BECAUSE THEY CAN USE MAGIC! HOW VEXING!

PISS OFF, MAGES!

And since no one was tearing these signs down, I could tell that the Antique Store Posse was growing more emboldened.

I don't have a good feeling about this...

“Hello, miss. Haven’t seen you around these parts before. You a traveler?”

After walking for a short while, I heard the owner of a roadside stall call out to me. The suspicious woman, hat low on her head, had conspicuously crooked teeth that made it look like she had fangs. Her unruly canines made her look several years younger.

“Huh?”

When I stopped short, she said, “Hoh-hoh... You’re a real blockhead to visit this city in such dangerous times,” and roared with laughter.

Oh-hoh, are you picking a fight with me? Shall I take you up on it?

“It looks like this ‘Antique Store’ organization is inciting violence in this city.”

“That’s right. Good grief. They’re the reason why we don’t have any business. Thanks to them, there have been fewer and fewer tourists lately, and even if I open up shop, there’s no one buying. It’s a real problem.”

“...What do you sell?”

“Hm. Can’t you see? Someone’s a real blockhead.”

“Ah, I see, so you’re peddling insults, huh?” I almost said, but I quieted these thoughts by clearing my throat and looked around. I assumed swords and guns would be lining the shelves, but the store was stocked with memo pads and pens and other stationery. There were other everyday goods, like tissues and mirrors. In short, it looked like she had all sorts of trifles.

“So you’re a garbage collector?” I asked.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No, I’m really asking.”

“.....” The lady with the fangs let out a big sigh. “These are for self-defense. This land has been disturbed recently, so I’m selling tools to protect yourself. How about it? Need one?”

“Not really.”

“Now don’t say that. Buy one. If you don’t, you never know when you’ll be attacked by some dangerous gang, hmm?”

I can protect myself by myself without buying these things.

“I’m not a mage or anything, so I don’t feel the need to protect myself,” I said.

The Antique Store Posse is targeting mages, right? I’m afraid I’m not a mage at the moment... If that’s my backstory, I don’t need protection, do I?

“I’m telling you, I’m fine. Well then, I must be going—”

And then I turned my back on the shop.

“Oh, wait there,” the merchant called out to my back. “Here, this is a freebie. Have it.”

I turned back around at the sound of her voice, and in that same moment, she threw something at me. A single piece of candy sailed through the air and landed in my waiting hand. When I pinched it between my fingers and held it up, I saw that its wrapper read, in fanciful letters, VISIT OUR STORE TO PROTECT YOURSELF!

“It’s a freebie for coming to my store. Should you have any troubles, you can come back. I’ll have just what you need.”

“...Thanks.”

I opened the wrapper and popped the candy into my mouth.



Right after arriving at the Free City Qunorts, I was assailed by a strange feeling.

“...It’s a mage!”

“...What’s she doing here...?”

I faintly overheard many whispered voices.

Could it be that they’re purposely talking loud enough for me to overhear them? Hmm...

Feeling uncomfortable, I walked hastily through the city.

Let’s hurry up and get to the port and finish the job—

“Ah, hold on. You there. You there, girl. What’s the hurry?”

Only when you’re in a hurry do you get caught up in some obstacle. A voice called out from somewhere behind me as I rushed through town.

Ignore it. Just pretend you don’t hear it. I don’t have time to be talking to anyone.

“Heeey! I’m talking to you, Little Miss Cute Witch!”

“Ah, could you mean me?!”

Whoops. I turned around.

“I am, I am. Where are you going in such a rush? This city is dangerous of late. Especially if you’re dressed like that. You never know when you might be in danger.”

The woman calling to me from inside a roadside stall had a physical appearance that was...difficult to describe. Her hair was red and long, but that was about the only characteristic that could be discerned at a glance. She wore a hat pulled down low over her face, so that her eyes couldn’t be seen, and everything below her ears was covered with a piece of cloth, so any other part of her face was imperceptible.

She must be ashamed of her appearance. Poor thing...

“What is it? I don’t like the way you’re looking at me. *Humph.*” The woman snorted through her nose like she was not amused. “What did you come to this city for? Coming here looking like a mage is like begging them to attack you, you know?”

“...Is this place all that dangerous?”

“It’s absurdly dangerous.”

“Absurdly dangerous?” *This is serious.*

“Mmhmm. And because of that, you’ll need some personal protection to continue living here—”

“Ah, I don’t entertain aggressive sales pitches, so—” I turned quickly on my heel.

“Hey, wait a second!” The woman raised her voice as she banged on one of the racks in the shop.

When I turned around, she had her arm raised and had flung something toward me. It soared through the air and struck my chest before tumbling to the ground. A piece of candy.

“...My shop is always selling defense goods. Come anytime if you feel so inclined.”

I picked the candy up and stuck it in my pocket. "...Thank you." Somehow, I got the feeling that if I ate it there in front of her, people would think badly of me, like, *Whoa, that girl is eating something she picked up off the ground! Nasty!*

Then I turned my back on her shop and started walking again.

"Be careful. If you want to stay alive in this city, you better not trust anyone."

The shopkeeper spouted off something that sounded important, then laughed boorishly.

I walked away from the shop and down the main avenue of the city.

As expected, the stares from the residents were uncomfortable, enough to make me feel like I ought to change out of my witchy-looking clothes as soon as possible.

"....." Among the cold gazes, I could feel a different set of eyes following me.

I realized I was lost on a deserted street. There wasn't a single person on the road before me, but I could still feel those eyes on my back.

What could this be?

It felt like the ferocious way that a hunter would look at their prey, like a filthy gaze that was licking me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

A full-body chill seized me. Someone was coming after me. Of that, I was sure.

I started preparing to get my wand out.

"....." I turned around, slowly—

"____"

And I saw someone—an ominous someone with their mouth covered by a piece of fabric.

Then an arm quickly snaked around my throat, and something covered my mouth, and I was dragged away.

"...! Mmph! Nmmhh—!"

Ah, this is bad. I might die—!

My heart began pounding at the thought of danger, pounding as if it was sounding the alarm. While I was kicking and struggling, I heard a voice right by my ear.

“Be still, Big Sister—it’s dangerous here. We need to escape.”

I knew this gentle, warm voice.

“...Mina?”

Before me was the face of my little sister, whom I was seeing for the first time in a long time... Though I couldn’t really see her, because of the cloth.

“Wandering around looking like that, you must have a death wish,” she said. “I never knew this side of you.”

We headed to the very back of a narrow, deserted alleyway.

Pulled along by my younger sister, Mina, I passed through the dim back alley and an isolated door that stood at the end. I was pushed into the small room behind it. By all appearances, I was a rat in a trap.

Mina sighed and removed the fabric that was covering her mouth, revealing her luscious peach-colored lips. When she tugged off her hat, long locks of hair tumbled free. She tossed her head and sent her hair fluttering, and there was something very sensual about the gesture.

Compared to my shrimpy little body, my little sister seemed to be brimming with pheromones. How distressing.

She had really grown up during the long time we’d been apart. How distressing.

“Ah, Mina, long time no see—”

Since it had been so long, I raised a hand in greeting.

“.....” In return, I received a venomous glare. My little sister could be so cold. “...Why are you here?”

To make matters worse, I was immediately treated as an imposition.

“For work. I’m here for work.” I let the box peek out of my bag for a second.

Mina and I both work for the United Magic Association, but unfortunately, we

don't often cross paths. I spend my time aimlessly traveling around on my own, while Mina is busy with her undercover investigations, so even if we wanted to, we couldn't really see each other.

"...*Sigh*. So the mage bringing the box was my own sister..." Mina let out an exaggerated sigh. "Of all the people..."

Humph. What's with that comment?!

