

Little Witch Academia

The Nonsensical Witch
and the Country of the Fairies

Momo Tachibana

ILLUSTRATION BY
Eku Uekura

ORIGINAL STORY BY
TRIGGER/Yoh Yoshinari



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Copyright

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Original Story by TRIGGER/ Yoh Yoshinari

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Eku UEKURA

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Character Introductions



Atsuko (Akko) Kagari

A girl who came from Japan to become a witch. She's not great with magic, but she's cheerful and optimistic.



Lotte Jansson

A kind, sincere girl. She can use songs to summon spirits.



Sucy Manbavaran

A poison fiend. She takes life at her own speed and is a little odd.



Diana Cavendish

A prize pupil. She's smart and can even perform advanced magic.



Professor Ursula

The magical astronomy teacher. She kindly watches over Akko.



Shiny Chariot

The witch Akko idolizes.



Amanda O'Neill

A foulmouthed delinquent. She's a very skilled broom rider.



Constanze Amalie

A machine hobbyist. She's very quiet, and it's hard to tell what she's thinking.



Jasminka Antonenko

A big eater who's always munching on snacks.



Feoras

The king of the Cait Sith. He's a bit pompous and has a short temper.



Alan

The king of the Cu Sith. He's incredibly lazy.



Sifla

A six-year-old witch who lives on Doras Hill with Feoras and Alan.



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The Floundering Witch Who Can't Ride a Broom

My name is Atsuko Kagari, and I knew my destiny when I was six years old.

At an outdoor stage, under a sky full of twinkling stars, I saw a magic show for the first time in my life. I watched as birds made of light flew out of the Big Dipper, and from their brilliant glow appeared a redheaded witch.

She was Shiny Chariot, the person to whom my destiny was tied.

Falling stars showered down on us, and fairies materialized in front of our chests. When we tried to catch them, they slipped through our fingers, flitting up and away. Beyond them, a centaur waited in the night sky, and Chariot raced past on her broom.

Even now, I can remember it all very, very clearly.

Chariot showed me a whole new world I'd never known, a world where magic definitely existed. And she taught me that it was both incredibly fun and a way to make everybody happy!

"A believing heart is your magic," said Chariot as she waved her magic staff, Shiny Rod, at the sky. "When you reach out your hand, your story will begin!"

That was when I made up my mind: I was going to become a witch, too.

Someday, with my own two hands, I was going to make my dream come true—just like Chariot, the best witch in the world.

It was gonna be a story by me, for me!

...Well, at least, that was the plan.

"I hate thiiiiis! I don't wanna do this stuff anymoore!" I planted my face onto my desk. "I'm so done with it. This isn't why I came to Luna Nova!"

Ten years had passed since the night I'd decided to become a witch. Now, at sixteen, I'd gotten my heart's desire and come all the way from Japan to attend Luna Nova.

Luna Nova.

It was the school Shiny Chariot had gone to: a distinguished magical academy straight out of my dreams! Ever since I'd been officially admitted, I'd been looking forward to attending it more than anything.

Oh, I just knew I'd be bursting with talent and pulling off even the most challenging spells. I could already hear the professors: *Miss Kagari, you truly are Shiny Chariot's successor!*

But reality was much different.

Magical numerology, magical pharmacology, magical astronomy...

The only things piled up in front of me were textbooks crammed with complicated theories.

Well, sure. Magic was magic. It was nothing like anything I'd studied in school up until now. I even learned how to find goblins and make magic potions for the first time at Luna Nova.

But come on!

What I wanted to do was, you know, wave a wand like *Kapwing!* and *Blam!* and cast some flashy spells—the kind that filled you up with wonder and excitement, like Chariot's show.

Not this “studying” kind, which kept me glued to my desk and was full of lousy stuff I had to memorize!

“Haaah. Seriously, what's the point of learning about the magical world's past anyway?”

The textbook I had open was for magical history. It droned on and on about the history of witches.

But, um, excuse me, it really doesn't matter what a total stranger did a hundred years ago. Like, I don't care about it one bit.

“You just gotta deal with it. It’s your fault for napping in class, Akko.” My roommate Sucy spoke callously, as though it had nothing to do with her.

Lifting my head, I hit her with my most withering glare.

“And that was because of you, Sucy! You made me drink a sleeping potion!”

“If you wouldn’t yawn with your mouth wide-open, maybe these things wouldn’t happen. Your fault for being careless.”

“How?!” I yelled, then remembered with a start and hastily clapped both hands over my mouth.

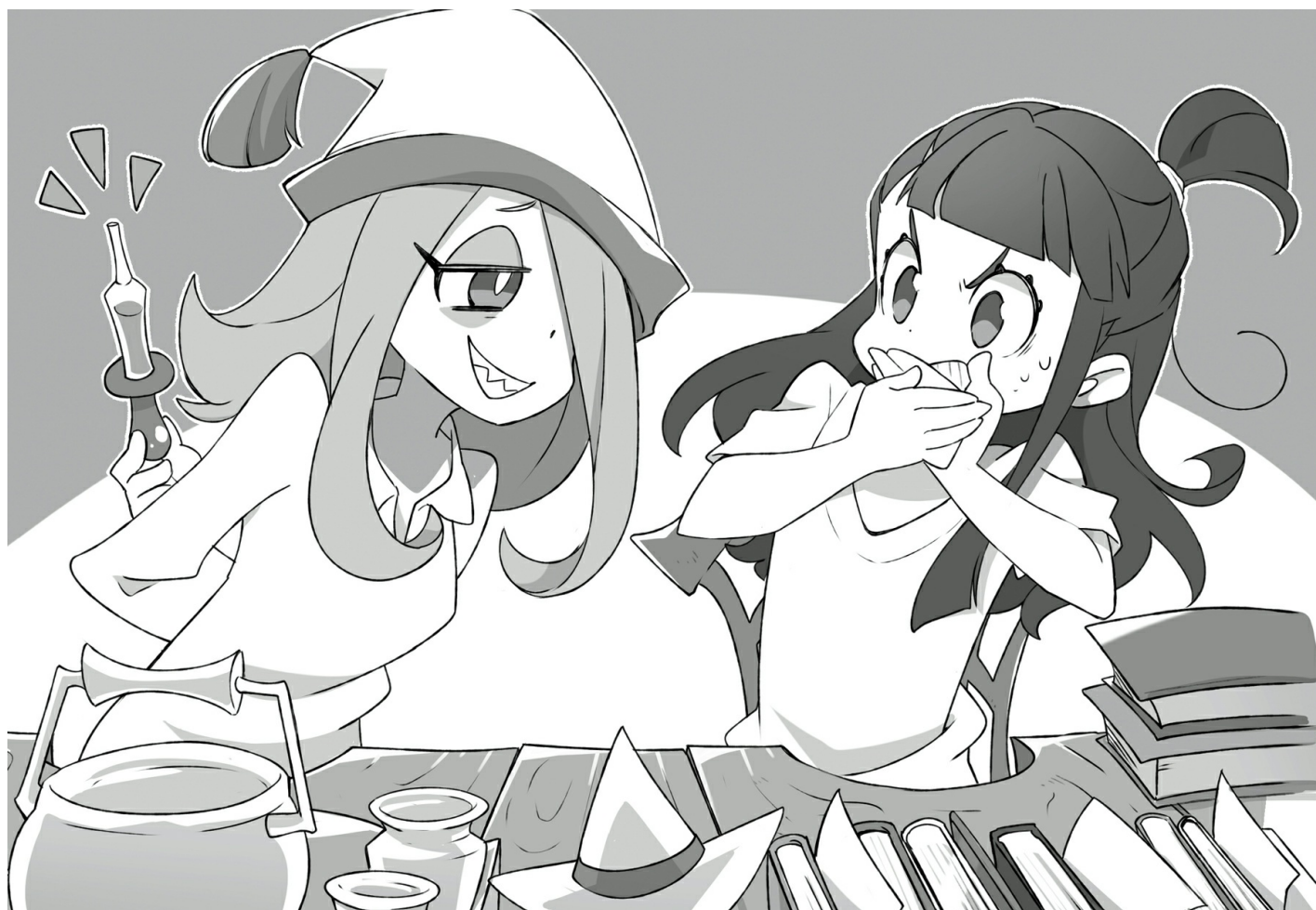
Sucy grinned at me.

I’d seen the eyedropper she was holding.

Oh, wow. That was a close one. She’d almost gotten me again.

Sucy’s hobby was collecting poisons, and if I gave her half a chance, she’d use me as a guinea pig all day. Thanks to that, I’d landed in this wonderful little mess today!

I mean, I’d been just the tiniest bit bored, so I yawned, like anyone would. That was all. I’d even covered my mouth with my hand so the professor wouldn’t see it.



And Sucy had still slipped in from the side and squirted some of her homemade sleeping potion into my mouth with an eyedropper.

Just one drop, and I was out like a light.

Professor Fannelan, our magical history teacher, got so mad, she almost burst into flames, but apparently I still didn't stir. They shook me and pinched me, but I didn't so much as twitch.

Sucy, you jerk! What kind of powerful potions were you using on me?!

The upshot was that I was the only one in the whole class to get homework. I was supposed to copy everything from chapter 1 to chapter 3 in the textbook—forty pages' worth—into a notebook by the next day. Seriously, punishments didn't get more tedious than that.

Long story short, all of this was Sucy's fault!

But she showed no sign of trying to help me. She was busy organizing her collection of poisonous plants.

I swear. What was so fun about staring at scary weeds day in and day out?

"HaaaAAAAaaaaAAAAaaah."

As I sighed for the umpteenth time, my other roommate, Lotte, smiled wryly at me. The three of us had been sharing a room ever since the entrance ceremony.

“The homework’s hard, but it isn’t all bad, you know,” she chided in her easygoing way.

“What about this is good?”

“You weren’t born into a family of witches, Akko. Sucy and I learned these things growing up, but you hardly know anything about history. If you take this opportunity to learn about witches properly, it’s sure to come in handy.”

“But do I really need to memorize it? Like, if there’s ever anything I need to know, I can just grab a book and look it up then.”

“Mm... Maybe it’s not useful right now, but I bet it will be eventually. That’s what studying is for, after all.”

“Geez, Lotte, you’re such a Goody Two-shoes.”

I pushed my lips out in a pout and balanced my pencil on top of them.

I wasn’t even halfway through my homework, but I really didn’t feel like doing it anymore.

Lotte stepped in to placate me. “But, Akko, if you don’t finish your homework, I doubt they’ll let you go on the field trip.”

“A field trip?” I blinked at her.

What trip? Nobody told me about this.

Sucy shot me a look of irritation. “Oh, Akko, you really don’t listen to anything. The professor told us about it today, remember?”

“When?”

“During our magical history class.”

“In case you forgot, that was *your* fault, Sucy!”

“Oh yeah. You were asleep, huh?”

“Stop pretending this has nothing to do with you!”

“N-now, now.” Lotte slipped in between Sucy and me to keep us from attacking each other. “Um, so we’re all going to Doras Hill tomorrow night.”

“Doras Hill?”

“Uh-huh. It’s been said fairies have gathered there for centuries. It’s a really special place, full of magic.”

“Fairies? Special?!”

Words I loved to hear.



She certainly had my attention.

Lotte smiled at me knowingly. “I went there with my grandma a really long time ago. Oh, it’s wonderful! You know, they say you’ll receive a blessing if you stand at the very top of the hill and let the full moon shine down on you.”

“Ooh, got it. So that’s why we’re going at night.”

“Yep. I think it’s a yearly event, a sort of good-luck ritual for first-year Luna Nova students to become full-fledged witches. Oh, and we’ll be leaving at ten PM.”

“Ten PM?! But that’s when they turn the lights off!”

“I think the magical powers of the moon are the strongest between midnight and two in the morning. I can’t believe we get to go out so late! Isn’t it exciting?”

“Woaaaaow! Sounds like so much fun!”

“Will you be able to go, Akko?” Sucy scratched her cheek. “The trip’s tomorrow evening, remember? Will you make it in time?”

“Oh, sure, it’ll be fine. If I’ve got that to look forward to, this homework will go by real fast. I’ll have it done in a jiffy!”

“That’s not what I meant.” Sucy’s eyes swept across me to the broom propped up in a corner of the room.

Lotte let out a small gasp.

“We’re taking the leylines to the hill.”

“Huh?”

“Meaning we’re going by broom. And you can’t ride, Akko.”

“...Huh?”

“I seriously doubt you’ll be able to learn how by tomorrow.”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

I jumped to my feet on reflex, and my chair fell over with a bang.

That’s impossible! Nobody told me about this!



“All right, girls. Are you ready?” With a soft smile, Professor Ursula mounted her broom.

I listened as everyone energetically answered her. “Yes!”

You know, my idol, Chariot, used to stand on her slender broom, riding it through the night sky like a snowboard. Sometimes she’d even use her momentum to do multiple spins in midair.

That’s why I kind of assumed witches could ride brooms as a matter of course. I figured because I’d gotten into Luna Nova, I’d learn to ride one without any trouble at all.

...Well, let me tell you.

I could not.

It didn’t matter how much I hopped around or fervently chanted my spells. My broom wouldn’t respond to me one bit.

It normally wasn’t a problem. I mean, it wasn’t *not* a problem, but if I needed to go into town or get around the school, I could just walk.

That wouldn’t work with the leylines, though.

They have a whole lotta magic in them, so we can cast spells anywhere as long as we’re close to them. Oh, and they let us travel around by broom, too.

Our destination tonight was several dozen miles away, but it was on a leyline, which meant we could catch a magical current and be there in no time at all! ... Or at least, I should’ve been able to. Technically.

But since I couldn’t ride my broom, I had to sit behind Professor Ursula on hers.

I’ll be honest, it was seriously uncool.

“Miss Kagari, are you all right? Hold on tight so you don’t get thrown off.”