"Mina, aren't you in the middle of an undercover investigation? Is it safe for you to be here like this?" I had been stung by her remark, so I tried to get her back.

"Of course it's not. You did something stupid, so I went out of my way to risk danger and come stop you."

"....." She seemed to be rebuking me for walking around town in a robe. "I mean, I was planning to change clothes after I delivered the box to the harbor, you know."

"That would have been too late."

What? I tilted my head, and Mina fixed her cold eyes on me.

"The 'Antique Store Posse' that has taken root in this city again is a sneaky group of thieves who have special tools in their possession. They're driven by their hate toward mages, but they're otherwise no different from typical thieves who commit robberies and attack merchants."

"Mm-hm."

By the way, do you have any water? It's really hot out here. No? Okay.

"Recently, the Antique Store has come up with a plan to purge the city of mages. That thing you brought here today is actually one of their tools for doing so."

"Meaning...?"

I cocked my head questioningly, and Mina peered into my bag, which I had left open.

"In other words, the Antique Store Posse already knows about that box. In

fact, it's very possible that they had a hand in bringing it here."

"....."

"...I don't know what kind of power it might hold, but I'm certain it can't be anything good, because the gang leader said, 'The box brought by the assistant from the United Magic Association is essential for our next attack!'"

"....." *Goodness. I've heard that tone of voice somewhere before...*

"Um, so would I have been ambushed at the harbor?"

"If I hadn't saved you." Mina shrugged as if to say I was a burden on her.

My little sister could be so cheeky!

"...So what should I do now?"

"For now, hold on to that box. I've still got some undercover work to do. If I can get a lead on all the members of the organization, we can arrest them all."

"...So I should wait in town until that happens?"

"Exactly," Mina said. "...By the way, do you have a place to stay? If you like, you can live here with me in this house."

"Ah, I'm staying at an inn, so it's all right. Don't worry about me!"

I wouldn't want to get in the way of my sister while she works. Plus, it's dusty in here. And kinda hot. And wouldn't it pose problems if I stayed in the house of a person who's in the middle of an undercover investigation?

"....." Something must have hurt her feelings, because Mina knit her eyebrows. "...I see," she said and let out a huge sigh.

She was a person of few words, so I never really understood what Mina was thinking all the time. But even so, she'd always been more mature than I and a dependable girl, so in the past—especially before I met Elaina—I had always clung tightly to Mina.

But now both of us had jobs, and we barely saw each other, so I felt like we'd grown distant.

"....."

“.....”

We stood there in silence, and I felt around in my own pocket while I was choosing my next words.

I remembered I'd received a piece of candy earlier. I thought I could eat the candy and dampen my throat for a moment. I peeled off the wrapper and tossed the candy into my mouth— And something inside me burst.

○

...? What's happening? My head feels foggy.

“...Anyway, don't do anything until I've prevented the Antique Store Posse's uprising, Big Sister.”

Big Sister...? Who? I haven't got any siblings.

Come to think of it, this was my first time seeing the girl before my eyes.

Who are you?

...And why am I here...?

“This time, their concocted plan seems to be a simultaneous attack on every single shop in the city—from the jeweler's to the arms dealer's, the general store, even the restaurants and inns. If I don't prevent them, the damage could be catastrophic.”

The girl sitting next to me was speaking very seriously, but I was fully occupied with trying to figure out what was going on.

I patted my own skin. I tried pinching it. I didn't appear to be daydreaming. Inside my mouth, a piece of candy was rolling around.

Huh? I thought it had dissolved a while ago...

Hmm...?

“Once I prevent the attacks, we'll turn that box over to the United Magic Association at the harbor. Then they can deliver it to the island nation. That's the safest route.”

“.....?” I still couldn't make heads or tails of it.

It all felt hazy, as if I were in a dream.

Nearby was the item she kept referring to as *that box*. It was lying there casually inside a bag.

“...Big Sister, I’ve got to ask, by the way, have you noticed anything strange since you entered this city?”

“...Um, I’m sorry. Who are you? I’m—”

“I can do without the jokes.”

But I’m not joking...

I took the box out of its bag.

It was about the right size to hold in both hands. It wasn’t too large. To articulate what was going through my mind in that moment, I was thinking only about the puzzle of what might be inside it.

There were far too many other things plaguing me, so many I didn’t know where to begin. So I narrowed my focus to the box.

“Got it? I don’t know what that Antique Store Posse might do to you, Big Sister. Don’t let your guard down—”

Letting the words of this person I had never seen before flow past me, I placed my hand on the box.

And then, I opened it.

“.....! Big Sister! What are you—”

It was only after I’d revealed the contents of the box that I realized I probably shouldn’t have done that.

I couldn’t see anything inside the box, though, because what had been there was not a *thing*, but just smoke—smoke that erupted, turning all my surroundings white.

At that point, I didn’t know what the stuff that had been inside the box was.

And I still didn’t know what had happened to me.

From inside the white cloud, I heard a cough.

The smoke that had poured out of the box gradually dispersed, and I could

see again. As I recall, it was around this time that my ability to think mostly returned to normal.

My name was Elaina. I had been in the middle of strolling around town sightseeing. I had received a candy from a roadside stall.

Now I was someone else. I seemed to be having a conversation with someone's little sister, while sucking on a candy.

Interesting. I don't understand at all...

"...Big...Sister..."

The first thing that met my eye when the fog completely lifted was a little sister whom I was meeting for the first time. Just a moment ago, she had been talking about something important with a serious expression on her face.

She was crouched on the floor, looking up at me, her breathing ragged.

"Are you all right...?"

She didn't appear well. Her face was flushed all the way out to the ears, and she was gasping between heavy breaths, as if beset by a high fever.

Oh no. Could that smoke have been poison gas or something...? But I'm fine... Aagh, I have no idea what's happening!

In any case, it seemed like the first priority was to help the suffering girl.

"What's wrong? Is it your stomach? A fever? Do you feel like you're going to throw up?" I went over to her side, placed a hand on her forehead, and rubbed her back for her.

"Don't touch me!" The little sister whose name I didn't know pushed me away. I stumbled and fell on the floor, then she also fell, covering me.

"Umm..." *So heavy.*

"Hah, hah..." Somebody's younger sister placed her hands on the floor on either side of my face and slowly pushed herself back up.

"...Um." In this position, it looked like she had been the one to push me down.

"Big...Sister..." The girl looked extremely unwell, and her eyes... On second thought, she didn't look unwell. She looked like she was intoxicated.

“.....Ummm.” I’m getting a bad feeling about this.

“Big Sister... Big Sister...” The girl was muttering deliriously. “.....You’re cute.”

“.....” Somehow, I could tell something was very wrong here.

“Ahhhhh...I love you. ♥”

“...Aaah!”

She inched her face closer to mine. “Big Sister...I’ve... For a long time, I’ve... Well, I’m sure it’s strange because we’re sisters, but, well, I’ve always loved you. Weird, right? You’ve been the only thing on my mind. You’re my big sister, but you always followed me around like a little puppy and relied on me. What a helpless big sister you were. You’re so seriously cute and cute and cute and cute—I can’t stand it! Oh, I don’t need anything in my life but you. And yet I always treated you coldly! I’m sorry. I’ve always really loved you, but I couldn’t be up front about my feelings. Really, I just want to eat you up. I love love love love love love love love you, so please—”

“No.”

Full stop. I physically floored her with the wand I had pulled out, and she squealed before pouncing on top of me again.

This time, her eyes were bloodshot, and she made no attempt to get up.

She seemed to have fainted.

“...Sigh.” I pushed her off me and sat up.

What in the world...?