“...I will,” I grumbled.

I mean, I was thankful Professor Ursula volunteered to be my mentor, especially since I was floundering in pretty much all my classes. She's always smiling and super-kind. But just between you and me, she's sometimes a little *too* nice, so you can't always count on her. That said, she's way better than the other teachers, who are constantly mad at me.

...That still didn't cancel out the fact that I looked totally dumb right then.

Sure enough, I heard spiteful snickers here and there.

"I can't believe there's a witch who can't even ride a broom! A blot on Luna Nova's reputation!"

"It's absurd for an ordinary person to even *think* they can join the witches in the first place."

...Okay. Whoever said that, get out here.

I'll shut you up for good!

My right fist was raised and ready to go, but I slowly brought my left hand up to restrain it. After pulling an all-nighter to finish my homework, I really wasn't in the mood to cause trouble and get my trip privileges revoked.

Be patient. Suck it up.

To tell you the truth, I was gritting my teeth so hard, they were about to shatter!

"Express contempt for others, and it will always come back to you."

Everyone instantly fell silent at the sound of a dignified voice.

...It was Diana.

"No one is without weakness. It's unbecoming to find fault in others while turning a blind eye to yours. What a disgrace to Luna Nova."

Diana Cavendish.

She's a girl in my class with fluffy, wavy hair. Some people say she's the best student in all of Luna Nova's history. On top of that, she's really pretty, super-smart, and from a very distinguished family. She can effortlessly cast even the most advanced spells. Basically, she's perfect.

From what I've heard, there are several Diana fan clubs—not just at Luna Nova but in the magical world at large.

Hmph. So what? Back home, I was... On second thought, that doesn't really matter right now.

"That's just like you, Diana!"

"How very admirable."

Her sidekicks, Hannah and Barbara, cheered her on.

There they go, following the crowd again. Gimme a break. You two were the first ones to bad-mouth me a minute ago!

As I growled audibly, I made eye contact with Diana. She was undisturbed, cool, and collected. Ugh, I couldn't help but look away.



I mean, it was nice of her to defend me.

But it didn't make me the least bit happy! I was super-embarrassed, actually.

But Diana didn't seem to care I was ignoring her. She looked as snooty and composed as ever, and I was the only one acting immature.

That bugged me, too.

“Now, now. If we take too long, dawn will break, girls. Let’s be off, shall we?”

Looking out at the group of students as they finally quieted down, Professor Ursula raised her magic wand. “Fly, my broom. **Tia Freyre!**”

No sooner had she said the words than the broom we were riding rose into the air. It moved with such ease, you’d never have thought it was carrying both the professor and me.

Starting with Diana, the other students started chanting the spell and began to rise, one after another.

“Proceed to the leyline in order, please, and follow Professor Fannelan.”

They flew into the entrance of the leyline one by one, while I gazed up at them in total silence.

“Professor? When do you think I’ll be able to fly?” I whispered when Lotte and Sucy were the only ones left.

You know, I’d flown properly, just once.

But it was with the help of a legendary broom, the Shooting Star. It was a rowdy one with a mind of its own, but it could zoom around all by itself, even without a witch on board, and I could soar through the sky just by clinging to it. (Well, we were going so fast, even that’d been a job and a half.)

I wished I could ride the Shooting Star again, but that probably wasn’t possible. I mean, all it did was run wild, so there was no way it’d take me where I wanted to go.

I had also tried asking Professor Ursula to put a spell on my broom on the sly, just for today. But she refused, and that was that. Tch!

“Everyone has their own pace, and we all have our own strengths and weaknesses. It’s perfectly normal for you to take longer than others. After all, you’ve only just begun studying magic.”

“But...”

“This isn’t like you, Miss Kagari. What happened to that catchphrase of

yours?”

“My catchphrase?”

“You know: ‘A believing heart is my magic!’ That’s why you have the Shiny Rod, isn’t it? It’s because you believe.”

“...Uh-huh.” Nodding, I softly touched the Shiny Rod at my waist. This was the magic staff Chariot used.

Why do I have such a special staff, you ask?

I found it by accident in the Arcturus Forest. I got lost and wandered in there with Lotte and Sucy on the day of the entrance ceremony.

And I’ve also used it to cast spells.

Well, only one, and I haven’t heard a peep out of it since, but still. That’s why everybody says it’s probably a replica, but I believe it’s real! The Shiny Rod is my greatest treasure, a talisman that gives me courage.

“You never lose heart in the face of failure. I’m very impressed by your resilience, you know. People usually get discouraged. I know I couldn’t get back up on my feet so easily myself.”

“Are you trying to tell me I have no shame?”

“Wait, what? Is that what it sounded like? No, that isn’t it. Let’s see...”

At first glance, she looks sharp and competent with her tiny glasses and all, but Professor Ursula is the kind of person who’d trip over absolutely nothing. Honestly, she is pretty careless and scatterbrained.

As I watched her scrambling to find the right words, my bad mood started to seem more and more ridiculous.

Besides, it felt like just touching the Shiny Rod had given me a burst of energy.

“You’re right. There’s no point in worrying about what I can’t do!”

“Yes, exactly. That’s the spirit.”

“I’m practically destined to become the next Chariot, after all. Overcoming hardships will only make my future shine brighter!”

“Um, yes. Uh...huh?”

“That’s another reason for me to soak up lots of light from the full moon tonight. If I get twice as much light as everybody else, the effects should be twice as strong!”

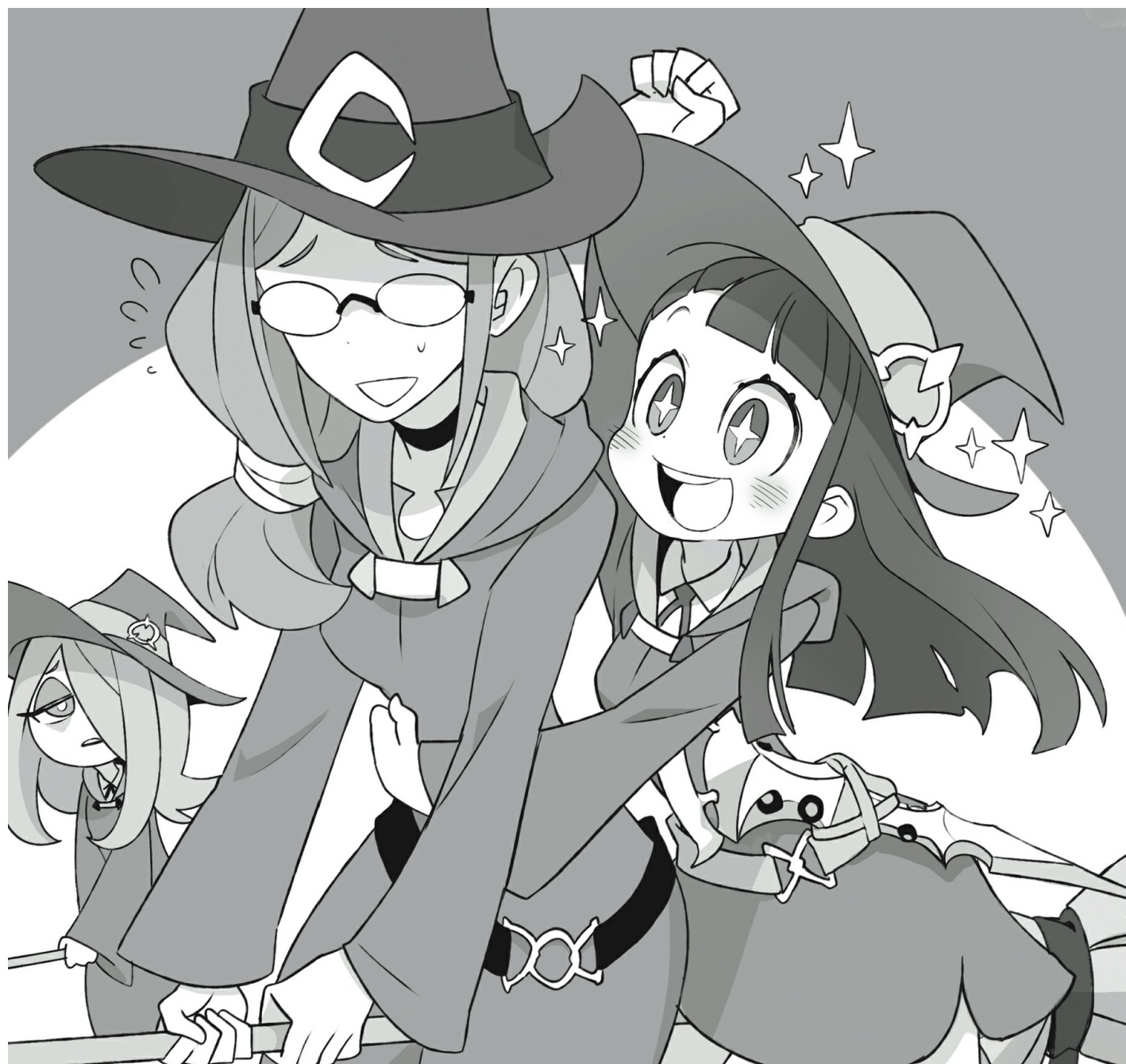
“W-well, I’m glad you’ve cheered up.” The professor sounded a bit overwhelmed as I hugged her tightly from behind.

“Okay, Professor! Let’s hurry up and go!”

“...I think you should learn to be a little more disheartened, Akko,” I heard Sucy mutter beside me, but I really didn’t care at all!

The fairies’ hill! The light of the full moon!

I was thrilled just thinking about it! I started smiling in spite of myself. “Come on, Professor! Hurry! Let’s go!”



And just like that, I stopped dwelling on Diana's smug face, the other students' sarcastic laughter, and everything else. My heart swelled with anticipation.

I just knew I was gonna soak up lots of moonlight and get another step closer to Chariot!



Sifla, the Witch Who Guards Doras Hill

Doras Hill was basically a modest mound covered in long, unkempt grass. More like a clearing than a hill, really.

A short ways down its gentle slope, a forest enclosed the entire hill. Lotte told me thirteen sacred trees grew in a wide ring just before it.

When we got to the very top, I saw there were some big, bumpy boulders in another circle. You guessed it—thirteen of them. In the center of it all were two enormous rocks standing upright with a third rock lying across them, kind of like a roof.

“Wow, it looks like a torii gate,” I blurted out, puzzling Sucy and Lotte.

“Torii?”

“Uh-huh. You know, those ginormous gatelike things at the entrance of shrines?”

“Shrines?”

“Um, uh, that’s where the Japanese gods are... You know what? Never mind. What *is* that?”

“Stone Doras. It’s the symbol of Doras Hill. That’s what the professors said, remember?” Lotte flashed a dry smile.

“This thing? Huh. They kind of just look like plain old rocks to me.”

Torii gates generally have shrines behind them, but these boulders didn’t seem to lead to anything. They kind of just stood there uselessly.

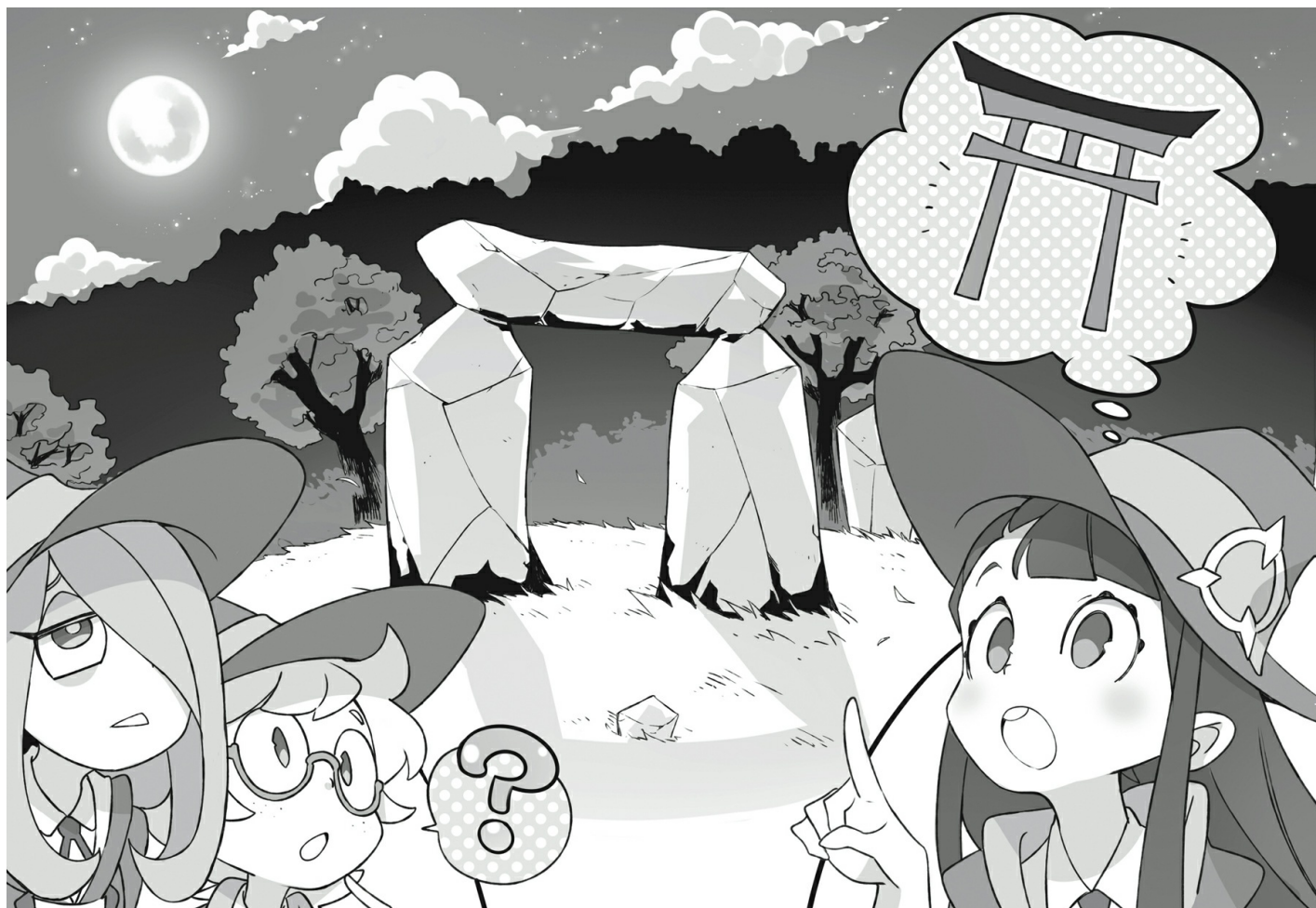
Oh, did I mention there was nothing else to see on this hill?