After I had straightened up my disheveled clothes, I put on a pointy hat and got out of there—and it was only after doing so that I came to understand what was really happening.



○

If I were to sum up the state of the city in one word, it would be *chaos*. That seemed to neatly describe the entire situation.

“Ahh! I love you! Please go out with meeeeeee!”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh... Wait for me...”

“I have always adored yooouuu!”

“I love you! I’ve always loved you!”

“Ah! Wait! Don’t go!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! My body belongs to you!”

“Stop! There’s a girl I’ve got my heart set on!”

“No! Don’t come any closer!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Ew! Gross! Die!”

While I hadn’t been looking, the whole populace had apparently started playing a game of tag. That was the only thing I could think, as all the townspeople were running around, chasing after someone else.

Someone would run away, and another someone would give chase, and the whole scene would rinse and repeat. Not one person was standing still.

“...What the...?”

Just what is going on here?

The city had gone completely crazy.

Already, my mental processing power had reached its limits. It was all too much. I felt like I wanted to cry.

The mysterious thing was, even though everyone else in the city was going crazy, I was still holding on to my mind, in my own way. It felt strangely lonely—not that I wanted to go nuts or anything.

Somehow or other, I was struck with a sense that, since I was the only sober one in this whole place, it fell to me to resolve the situation.

Hm. That's annoying.

“.....”

As the first step, I walked through the city, avoiding all the people sprinting past me.

Among the jumbled screams and flirtatious overtures, I devoted myself to solemnly observing the situation.

Come to think of it, there's supposed to be a branch office of the United Magic Association down by the harbor. Maybe I should head there.

This must be happening because I opened that box, but...I can't even understand what's going on with my own body.

“.....”

After I had been walking for a little while, something happened. I had already arrived at the harbor without incident. I had made it as far as the United Magic Association branch office.

“Aahh! Ah, aaah... Is this...? Aaah. Oh nooo!”

But of course, there was a strange person here, too. It was a weird girl, gazing into the window of the café that stood next to the branch office and babbling away. She was suspicious from every angle.

The whole city had gone mad, so I wasn't all that surprised to see someone gazing into the glass of a café and murmuring, “Wow...I love you... ♥”

Somehow, I had a hunch that I wouldn't get much out of trying to talk to her.

“.....” I watched the figure of the girl stealthily. From a certain viewpoint, I, too, seemed suspicious.

“You sure are cute...and super adorable from every angle...”

“.....” Oddly enough, I had seen the girl before.

Her clothing was very plain, just a sweater and a flared skirt. Her hair was ash-colored. It was long and sleek, gathered into a half-up, half-down style. Her lapis-colored eyes were gazing lovingly at her own reflection in the glass, and it looked like she was going heart-eyed. Her mouth was slack open, loose and

sloppy, as she mumbled, “I wuv you... ❤” I could almost see the hearts trailing after her words.

That girl, squirming and feeling her own hips and shoulders, looked like she might actually be a witch and a traveler.

Who on earth do you think she was?

...She's me.

“.....” *Huh? How are there two of me?*

When I approached the girl with my head cocked in confusion, I realized that my own figure had changed. My own body, reflected in the window glass, was that of a witch from the United Magic Association, wearing a black pointy hat and a black robe. My hair, black as charcoal, tumbled down to about my shoulders, and my eyes were black, too. I looked like I might be from the East.

Which is to say—

“Saya...?”

I was Saya. Her hair was a little longer since our last interaction, but it was definitely Saya I was looking at.

“Elaina...?”

At the sound of my voice, the person wearing *my* body turned around, and in that moment, I was convinced I knew who this was.

“.....”

“.....”

We looked at each other, there in front of the café. It was just like looking in a mirror, and both of our faces were stunned. It took us a moment to realize precisely what had happened to us.

To put it simply, an incomprehensible situation had befallen us.

Could it be that...our bodies...have swapped?

○

Let's take a moment to collect ourselves.

To that end, we escaped into the café, ignoring the waitress who shouted, "Welcome... Oh! Boss, I love you!" and ran off somewhere. We sat ourselves down in a booth by the window.

"Huh? What's this? What's going on? I don't understand. Explain it to me, please." Trapped in Saya's body, I reached out and firmly shook the shoulders of Saya, who sat across from me, in my body.

"I don't know either! I just ate some candy, and then I turned into you, Elaina... But I don't know the reason why the city is like this."

Uh-oh.

"Never mind that. I more or less understand the reason."

"Huh?"

"...Anyway, getting to the reason why we switched bodies..."

So it was the candy's fault. Sure enough, I ate it, and it was in Saya's mouth, too, but...

"No, wait. What did you mean that you know the reason why the city is like this?"

"...Uh, let's leave that aside for the time being." I waved both hands casually to the sides.

"Ah, come to think of it, I should have had a box with me, but...what happened to it? Apparently, it was a dangerous object that absolutely should not be opened."

"....." This time, I averted my gaze.

"Eh, what's with that reaction?"

"....."

"...Don't tell me you opened it?!" She shot up in her seat.

"....." I knew I couldn't talk my way out of this one. "...Well, just a little."

"A little! What were you thinking?! Really!" Saya smacked me gently. Seeing her in my body, I was taking more mental damage than physical. "Wasn't it obvious that no good would come of opening that?!"

“No, because nobody ever told me a single word about opening it being bad!”

“My younger sister didn’t stop you?”

“Sister?”

“If you and I swapped minds, then you should have been in the place I was before, where my sister was. Wasn’t she there? She’s got black hair and is disturbingly sensual.”

“.....”

Ahhhhh...I love you. ♥

—*Big Sister... I've... For a long time, I've...*

“Uhh... Yeah... Her...”

“Your eyes have gone blank.”

“...So you two are sisters? You...look alike...”

“Huh? Do you mean it?” Looking not at all disappointed, she chuckled. “Eh-heh-heh...”

“Could I get you to stop making that face with my face?” Exasperated, I looked out the window.

The city was still in chaos. People continued to chase each other around.

“Elaina, what are you looking at— Ah! I love you!”

On the other hand, immediately after Saya had followed my gaze to the café window, she was glued to her own figure reflected in the glass. I’ve never been more confused.

What's she doing? Has she lost her mind?

“Pull yourself off the window, please.”

“No way! I’ll never separate from Elaina, for the rest of my life!”

I let out a sigh. “...For the time being, our priority ought to be getting this city back to normal, right? —Well, not really *we*, I guess. That’s what *I* ought to do anyway.”

Because I'm the one who caused this.

“All right, and since right now I’m Elaina, I should do something, too, right?”

It was a confounding way of speaking in an already confounding situation, but Saya seemed to be saying that she was going to join forces with me.

I’m grateful, but get off the window, please.

“...What could have been inside that box, I wonder? Smoke flooded the city, then everyone started acting all funny, but—” Saya was groaning as she tilted her head in contemplation.

Get away from that glass!

“.....”

I did have somewhat of an idea, since her little sister had said she would deliver the box to the island nation, and everyone in the city had gone crazy the moment I’d opened the box.

This wasn’t a spell. It was a curse.

From what I could deduce after watching Saya regain her sanity when she saw me in the glass of the café, whatever had flooded the city wasn’t anything like a love spell, but...there wasn’t anything we could do from that information.

Ultimately, our situation was basically the worst-case scenario.

...Just because I know what it’s not, doesn’t mean I’ll be able to deal with it right here and now.

“The Antique Store Posse probably knows something.” I cradled my head in my hands.

Saya put a hand down on my shoulder, and said, “I heard this from my little sister, but apparently, that lot knew about the box... They might know how to deal with it.”

And then, Saya told me every bit of information she had heard from her sister, from the beginning.

Blah-blah-blah. In conclusion...