I mean, there were some rocks lying around and a few shrubs with white

flowers, but that was pretty much it.

What were we gonna do *here* of all places in the middle of the night? *I want a refund! All that excitement for nothing!*

As I sulked, Lotte pointed up over our heads. “Like I said, we’re going to bask in the moonlight. It’s better to do that in an open space where nothing gets in the way, right?”



Following her finger, I looked up to see a perfectly round moon shining brightly, surrounded by glimmering stars in the night sky.

Wow. Okay. This was pretty amazing.

If I reach out, I bet I could catch the moon and all the stars.

“Doras Hill was discovered three hundred years ago. It’s said the coronation ceremony of the fairy king was held here, under the protection of the thirteen sacred trees.” Professor Finnelan spoke with a stern face. Gah. I definitely hadn’t noticed her creeping up on us.

“A coronation ceremony, huh...? So the ceremony to crown a new king? How would they do that here?”

“I believe that was in the homework you submitted this morning. I was under the impression you copied down some facts about the fairy king?”

“Huh?! Um, yes...I think so. Maybe?”

Professor Finnelan gave out a big, long sigh, and I laughed awkwardly, hoping she would leave it there.

Like I’d actually remember details like that! I had forty whole pages to copy, remember? I never would’ve finished if I’d paid attention to the content.

“Well, if your textbooks don’t have enough information for you, I’d advise you to read Sifla’s *The Origin of the Fairy King*. They say she entered the Country of the Fairies over three hundred years ago. She was the first witch to make a contract with the fairy king.”

I kind of remembered reading that in the textbook. Maybe.

Let’s see... I think it said the sacred trees protected the peace on this hill.

Yeah, that was right. And the thirteen trees each served different purposes and roles.

Hey, look at that—I *did* remember. *I’m a freakin’ genius!*

“Professor Finnelan. If I recall correctly, Sifla went on to become the guardian of this hill, as the only witch to win the confidence of the fairy king,” said Diana. Even though we weren’t in class, she’d raised her right hand high in the air.

The professor nodded. “To be precise, it wasn’t her alone. The role of guarding the hill was given to her family, handed down from generation to generation. As a general rule, the fairies don’t welcome any meddlers, but successive generations of Siflas continue to protect their space so they may spend a few restful moments on this sacred hill.”

“Um, in that case, are you sure it’s okay for us to intrude in such a large group...?” Lotte had timidly raised her hand.

This isn’t class, people.

“No need to worry. Over the years, Luna Nova has signed a contract with each Sifla to provide her support should any trouble arise on the hill. In exchange, we have permission to bring our students once each year. That said, should we set

foot on the hill without her permission or make an inordinate amount of noise, we'll still be held accountable..."

"Yahoooooooo!!"

Just as Professor Finnelan's eyes started to relax for once, this earth-shattering yodel reminded them to return to their usual scowl again.

Yeah. We already knew who this voice belonged to, but we looked up anyway.

"Amanda O'Neill!" The professor raised her voice to rival Amanda's. "Get down here! I'm sure I said you're forbidden to ride your broom without permission!"

"Oh, don't be such an old stick-in-the-mud, Prof. I can't keep my poor broom locked up on a night as nice as this one!"

She was spinning around one moment, hanging from her broom the next, flying through the night sky with the control of a seasoned acrobat.

"Never mind that! Come down this instant, or you'll face disciplinary action!"

"Tch! Booring." Pouting, Amanda descended slowly.

With the professor right there, we didn't dare burst into applause, but I had to admit we were all in awe over her broomsmanship.

That was Amanda for you. She could never sit still and loved getting her nose in mischief. Especially if she was on a broom.



Grudgingly, she landed beside Constanze and Jasminka. We all thought that was the end of it, until Professor Finnellan saw Amanda's two friends and scowled again.

"Constanze Amalie! I know you've been informed that tinkering with machines is strictly against school regulations! And, Jasminka Antonenko, please put down your snacks!"

Even as the professor yelled at her, Jasminka was crunching away on her potato chips.

As for the machine fiend, Constanze... Oh, geez, she was welding again. Sparks everywhere. *Wait, that looks like a bazooka. Uh, I wonder if that's dangerous.*

At her wits' end, the professor turned to glare at me. "Honestly! Between you and that trio, this year's class is riddled with troublemakers."

"Huh? Me?"

"Why, of course! Mayhem follows wherever you go! Be on your best behavior tonight. If you do something to anger the fairies, you'll have no grounds to complain about your punishment—or expulsion!"

"...Yes'm."

Hold up. Why is she going after me now?

I had an issue with that, but I let it slide so I wouldn't have to deal with an annoying, lengthy lecture. *But you should know, Professor, the guardian's gonna scold you for shouting and screaming!*

"Tonight is particularly dangerous. The door to the Country of the Fairies will be easier to open," said Diana, looking at me sternly. "If you circle Stone Doras nine times on the night of a full moon, it's said you'll enter the realm of the fairies."

"What's so bad about that? Sounds kinda fun."

"Were you not listening to what the professor just said? The fairies aren't very friendly, least of all to those who enter their territory uninvited." Diana put a hand to her forehead theatrically as she let out a dramatic sigh.

I'm telling you, that right there was the definition of contempt!

"If the fairies find you, they'll take you captive immediately. You'll probably never return to your old world again. In fact, if taking you captive is all they do, you're lucky. They say some are unfortunate enough to lose their lives." As she spoke, Diana gazed at me with cold eyes. "After all, Akko, you're rather foolish. Be very careful not to wander around and lose your way."

"Even I wouldn't accidentally walk around something nine times!"

"...Hmm, we'll see." She snorted, turning her back without waiting for me to respond.

"Sh-she makes me so mad...!" I clenched my fists, trembling, as Lotte gently patted my back.



“They always say to treat others the way you want to be treated,” suggested a voice.

“I don’t want to hear that from *you* of all people, Sucy!”

“Now, now. Since we’re here, let’s take a walk. Oh, and I brought some herbal tea! I thought we could let the moon reflect in our teacups as we drank,” Lotte said as she brought out a teapot.