...I think we can probably resolve this situation if we hunt down the Antique Store Posse, capture them, and make them spit out everything they know.”

She nodded decisively at me.

"I have a feeling—not sure why—that the Antique Store Posse was also involved in the cause of our body swap."

"...Well, it would be a little much for it to be a coincidence this happened because of some candy."

In other words, we had been tricked into eating the candies as part of some scheme and ended up like this. At least, that was my suspicion.

Makes sense. Assuming they could get me in position to open the box.

"Anyhow, we need to find one of the members of that Antique Store thing, don't we?"

If someone from the opposition could just conveniently appear, that would save us a lot of time and effort, but—

I let out a sigh. That's when it happened.

"Nobody mooooooooove!"

The door to the café slammed open, and a truly suspicious-looking group with pieces of fabric covering their faces swarmed in.

Each of them held an extremely old sword or gun, a bow or spear, or even an ordinary pen or frying pan. Everyone had something, from real weapons down to ordinary household objects. From the looks of them, they appeared to be garbage collectors holding their trash.

"Don't waste time! The effects of the smoke won't last a full day! Before it wears off, we've got to steal anything we can and escape! Don't hold back! Hurry up and get it done!"

With raucous shouts—"Hyah-hah!"—the group raged around the café, snatching money from customers' wallets, running off with coins out of the cash register, and while they were at it, destroying tables and other fixtures.

Well.

What a bunch of lowlifes. Who on earth could these guys be?

We looked at each other.

“.....”

“.....”

“Come to think of it, my sister did say that the Antique Store Posse was going to rob all the shops around town.”

“Oh-hoh, perfect.”

And then, I stood up.



“.....Um, sorry for getting carried away.”

“That’s just fine, really. So long as you tell me where your leader is.”

There was a horrible witch there, laughing to herself—“Oh-hoh-hoh!”—as she abused the men who were tied up with ropes. Her elegant black hair extended as far as her shoulders, she wore a black robe and a pointy hat, and she kicked, kicked, kicked at the men.

She must have been some sort of demon.

And who was that witch?

That’s right. She’s Saya.

“Stop lying, Elaina.”

“.....”

From directly behind me, a girl with ashen hair was glaring at me. It was me, but with Saya inside. But if it looked like me on the outside, couldn’t we just say it was me?

I’d started to act pretty recklessly with this new mentality.

“Please don’t act so out of control in my body,” Saya begged. “After this incident is resolved, all kinds of people are going to be angry with me.” She had her cheeks puffed out in anger.

Since I was currently inside Saya’s body, everything I did now would be blamed on Saya later.

I see.

I sat down in front of one of the veiled thieves.

“Hurry up and talk. If you don’t, I’m going to break your fingers one by one. *Snap! Snap!*”

I described in brutal detail how I might use a spell to sadistically bend his fingers back until they snapped.

“H-huh...! I’m a member of the Antique Store Posse, you know? I’ll never give in to such a threat—”

“Okay.” *Snap!*

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” he cried in agony. “Wa-wait, wait! Wait just a—”

“Hup.” *Snap!*

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” Another agonized wail. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’ll tell you! I’ll—”

“Hm?” *Snap!*

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

For someone who belonged to an organization that upset society like the Antique Store Posse, the thief seemed quite the gentleman, truly compelled by a strong sense of justice, and he readily answered all my questions.

“Please don’t lie, Elaina.”

“.....”

There was a girl with ashen hair staring at me in disappointment.

After that, we headed for the whereabouts of the leader, which I had convinced (forced) the thief to tell us about. Apparently, the person they called their leader was hiding in the basement below one of the city’s taverns— “... Ohh...to think my Elaina is a sadist who cackles as she breaks people’s fingers... I can’t...”

As we were walking to our destination, the girl behind me wept openly.

I glanced at her only for a moment. “Don’t tell me you really thought I broke that man’s fingers. Also, I’m not ‘your Elaina.’”

“Eh? But, Elaina, you’re wearing the pendant I gave you, aren’t you? See?”

“Oh, I was thinking of selling it.”

“So mean...”

“.....” I let out a heavy sigh. “Come on. Of course I’m joking—and also, I didn’t really break that guy’s fingers.”

“..... No, but, Elaina, I’m sure I watched from right behind you as his fingers bent in a strange direction.”

“Like this?” With a low grunt of exertion, I applied the same spell to my own finger and snapped it backward.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” The horrible wail belonged to Saya. “W-w-w-w-w-what are you doing?! My fingeeeeeer!”

“Calm down.” *You’ve got to stop making those faces while you’re in my body.*

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

“I thought I told you to calm down!” I lifted the spell that I had placed on my finger. Immediately, the digit went back to normal. I was able to bend and flex it just as if nothing had happened.

“Aaah...huh?” Blinking her eyes in surprise, Saya cocked her head. “What the...?”

“I simply used a spell to bend the finger just shy of the limit of its movable range, that’s all.”

A human finger could bend backward to about roughly ninety degrees. If you force the finger to move just barely shy of that range, it is excruciatingly painful. And if it happens very quickly, it might make you think that your finger has been broken.

In reality, I had tampered with the man’s sense of pain, but I didn’t feel any particular need to talk about that, so I decided to keep quiet.

“...But if you didn’t actually break anything, what was that strange noise?”

“I snapped some celery.”

“Celery.”

The man had been tied up with rope, so he mistook the sound and the pain to mean his fingers had been broken, and that was enough to convince him.

When you put it into words, that's all there was to it.

"Well, I imagine they hate mages because we do these kinds of things to them..."

Unbothered by the series of events, we talked about this and other things as we walked through the city that was gripped in tumult.

We arrived at the tavern after a little while.



The basement of the tavern was dim and gloomy. The air was stagnant, and in the middle of the room, a lamp hanging from the ceiling cast an orange light, causing all the dust dancing through the room to sparkle.

Deeper inside was, sure enough, the figure of the person in command of the Antique Store Posse.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh...hah-hah-hah...heh-heh-heh-heh...!"

The woman standing there letting out ominous laughter had long, sleek red hair. I couldn't tell how old she was. But I had heard that voice before.

"Hoh-hoh... Right about now, my men are taking advantage of the uproar in town to go around stealing money...heh-heh-heh..."

Since she had her back to us and was reading a book, the woman seemingly had not noticed our arrival at all. What an idiot.

"As soon as the person from the United Magic Association came to the city, I body-swapped her with an ordinary citizen and made her open the box she was carrying... What a perfect plan that was... He-he-he-he... Now this city is mine!"

As we listened to the woman talk loudly to herself, it became clear what had happened.

Me in my civilian clothes, and Saya in her robe.

The woman and her group had had their eyes on the package that Saya was planning to send to the island nation via this city, so when Saya had come to town, they must have hatched a plot to get her to open the box.

I would think they could have used hypnotism or something, or snatched it away from her by brute force, but the method they had chosen was apparently a body swap.

"When they ate that candy, they swapped on the inside...and once that happened, she opened the box! A truly groundbreaking method! Hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah! This time for sure we will have total victory!"

I feel like that plan has a lot of holes in it...though, crazy as it was, it did work... So I suppose we're the real fools...

"By the way, why did you body-swap a mage and an ordinary citizen?"

Wouldn't it have been a safer plan to swap the mage with a member of the Antique Store Posse?

"Why, you ask? Why, that's obvious!" Laughing loudly, she said, "I mean, body swapping means you have to get inside the body of a mage, right? Wouldn't that be hellish?"

"....."

Aha.

Certainly, it would be personally revolting to be forced to spend a day as a person that you hated—enough to make you nauseated.

"Didn't you consider the possibility that this ordinary person and the mage might just happen to be acquaintances?"

When I placed a hand on her shoulder, the woman spun around.

"Huh? There's no way that could—" Her expression stiffened.

Time seemed to stand still as she stared at us with her mouth hanging open, shifting her gaze slightly right to left, sweat breaking out on her forehead.

".....Huh?" And then at last she spoke. "...What are you doing down here?"

I recall it was a very small voice.

"I just came to buy something," I answered her flatly. "You've got candy, right?"



“.....Sighhh.”

So reality was bleak, it seemed.

There was no more candy.

We would need to wait patiently for a whole day to pass so we could return to normal. The woman hadn't readily produced more candy, so we asked her directly, and that was the answer she gave.

That was annoying.

“So we'll go back to normal after one day, right? There's no way you're wrong about that?” I questioned her, and she nodded and sniffled with tears in her eyes.

Apparently, the very existence of mages was an insult to this gang of thieves. And so they had planned to release the smoke throughout the city. They had come to know what sort of thing was inside the box through certain back channels and had executed our body swap to acquire it.

That seemed to be the situation.

“So what are you going to do? It's your fault that the city is in chaos, isn't it?”

According to the thugs who had invaded the café, everything would go back to normal within a day, but I knew we would never be able to stop all the robberies. The people were already rioting. A return to normal wouldn't change the fact that the city was already in chaos. This was the worst-case scenario.

“H-humph! Looks like you've come to the wrong place! The city won't go back to normal, even if you show up in our lair. My men are excellent at what they do! I've ordered them to steal what they can and then get out of town immediately! Hah-hah-hah! Victory is ours!”

“.....”

“.....”

We didn't ask to get involved in this stupid situation. How come you're wearing a triumphant expression, like you've beaten us or something?

“Do you understand the position that you're in here?” I forced her up against

the wall and slammed my hand into the wall beside her. “Right now, you are in our hands. We’ll be able to take you hostage and lure your whole gang out to be arrested at once.”

“H-humph... Is that a threat? My comrades wouldn’t come out of hiding for that.”

“All right, well, until they show themselves, how about I break your fingers one by one? If they still don’t appear, then I think I might tear off your fingernails. If that still doesn’t do it, I could break your arms. If that’s not enough, I suppose I’ll lop off your useless fingers one by one. I’ll use any and all techniques at my disposal, and I absolutely won’t let up, though your throat might go hoarse with screaming... I wonder what state you’ll be in by the time all of your comrades finally appear?”

My tone of voice was a little bit threatening, but I only started talking like that because she didn’t seem to show much remorse.

“.....Waah.” The woman started to cry.

Saya cringed in disgust. “Elaina, I can’t tell which one of you is the bad guy anymore!”

I was no devil, so I would have liked to avoid such violent behavior, if I could. If it were possible, I would prefer to proceed peaceably. However, even if we started hunting for this woman’s minions right now, we’d never be able to catch them all— I was troubled, very troubled, but determined not to let it show on my face.

“...No, there’s no need to search for them,” someone said.

A voice echoed through the basement after Fang Lady and I had been glaring at each other for what seemed like an eternity.

It was a voice I knew.

“.....”

When I turned around, I saw the figures of two witches standing there. There was, in addition, a mountain of junk, from weapons like swords and spears, bows and hatchets, to stationery, ordinary furniture, and kitchen utensils. It

looked like a pile of assorted rubbish.

They were two witches whom I knew.

One of them had soft blond hair like stardust, tied up in a single bunch behind her head. She wore a robe with two brooches clipped onto her breast, one shaped like a star and the other like the moon.

“It’s been a while—”

The other had smooth, long black hair like midnight and a nonchalant air about her. She wore a black robe and pointed hat, and upon her breast was a single star-shaped brooch.

“Don’t worry about the Antique Store Posse that was running wild outside. We dealt with all of them,” the blond witch declared, exhaling purple smoke from her long pipe.

“But how on earth did this all come to pass? Are they still terrorizing the city, despite what happened in the past?” the black-haired witch asked, tilting her head curiously.

Who would have thought that we would reunite here?

Who would have thought that she would come to a place like this?

If I’d had even the slightest warning, I would have tried to look presentable. I really didn’t like the thought of anybody seeing me like this.

For starters, I’m not even myself.

“...T-teacher,” Saya said, wearing my body and dripping with sweat. She looked at the blond witch—at Sheila.

“...M-miss?” As for me, wearing Saya’s body, I looked with a panicked expression at the black-haired witch—at Miss Fran.

Their faces brought back many memories.

...Wait, did Saya just call Sheila “teacher”?



It was surprisingly simple to return the city to normal. Apparently, all we had to do was open the box again. Once she had been turned over to the United

Magic Association by the four of us, Fang Lady had told us the truth of the matter.

After the girl who turned out to be Saya's younger sister had exhibited strange behavior, I'd had to make a pretty quick escape and ended up leaving the box behind, so returning things to normal got delayed until we could retrieve it.

How thoughtless of me. It wasn't my fault, though. I mean, I was in a daze back there, right? So I couldn't think straight. I did nothing wrong.

In any case, we went back to Saya's little sister's room—Mina's room—opened the box, and restored the land to normal.

“...She's still sleeping.”

Mina was still lost in a dream. She was in a sound sleep, breathing deeply on the floor.

“Huh? Why is she sleeping? What did you do?” Saya was eyeing me suspiciously.

“I didn't do anything.” In fact, she did stuff to *me*.

Not that I'd tell you. I can't.

To confirm that the city was back to normal—and do some sightseeing while we were at it—the four of us ventured out into town.

“Uh...what on earth...did I...?” A man—lying half nude in front of a mirror for some reason—sat up, holding his head.

“Oh no. Did we...?” A waitress from some restaurant somewhere sat up from a slender man's lap.

“...H-hey! What the hell?! Getting all frisky on me...”

“Y-you're one to talk! Stop! I'm not interested—”

A bittersweet drama was playing out on a nearby street corner.

Everyone appeared to have returned to normal.

“...Thank goodness.” Saya sighed with relief.

“You said it.” I nodded quietly.

...Except we’re not back to normal yet!

“I was certainly surprised to find you two here. I knew that Sheila’s pupil was coming to this city, but to think that Elaina was here, too...” Walking alongside us, Miss Fran gazed kindly at Saya.

...Since I was still body-swapped with Saya, and since we hadn’t quite found the right timing to reveal that fact, we continued the conversation even as my mind was still running wild with frustration and discomfort.

“Well, I heard all the details from the rampaging members of the Antique Store Posse when we met them outside. Sounds like you two had a hard time. You were forced to open that box against your will, I’m sure?”

She doesn’t seem to have heard about the body swap...and thinks that all of this happened because the Antique Store Posse forced me to open the box. She hasn’t considered that I opened it on my own.

Sheila said, “Well, this was some calamity.” Her hand came down on my shoulder, and she blew smoke in my face. It stank.

“What brings the two of you to a place like this?” I tilted my head questioningly as I wafted the smoke away with my hand.

Since I was currently in Saya’s body, the gesture looked somewhat out of character.

“...? Hm? Have I made your acquaintance?” Miss Fran tilted her head right back at me.

Sheila also wore a puzzled face. “What’s with you? Someone’s calm today.”

To make matters worse, Sheila was staring intently at me, getting closer and closer, peering deeper and deeper into my eyes, like she had started probing for something, “Hmm...?”

I don’t know if her intuition was sharp, or if she had a keen eye for things like this, but Sheila stared at me for a while longer, then confidently said, “...Something about you is really off.”

...Maybe it’s better to go ahead and come out with it...? But it seems like the

situation will only get more complicated once we tell them that we're swapped... I'm really afraid of what they'll think when we tell them we caused the whole situation ourselves.