“What’s that about? Is it some kind of spell?”

“No, no! In Volume 247 of *Night Fall*, there’s a scene where the heroine, Belle, goes on a nighttime picnic with Count Lancelot. Well, he’s actually harbored feelings for her for a very long time but just can’t bring himself to say so, and his longing for her is depicted in a terribly romantic way during that moonlit—”

“Okay, okay!” I cut her off hastily.

Most of the time, Lotte is calm, relaxed, and very well-behaved, but when she starts talking about the romance novel *Night Fall*, she always ends up delirious with excitement. If you let her, she’ll rave about it all night long.

“All right then, let’s all have tea together. Whaddaya think, Sucy?”

“I’d rather collect leaves from those sacred trees.”

“From the trees? Won’t they get mad at you for that?” I shot a glance at Professor Finnelan.

Oh, good. She didn’t seem to be listening.

“Not if they don’t find out. See, medicine can also be used as poison, which means I should be able to get all sorts of effects from the sacred trees if I put them in different compounds.”

“Ghk. Don’t go testing that on me.”

“We’ll see. Hee-hee-hee.”

Agh. She laughed only when she was plotting something diabolical. I’d have to watch my back.

Sigh. I didn’t understand why the professors got mad only at me. I mean, Sucy was a real problem child, too.

“Professor Finnelaaan,” called a voice from the distance. Professor Ursula came running up the hill toward us. “It’s no use. She won’t come out.” The professor was panting for breath, and her shoulders were heaving. She must have really booked it over here. “She answered me from inside the hut, so she’s definitely there, but...”

“Well, the child’s always been shy. She’s probably afraid of strangers, even if they’re teachers from Luna Nova.”

“Which child?” I interrupted the two of them.

Professor Ursula looked at Professor Finnelan for permission to explain. When she got a nod in response, Professor Ursula continued. “We’re talking about Sifla.”

“Huh? You mean the guardian of this hill?”

“Yes. She lives in a hut at the foot of the hill, but...” Looking troubled, she folded her arms. “The previous Sifla... Her grandmother passed away a month ago, and she’s been living on her own ever since. Now that she’s inherited the name and become the new Sifla, we need to renew our contract with her, but she’s refused to meet with us.”

“And she doesn’t have any other family members?” Lotte asked.

The professor shook her head. “From what I’ve been told, her mother died in childbirth... And so the current Sifla is only six years old.”

“Six?!” I shrieked.

And she was a guardian? Not only that, but she lived by herself?!

“Yes, that’s right. We’re just as worried as you are. We’d really like to meet her and talk with her, but...”

“Nothing can be done. We’ll call on her once more before we leave, and if that’s no good, we’ll simply come again another day... That said, if we don’t make haste, the contract will expire. We’ll have to come up with a plan of some sort,” Professor Finnelan said.

Professor Ursula just looked down somberly.



“Can you believe that? Six! She’s still a little kid!”

We were drinking some of Lotte’s herbal tea next to Stone Doras.

“I’d run away right off the bat. I mean, there’s nooothering here and nobody to talk to.”

“Well, yeah, *you* probably would, Akko.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You only ever sleep, eat, and talk.”

“I mean, duh. Those three things are the basics of life!”

“...She must be lonely,” mused Lotte. Until now, she’d been entranced by the reflection of the full moon in her cup, but she abruptly looked at us. “Growing up, I didn’t have any siblings, and I was constantly reading, so I didn’t have a lot of friends. When I was a kid, I spent most of my time at my family’s secondhand shop, talking to spirits with my grandma, so I guess I wasn’t alone in the real sense of the word, but I was a little lonely.”

When I heard that, I stood up. “Okay, then! Let’s go see her!”

“Huh? Go see who?” Lotte blinked rapidly.

“Sifla, of course!”

“...You’re just going to get yelled at again,” Sucy said with a glower.

I smugly laughed at her. “Well, the hut’s down the hill, remember? You might be able to pick up some leaves from the sacred trees if you go.”

She twitched.

“Besides, if you make friends with Sifla, maybe you’ll be able to get leaves without collecting them on the sly.”

“That doesn’t sound half-bad.”

“Right?”

Now that Sucy was on board, Lotte was disconcerted. “B-but Professor Finnelan said she’d be going later. And if we barge in beforehand and put her in a bad mood...”

“Oh, come on. She’s a six-year-old girl! I’m sure she’d be much happier playing with super-cute students instead of that scary-faced teacher!”

“...Are you seriously calling yourself cute?” grumbled Sucy, but I paid her no attention.

That was because my mind was already full of thoughts about how we could help out the professors if we could manage to pull Sifla outside. Like, they

seemed really troubled that they hadn't been able to meet her.

And they'd definitely think a little better of me then!

"You're concerned, too, aren't you, Lotte? We still have some herbal tea left. Let's invite her to have some with us. They wouldn't get mad about something like that! Probably!"

As I said *probably* with a whole lotta confidence, Lotte and Sucy exchanged an uneasy glance. But with one look at their faintly flushed cheeks, I could tell they didn't plan to object—as a matter of fact, they were all for this plan.

"Okay, now that we've settled that, let's hurry up and go!" I waved my fists wildly.

We were going to visit Sifla, a witch who'd made a contract with the fairy king.

I was betting she could teach me an amazing spell or two...but let's keep that a secret between you and me.

I mean, I was mainly worried about a little girl living by herself, of course!



We all trotted down the hill, secretly following Professor Ursula's footsteps until we found a hut hiding at the edge of the forest. Did I say *hut*? I meant to say *cellar*. It was basically some dirt piled up into a small mound—probably just a little shorter in height than the professor.

At the center of it, there was a single door.

...Did she really live in *this*?

I went to stand in front of the hut and knocked anyway.

"Hello! It's nice to meet you. I'm Atsuko Kagari. I'm a new student at Luna Nova!" I called out loudly, banging on the door. "Do you know Shiny Chariot? She's a witch, and I really love her and respect her, and she's, like, my idol! I admired her so much, I decided to become a witch when I was six years old. That's the same age as you! There are still a ton of things I can't do, but my

dream is to one day perform in a magic show full of hope and dreams, the way Chariot did! Tell me: What's your dream?"

"A-Akko... You're gonna startle her with a big speech like that out of nowhere," warned Lotte.

"Really? Isn't it better to give her a proper self-introduction?"

"Your definition of *self-introduction* is a little off base, Akko," Sucy warily interjected.

"Why? My dream of catching up to Chariot is, like, an essential part of me! How am I supposed to introduce myself without talking about that?"

"...Just do whatever you want. I'm going to look around over there." Sucy crouched down in front of the towering sacred tree nearby and began picking up fallen leaves to scrutinize them.

Once she gets like that, Sucy won't budge, no matter what.

"Listen, I'm here with my friends Lotte and Sucy! Sucy's obsessed with collecting poisons, and she's honestly kinda weird, but she says she's interested in the sacred trees, so you might actually hit it off. Oh, but I think you'll get along better with Lotte. She can talk to spirits. We also brought some herbal tea to drink together. Come talk with us!"