I have a feeling they would get angry at us.

"Ah, could it be that you...?" Sheila poked at me as I was standing there silently, not answering her. "Is that it? You're acting all innocent in front of your beloved Elaina?"

What is she saying? Seriously. What is she talking about?

"Ah, wait...! Teacher! Please don't say...!" Saya was in a flustered panic—in my body.

.....Aaah, this is so awkward...

Seeming not to catch sight of the red-faced Saya waving her hands and acting suspiciously behind her, Sheila grinned mischievously and slung her arm around my shoulders.

"Hah. What's this? You're all innocent now? As if you aren't always saying, 'Next time I see Elaina, I'm gonna XXX her XXX, and XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX—'"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

"Whoops, my bad. She's right here."

She was so evil.

"My goodness, Saya...was it? Are you all right? Your face looks red."

"Who wouldn't go red after having it revealed in front of Elaina herself that she wants to XXXXXXXX Elaina—"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

"Quiet, Elaina. Are you feeling okay?" Miss Fran was staring intently at Saya, who was in my body.

Really, this situation was beyond complicated.

I could only sigh and wish that tomorrow would hurry up and get here.



In the end, we stayed silent about our body swap to Sheila and Miss Fran, but it goes without saying that it placed some serious strain on our relationship.

“...Um, forget what she said, Elaina. Um, you see, the thing is that...”

After the four of us had strolled through town for a while and eaten a meal together, Saya and I had broken off from our teachers. I would have liked to stay with them for a little longer, since it was a rare reunion and we had many stories to exchange, but as I’ve said many times already, I was not myself, and we felt like we might die if we stayed with those two any longer.

Especially Saya.

The two of us had decided to stay in the same inn due to the body swap. I was the one who had rented the room—at the moment, that meant Saya did.

While we were at it, we brought Saya’s younger sister—in her unconscious state—to our room. The innkeeper’s eyes opened wide with surprise when he saw two girls carrying another girl on their shoulders, but we got him to keep quiet with a hefty bribe. Gold makes right.

“...Uuuuuuuuuuuugh... It’s not truuue...” Saya was cowering on the floor, and I looked at her indifferently.

“...I don’t really mind, you know.”

It totally didn’t bother me when I heard you want to XXX and XXX and XXX me, or XXX my XXX. I was just like, “Uh-huh? Yeah? Sure.” I’m serious!

“You’re lying... You find me creepy now, don’t you?!”

“That’s not true.”

“But your eyes are dead, Elaina!”

“These are your eyes. They’ve always looked dead.”

“Meanie.”

“Well, honestly speaking, I did cringe a little.”

“See, I knew it! My life is over! I’m gonna end it all!”

Tears streaming from her eyes, Saya began to pound her head repeatedly on the floor. Strangely, it resembled the posture she had taken one time in the

past when she prostrated herself to beg me to teach her magic.

By the way, do you realize that's my body you're hurting? What are you going to do if you damage me? Stop that at once!

"Um, look, Saya. I did cringe a little bit, but I really don't particularly mind, you know?" I got down from the bed and put my hand on her shoulder.

"...Eh?" Her face was very cute as she looked up at me. It was none other than my own face, after all.

Chasing a bad joke away to the edge of my mind, I smiled at her as best I could. "I've always known you thought these things, Saya, right from the beginning. So it doesn't really bother me."

"I caaaaaaaaaan't! I'm gonna end it all!"

Uh-oh. Looks like I poured salt in the wound.

"Please don't. Or at least wait until tomorrow."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang! She slammed my head into the floor violently.

What are you doing? Stop it. Surely, you're disturbing the people staying in the room below us. At this point, I finally got serious about trying to stop her.

"Um, Saya, you know, we all have wild fantasies, especially at your age. So there's really no reason to feel down because yours were exposed—"

"Stop it, please! Don't be so nice to me!"

"...I'm sorry..."

"I might get pregnant!"

"No matter how painful the lesson, you never learn, do you?"

You need to do some serious reflection.

"I can't take it anymore!"

"Come on... Hey, I'm going to have to ask you seriously to stop injuring my body."

After that, I feel like we yelled at each other for a little while. I don't know how long we were at it, or how noisy we were being.

But we must have been rather loud.

".....Nngh."

...Because Saya's little sister woke up.

She sat up on the bed. After staring in puzzlement at the unfamiliar ceiling, she took a look around the room, then finally looked at us.

.....

Mina saw me—in Saya's body—pinning her sister's arms behind her to stop Saya—in my body—from violently hurting herself.

"...Big...Sister...? Who is that person?"

Why did you have to wake up now...?

"I see... So my big sister solved everything, huh? ...Well, she is my sister after all. Of course she'd be able to handle that."

We told the whole story to Mina after she woke up. From opening the box after we body-swapped, to the insanity that befell the city, to the fact that everything was already resolved. We told her everything.

It would have been fine by me to keep quiet about the body swap, but not letting her know would have posed problems in several ways, so with all the tender grace of a goddess, I told her the truth.

"Body swapping is a little...well, hard to believe. But that means my sister wasn't the one to open the box. That's what you're saying, I'm guessing?" Mina nodded in understanding.

"Well, yeah, that's what it comes down to," Saya answered, nodding sharply.

"....." Mina had her eyes fixed on me. She added, "...Well, whatever. I'm not bothered either way." I was shocked.

Mina flipped her hair without a care. I thought about revealing her immodest conduct the day before to Saya, and it was about to come out of my mouth, but I restrained myself, barely.

"What was that smoke, I wonder? The townspeople started acting strangely." Saya tilted her head questioningly. "Hmm?"

"Ah—about that." I recalled something at that moment and clapped my hands. "I asked Miss Fran and Sheila and got them to question Fang Lady, and she said that stuff is a powerful magical aphrodisiac. It increases desire a hundredfold, so you won't be able to keep it together if you see someone you even kind of like. And it's strong enough to drive you totally crazy if you see someone you *really* like. Apparently, the smoke is cursed."

That's why the people of this city had been chasing each other around or running away.

Apparently, that was that.

"...Whatever." Mina flipped her hair again.

Oh-hoh. Is that it? That's the attitude you're gonna display?

"Well, you know, the reason why people started acting strangely yesterday was wholly because all their romantic inhibitions stopped working. I won't say who I'm talking about, but—" I shot a glance at Mina. "I'm going to tell her about your immodest behavior yesterday. Is that all right?" I was sure that's what I said, but— "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Strangely enough, it was Saya who started wailing in terror, not Mina.

I'm not talking about you. I mean, it applies to you, too. It applies to both of you sisters. What is your deal?

"...I really don't care."

On the other hand, Mina was looking back and forth between me and Saya, as her face quietly turned crimson. I sensed this secretive girl and I had something in common.

I felt like I now understood, more or less, one reason behind why Saya had chosen me to be the one to teach her magic.



As soon as everything was over, the box that had been meant to be sent to the island country, the object that had been behind the whole incident, was

sent on its way, along with the various objects that held strange powers.

Since the island country had a policy of national concealment that made reaching it a great difficulty, and since there was a ship scheduled to depart for the island only once per year, properly speaking, protocol was to deposit parcels for safekeeping in Qunorts until the ship was ready to leave. But this time, it was an object from the island country that had caused the terrible incident, so the United Magic Association forced it to be sent immediately. It was accompanied by a letter stating roughly, *We recovered this for you, so how about you send back a nice reward?*

The following day, a letter of reply came that said, in neat handwriting, *Fine. Thank you for this. (From now on, whenever you find something, go ahead and destroy it on the spot. Don't go to the trouble of sending it back. It's a nuisance to have you demanding money every time!)*

By the time we got the letter, Saya and I were back in our original bodies.