After I'd said all that without pausing, I stopped pounding on the door and fell silent.

...There was no response, not even a single sound... Was she out? But Professor Ursula had said she was definitely home.

As I tilted my head and wondered what to do next, Lotte stepped closer to the door.

"Um... It's nice to meet you. I'm Lotte Jansson. I'm sorry for intruding on your space so suddenly, Sifla." Lotte started to speak in her haltingly gentle way. "I brought some homemade herbal tea, based off my favorite novel. I blended chamomile and juniper berries and also thyme, but there's actually a special secret ingredient in it as well. It's..."

"...Indigo?"

Lotte's eyes grew round as a whisper filtered out to us from the other side of the door.

"That's right! It's indigo. How did you know?"

"...Indigo has purifying powers...and it's particularly effective on the night of a full moon. It's the same way Lancelot made herbal tea for Belle in Volume 247 of *Night Fall*." She said this all very fast in a voice as high and clear as a ringing bell.

For a six-year-old, she sure sounded like she knew her stuff.

The door opened just a crack, and we could tell someone was peeking out at us from the other side.

It was Sifla!

I almost launched myself at her, but Lotte reached out and grabbed me in the nick of time. She shook her head and silently mouthed: *Not yet*.

"So you're a *Night Fall* fan, too. Sifla... May I call you that?"

"...Uh-huh. Lotte. Who's your favorite character?"

"I'm all for Arthur! I feel so sorry for him. He's never rewarded for his efforts, but he's just so sweet. And I think it makes him all the more dashing, don't you?"

"I get it. But I'm more of a Colin fan. He may be a womanizer and a narcissistic mad scientist, but he's unexpectedly reasonable. And I really like how he somehow ends up as one of the good guys, even though he doesn't mean to be."

"Oh, I know! Sifla, I bet we'll really get along."

I couldn't follow their conversation at all, so I just kept glancing from Lotte to the door and back.

Oh, Lotte, you're amazing. All she did was talk about a book, and now she was friends with Sifla.

"Thank you. It's been a long time since I talked to anyone like this."

"Then let's talk some more. Would you like to come out and have some tea

with us?”

The door slowly swung open. Illuminated by the moonlight, Sifla finally appeared in front of us.

She was a delicate girl with long silver hair—the color of the moon, as soft as cotton candy. She covered her head with a hood and wore a pure-white dress under her coat. I swear she could’ve stepped right out of a fairy tale.

And her beauty gave Diana a run for her money.

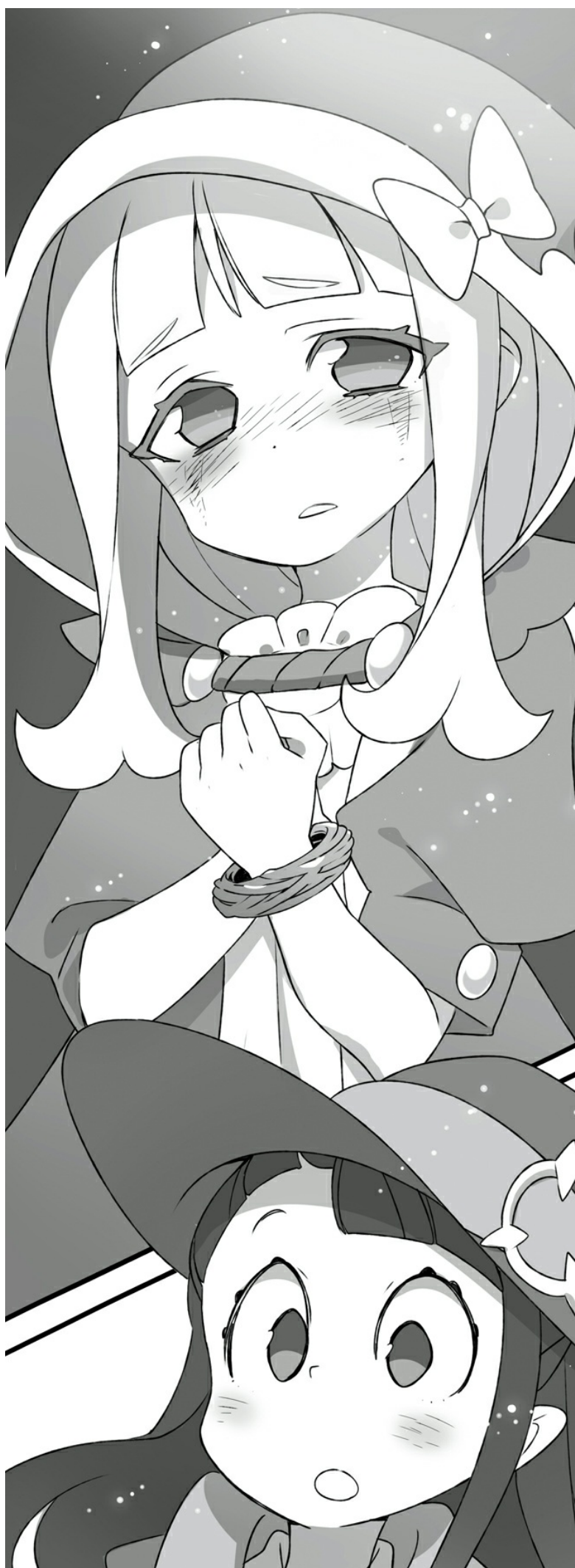
But I was more surprised by the color of her face: She was so pale and white, she looked as if she might vanish at any moment. Her large eyes were red and bloodshot, and there was a dry, salty residue on her cheeks. I could tell right away she’d been crying until we came.

I felt my heart tighten.

It’d been a month since her grandma died.

Had she been crying by herself that entire time?

Oh, I couldn’t even imagine how lonely she must’ve been. It made me sad just thinking about it.



Sifla gently shook her head upon seeing my reaction. "I wasn't crying because Grandmother died. I mean, of course that's very sad as well, but..."

"Then what's the matter? Was somebody bullying you?"

"No. That isn't it, either." She solemnly hung her head.

As her mature profile darkened, her eyes started brimming with tears. Then she sighed softly through trembling lips and looked straight at us.

"...My friends are gone."

"Your friends?"

"Feoras and Alan. They've been with me since I was born! They're like family to me. But they ran off a few hours ago, and neither of them has come back." Sifla sniffled. "I've been looking for them, but I just can't find them. This has never happened before... Say, Akko and Lotte, would you look for them?"

"Huh?! Us?"

"Yeah. If you find them, I promise to talk to the Luna Nova teachers."

As Lotte and I exchanged looks, Sucy was still off collecting her leaves.



Off to the Country of the Fairies!

“Um. For starters, could you describe your friends to us? Feoras and Alan, right? Are they both boys?”

Sifla shook her head. “A cat.”

“Huh?”

“Feoras is my pet cat.”

“So is Alan a cat, too?”

“No. He’s a dog. But they’re both my precious friends. They’re all I have.” Sifla’s face crumpled.