The strange incident finally came to a close.

Saya and Mina had jobs to get back to, and I was a traveler. Sheila and Miss Fran had simply come to the city on a vacation. Our impromptu reunion was necessarily short-lived.

If we were together for a longer time, surely our partings would become more painful for everyone.

However, at the table in the café where the five of us sat before going our separate ways, it felt like none of us really wanted to leave. I couldn't be the only one who wanted us to stay together.

As we sat there, Miss Fran and Sheila told us all sorts of things.

Saya's little sister worked at the United Magic Association just like Saya. Sheila was Saya's teacher. Sheila and Miss Fran had been instructed by the same teacher in the past. In short, they were pupils.

They told us that they had faced off against the Antique Store Posse in this country in the past. Ever since the first incident with the gang, the two of them had been close colleagues. Once a year in commemoration, they took a trip together— We heard all kinds of stories, and we shared all sorts of things about

our lives, too. Especially, that I was writing a book.

“...Yes, I’m telling you, Sheila has been like this for a long time. She refuses to give up smoking. She doesn’t think about if it bothers anyone around her, of course. What do you think? She’s a dummy, right?” Miss Fran snickered with Saya.

Before I realized it, we’d all gotten lost in conversation.

“Oh-hoh.” Saya laughed. “...I’m always telling her to please quit smoking, you know. But she doesn’t listen to a single thing I have to say.”

“She’s simply convinced that inhaling poison makes her look cool.”

I felt like I was watching something rare unfold.

“.....” On this side of the table, Mina was staring fixedly at me. “...So you’re Elaina, huh?”

“That I am.”

“I’ve heard all sorts of things from my big sister—that you taught her magic after I left her and that you two reunited in some other country.”

“.....”

“She seemed really happy when she was telling me about it...”

Then why do you seem a little jealous? Why are you grinding your teeth? Please stop. You’re starting to scare me.

“Why did you leave Saya behind in the Country of Mages?” I asked. “That really hurt her feelings, you know?” I spoke in a whisper, so that my words wouldn’t reach Saya’s ears.

“Ah, about that.” The person who answered me was not Mina, but Sheila. “I wanted her to hurry up and get through her training to become a witch, so I pushed her to return to her hometown. Saya has a habit of depending on people, right? If she never left her sister’s side, it wouldn’t have been good for either of them. That’s why.”

I see, I see.

“...I was sure Mina had run out of patience with Saya and just left.”

Sheila snorted at my words. “No, actually, Mina was rather furious! Shouting at me, like, ‘Why did you pull me apart from my big sister?’ and ‘I’ll never forgive you!’ and ‘I’ll curse you till the day I die,’ and so on.”

“Huh!” *That was unexpected. Well, after what happened yesterday, I probably shouldn’t be too surprised.*

“The way it stands, I’m not sure which one of them was more dependent on the other.”

“Please, you can just leave it there...” Mina was grinding her teeth as her face flushed bright red.

The conversation kept going after that. There was no clear direction, no coherent focus, yet the interesting, amusing, aimless chat was somewhat like a journey.



But time could not last forever.

The hour for parting was coming to call.

“Waaaaahhh! No! I don’t wanna! I don’t wanna go back! I want to be with Elaina a little longer!”

There was a lone girl kicking up a fuss and whining in front of the gates of the Free City Qunorts. If you’re wondering who this embarrassing child could be, it was Saya.

Sheila had caught her by the nape, dragging her roughly along. She looked just like a little kid throwing a tantrum, or maybe like a wayward kitten.

Exasperated with her charge, Sheila let out a huge sigh. “What are you throwing a tantrum for? We’ve got work to do, so we’re going home.”

“All right, I quit.”

“Huh? How are you going to eat?”

“I’ll get Elaina to take me as her wife.”

“Uh, no can do.” *I’ll pass.*

“See?” Sheila snorted.

"Big Sister. Give it up." Mina also grunted, glowering intensely in my direction.

I think she hates me... Like a lot...

"No waaaaaaaaaaaaayy! Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Saya's awful wailing echoed through the town until she had left the city completely behind.

The girls, members of the United Magic Association, had to depart the city. After all, they had work to do. Consequently, Miss Fran and I had gone to see them off, but...

"...You certainly are loved." Miss Fran let out a dry laugh from beside me.

"...Well, I guess...I am..."

In truth, I was at a loss for how to respond, so I let my sentence trail off.

"....."

"....."

We saw Saya and the others off, and then it was time for our own parting.

Even though we were just standing there—even though the only change was that we could no longer hear Saya's screams—for some reason, the silence was stifling and almost impossible to bear.

"I've told you about my own teacher, haven't I, Elaina?" Apparently, I wasn't the only one who found the silence difficult to sit through. "I've told you about the freewheeling traveler who was very strong, wise, and stingy, haven't I?"

"You've told me, and I've listened."

"Well, don't you think she sounds like anyone you know?" Miss Fran tilted her head.

Her usual expression was nowhere to be seen.

"...Who knows? There are probably plenty of people like that, aren't there?"

"She sounds like you," Miss Fran said, without pausing. "Very strong and wise, but stingy. Isn't that exactly like you?"

"...Could you be making fun of me?"

“A little bit, if you still haven’t realized the truth.”

“.....”

A freewheeling traveler who resembled me.

It’s not that she’s like me. It’s more accurate to say I resemble her.

And I’m guessing that person has ashen hair, lapis-colored eyes, and used to wear a black robe and a pointy hat.

I bet she is brimming with self-confidence.

And perhaps, she might have written a book while she was traveling. If we’re the same, that is.

“You seem to have already realized it.” As if she could read my mind, Miss Fran continued nonchalantly, “Who was the person who taught me magic? Who is the witch you have always aspired to be? You really must have guessed long ago.”

“...” *I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. “Well, who is she?”*

“Goodness. Don’t play dumb.” Miss Fran let out a quiet laugh. “I see you still haven’t addressed your inability to be honest when it comes to important things.”

“It doesn’t cause me any trouble not to fix it.”

“I don’t think it would cause you any trouble to fix it either.”

“.....”

“I wonder how long we’ve known each other, hm?”

“I’d say several years. I don’t think it’s been all that long.”

I think we’ve spent more time apart than together.

“I guess you’re right, but I think I’ve got you more or less figured out. I mean, it’s clear to me. It’s clear that you’ve vaguely realized who taught me and Sheila and who penned the book you’ve so treasured.”

“.....”

“I can also see that even though you know, you’ve been turning a blind eye.”

She didn't seem to intend to rebuke me. Instead, Miss Fran was there, smiling kindly, wistful eyes open just barely, as always.

Somehow it was very nostalgic, and I couldn't look directly at her.

So I averted my gaze and spoke in fits and starts.

"The author of that book—"

The Adventures of Niche. The title of my beloved book.

"...The author wrote five books about her travels then dropped off the face of the earth. Leaving behind only her books, she winked out of sight. Ever since then, there have been no new publications, and ultimately, it's never been made public just who the author was or where she came from."

"Yes, I know..."

"One day, when I find that out, I feel certain my own self-indulgent travels will come to an end."

The impetus for starting my journey had been, to put it mildly, related to *The Adventures of Niche*. I had set out to follow the same paths as the author and feel traces of the author as I traveled.

That's what I have been doing.

I wonder what would happen if I knew who the author was?

I would probably conclude that I had lost my reason for continuing to travel.

I suppose it has been easier in that case to turn a blind eye.

"I still want to keep on traveling, I want to keep moving from place to place. I want to take my time and do as I please."

I want to make a story that won't be over in five volumes.

And so, since my journey can't be over yet, I don't think that's something I can allow myself to realize just yet. I want to be myself, the Ashen Witch. I want to be an ordinary traveler.

What I said to her clearly and concisely was just that.

"....." Miss Fran did not criticize me for my ambiguous goals. Neither did she

seem particularly disappointed. She simply fixed her eyes on me. "...Even if you did discover who your hero really was, I don't think it would change anything about what you've done so far."

"...I wonder."

"It's true. Did you know? My teacher always seemed like she was calculating, but she had quite a careless personality."

"....." *Seriously?*

"And you're also quite careless."

"....." *Seriously?*

"That's why I don't think you need to sweat the small things." Miss Fran smiled. "But sooner or later, you'll need to go back to your hometown. *Your mother* is worried about you."

"...I suppose she is." *Sooner or later.*

Though I don't know when that day will be—

"There's certainly no changing that—up until now and from now on—you are an ordinary traveler," Miss Fran said. "But please, don't forget that we are always thinking about you—or that we will always love you."

How can she be so sappy with a straight face? Sly old witch.

"....."

I simply kept looking away from her, pretending to be lost in my own thoughts, as I pondered what she had said. Somehow, at times like these, my ability to form words or actions would fail me, so I simply just stood there in a daze.

I suppose I was, as I had always been, still a girl who had trouble being honest.

No, no. Even I have to have some moments of truth.

So I mustered my courage and squeaked out, "I love you, too. I love you, Miss Fran—and everyone else."

That must have reached Miss Fran's ears.

I could sense her usual smile was on her face, though I couldn't look directly at her, even though she was right in front of me.

"Good-bye, Miss Fran."

"See you later, Elaina."

In this way, our latest parting—who knows how many times we'd done this—was a modest affair.

After all the excitement had died down, and Miss Fran and Sheila had left the city together, I took my first step forward.

The curtains were opening on a new journey.



Afterword

Hello. It's been a while.

I recently started playing Fate/Grand Order, and I'm around Level 70. I have zero friends. My name is Jougi Shiraishi, a man who's lost himself in the solo play mode of a mobile game as Kirito. Very nice to make your acquaintance.

One way or another, we've already come to the fifth volume of the *Wandering Witch* series. When I first started writing it, I never imagined it would be so long. But I did want to write at least five volumes, so I'm really glad that I made it this far.

I've been allowed five pages for the afterword again, so I'll postpone my rambling a bit and start off with my comments on each chapter.

Chapter 1: A Certain Witch's Stories

The prologue. I don't really have anything else to say about it. It's just the prologue.

Come to think of it, I didn't write anything that matches the illustration on the cover. Crap!

Chapter 2: Castle Town Fresia: Gardenia's Carrier Pigeons

I wanted to write a story featuring carrier pigeons. This chapter came to being when I indulged in that desire.

When you do nothing but work, it really starts to affect the way you think, and I realized it's rather important to take a bit of a breather once in a while.

Chapter 3: Castle Town Fresia: Plumeria in a Cage

A long time ago, in a commercial or something, the husband of Kazue Fukiishi, a certain musician-turned-actress, said, "Is it far away because it's so beautiful? Or is it beautiful because it's so far away?" That phrase really stuck with me.

Even if you could gaze on a beautiful city from atop a distant tower or gaze up at that far-off spire, you would never reach mutual understanding. By the way, how do you figure I should go about acquiring a handsome voice, à la Mr. Fukuyama?

Chapter 4: Two Teachers

A story from Miss Fran's past, which I hadn't written about at all. I'm sure there are some people who were able to guess, based on their witch names, but it turns out Fran and Sheila were classmates. My initial plan was to debut Sheila in Volume 2, then reveal their past in Volume 3...but...I got sidetracked...

Chapter 5: Cute Makes Right

This is a reworked version of a special edition bonus story that I wrote to be a store exclusive packaged with Volume 2. I think that including this story means that all of the special edition bonus stories I've written up to this point have made it into the books.

Chapter 6: A Honeymoon and the Lily Flowers of Happiness

I got a report from my editor right after Volume 4 was published, telling me that we had gotten mail saying that readers wanted to see the continuation of Amnesia's and Avelia's travels. I had been occasionally getting similar reactions on Twitter as well. And in my in-box. I had already been planning to write more about them, but your feedback fueled me to write this chapter. I also casually reintroduced a certain married couple whom you might recognize.

Chapter 7: The Yellow Flower of Happiness

This one is a revision of a story that I wrote around the time of Volume 2 or 3. It was rejected at the time. Those two volumes were a little too involved, so it had been hard to squeeze this one in... Just your typical story, you know...

Chapter 8: A Certain Girl's Predictions

I turned the story of the boy who cried wolf over in my mind and granted the main character the ability to see the future, and the result was this sort of story. I think seeing the future and stuff might be really useful to cheat in battle, but it would actually hold you back if you're trying to get through everyday life. If you knew all that was going to happen, life would be so boring.

This is tangential, but when I hear the name Anemone, the “Ballet Mécanique” episode of *Eureka Seven* flickers into my mind. It’s a problem. I know.

Chapter 9: Two Pupils

A reunion with Saya and the debut of her little sister. Since Elaina has been inspired by a book with five volumes, I wanted to dive deeper into it in the fifth volume of this series.

I feel like Saya has a screw loose, so her little sister would naturally have some loose, too. I considered whether I should write a serious story, but I figured the brutal atmosphere of this story was tasteless enough, and this was the result.

In this volume, I used flower names for the names of characters and countries. Not because these stories all had to do with flowers or anything, but simply because it felt kind of fancy. I did consider creating characters that corresponded with their floral meanings, but I realized they would all be a bunch of lovesick dummies, so I gave that up really quick. Plus, it would be hard to explain, so I chose not to pay much attention to the meanings themselves.

However, I did make the characters’ hair colors match their flowers. Purple irises and pink plumeria and red anemones do all exist. By the way, you might be thinking, *Huh? There’s no such thing as a green gardenia, you idiot*, but gardenia have green leaves. So hush, and leave it at that. Green stems are an acceptable interpretation, too.

...After I decided to match the hair to flower colors, I found my color choices were narrower than expected, and I had a hard time.

While I was writing this afterword, I did a little Googling and discovered the astonishing fact that there is a rose known as Amnesia, and it means “memory loss.” What a coincidence!

At any rate, that’s the fifth volume.

Perhaps because I’ve purged myself of the darkness in my heart that I was harboring around the time I was writing Volume 2, I think this is a very upbeat volume. Maybe because past stories and characters made new appearances.

Even if *The Adventures of Niche* was five volumes in total, I’d like to continue

Wandering Witch. I feel as if I sound like a broken record, but I wish I could write these stories forever.

All of this is to say that I'd like to continue writing these stories, so please keep reading!

All right, on to the acknowledgments.

Azure.

Thank you for your adorable illustrations. While I was taking a break from work, I got your rough sketch for the cover from my editor, and it was too cute. I imagine I made a strange squeal when I saw it. Also, thank you for the limited-edition covers! Now we're doing limited-edition reprints, and I've been allowed to see the covers for Volumes 1 through 5. They're way too cute, and I let out another weird noise when I saw them. To tell you the truth, I almost always make strange sounds when I receive the illustrations.

My editor, M.

Thank you for your revisions and jokes at my expense. Also, my sincerest apologies for my constant emotional instability. It would make me very happy if we could continue to work together for many years to come. I'm going off on a tangent here, and I know I'm always tweeting...but only when I'm taking a break...or doing something other than writing...! Whenever I'm home, I promise I'm clutching my head in front of my computer... I swear...

To everyone else involved, thank you very much. I hope we can continue working together.

To everyone who has kindly read this far, I'll see you in the next volume, if there is one!

See ya!

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