Uh-oh, she’s gonna cry.

Now that I was on the spot, I puffed up my chest in confidence. “Okay. I’ll find them for you!”

“...Really?” Sifla’s eyes suddenly shone.

Startled, Lotte tugged at my sleeve. “Wait a minute, Akko.”

But I couldn’t back down now. I stuck my chest out even farther. “It’s totally fine! Just look at how bright it is tonight. If we all look, we’re sure to find them!”

“That doesn’t mean you should just...”

“...When you say *we*, are you including me?” Standing up ponderously, Sucy turned around to face us. Her expression clearly said this would be more trouble than it was worth.

“Of course. After all, we’re three hearts that beat as one, aren’t we?”

“We’re just roommates.” The corners of Sucy’s mouth turned down.

I lunged at her and hugged her around the shoulders. “Oh, come on. Don’t be like that, Sucy. Everybody needs a little help sometimes, you know!”

“Have you ever helped me when I was in trouble, Akko?”

“I’m always your guinea pig, aren’t I?!”

“So you’re telling me it’s all right to keep experimenting on you.”



“Huh? That’s...uh...”

Sucy gave me a creepy grin, then thrust her open left hand out at me. “Five times.”

“For what?”

“If you’ll let me experiment on you five times without complaining, I’ll help you out.”

“Isn’t that too many?! Hold up! You never give me a chance to complain anyway!”

“And promise you won’t keep whining about it after it’s over.”

“Ghk. Uhhh...”

As you’d expect, I couldn’t really give her an immediate answer. So I faltered.

You see, Sucy had gotten me so many times already. She’d turned my hair into a plant and dosed me with a numbing potion while I was asleep. I’d grown a horse tail once and developed an abnormal appetite for carrots. Another time, I’d lost the ability to say anything except *ha-hi-hu-he-ho...*

There were so many things, I really couldn’t count them all.

I refused!

Or at least, I almost refused. But then I saw Sifla, looking as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

Waaah. This deal is so unfair!

“...Fine. But just one time!”

“Four times.”

“Two!”

“.....”

“Argh, okay, fine, three times! I really can’t handle any more than that!”

“Well, all right. But remember, you promised. No running away.”

“It’s just three lousy times. Bring it on!”

“You said it.” Sucy’s eyes were usually drowsy, but they were suddenly wide and lively in quiet anticipation.

Augh. Why is this happening?

Sucy nodded as she brushed fallen leaves off her knees. “Okay. I’ll help. I’m Sucy Manbavarán. Nice to meet you, Sifla.” She smirked as she suddenly turned to Sifla, who flinched and trembled in fear.

“I-it’s nice to meet you...”

“Oh, that’s right. I do have one request.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“If we manage to find those two, I’d like some elderflowers from the trees, not the ones on the ground.”

“Oh, that’s all?” Sifla probably assumed she’d have to be a lab rat, too, but her shoulders relaxed when she realized that wasn’t the case. “They told me you’re the one who collects poisons, Sucy. Yeah, that’s right. And elderflowers neutralize poison, so it makes sense that you’d want some. Besides, the elder tree has the greatest power of them all, you know.”

“Really?” I asked.

Sifla nodded with the air of a teacher. “It’s a very important tree to us, presiding over death and rebirth and perfect for breaking wicked curses.”

“Huh! Wow, Sifla. You’re really smart!”

“...Even if she’s the guardian of the hill, you’re still getting schooled by a six-year-old. I dunno, but I think you should be a little more ashamed of that.” Sucy shrugged.

“If you find those two, I’ll give you as much as you want of anything you like. I could even give you leaves from all the sacred trees.”

“That’s real generous of you.” Sucy snickered.

“That’s just how important Feoras and Alan are to me. But in exchange, please make sure you find them for me.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Lotte exhaled sharply. “The two of you just decide these things without really thinking them through.” But she smiled as she handed her pot of herbal tea to Sifla. “Hold on to this for me, okay? When we get back, we’ll drink it together.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Everyone else looked satisfied, but I tilted my head, thinking hard.

Hey. Maybe, just maybe...

If Sifla was giving Sucy a thank-you present, maybe I didn’t need to be her

guinea pig after all. Right?

As I glanced over at her, Sucy spoke coolly. “Nope. You already promised.”

“Why?!”

“It’s called negotiating. If I’d made that deal with Sifla first, you never would’ve agreed to it.”

“Y-you planned that...!”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter. Promise or no promise, you’d still be my lab rat anyway.”

“Gnrrrrrrrrgh!”

Listening to Sucy, Sifla burst out laughing for the first time.

I was glad she was finally laughing, but this really didn’t sit right with me!!

“A-and? To start with, can you tell us what happened before they disappeared?”

At Lotte’s question, Sifla’s laughter froze as she came back to herself. “It happened a few hours ago,” she said, beginning her story.

It was after sunset, just as the full moon was beginning to shine in the night sky.

As usual, Sifla had gotten Feoras’s milk ready. He was a big eater, it seemed, so he’d usually pester her for dinner as soon as night fell.

But for some reason, he hadn’t so much as glanced at his milk today. He’d wanted to go outside, scratching at the front door so much, she thought something was out there. But when she’d opened the door to check, he dashed away, heading straight for the crown of the hill.

She hadn’t even had time to scream: *Where are you going?!*

Alan also bolted, sprinting away as fast as he could, even though he’d been curled up in a corner of the room a moment before.

By the time she’d dashed out of the hut in a panic, it was already too late. The two boys—er, animals—had vanished into the night.

“Could they have run away from the hill?”

Sifla shot down my idea firmly. “Absolutely not. When they disappeared, I immediately cast a barrier, so I’d know the moment they tried to cross it.”

“Hrmm,” I hemmed.

According to her, Feoras and Alan were bigger than your ordinary cat and dog. But if that were true, you’d think one of the students would have spotted them and tried to play with them already, right? Like, there were only a few places to hide on this hill, behind the rocks and trees.

“We should obviously cast a locating spell first. Do you want to try the one we learned in class the other day?” suggested Lotte.

“No, let’s use a spell that traces scents,” insisted Sucy. “Though it might be difficult with all these Luna Nova students around.”

“Ooh, what about summoning a giant catnip plant? Like, one that’s even bigger than Stone Doras!”

They all ignored my idea.

Hey! Everyone knows cats and catnip go together!

As we tossed around some ideas, I noticed Sifla was fidgeting.

“What’s the matter?” Lotte peered into her face.

She hesitated for a moment, clearly mulling something over and gathering her thoughts. “It’s possible...they’ve gone to the Country of the Fairies.”

“““**The Country of the Fairies?**””” the three of us chorused.

“Grandmother once told me those two aren’t ordinary pets. I think they’re fairies, and they’d been with her since she was a child. She told me I’d be a proper ‘Sifla’ once I was able to hear them speak, but...” She cast her eyes down forlornly. “But I couldn’t understand a single thing they said. I could guess from their body language, but that was all. You know, I bet they got fed up with me. I promised I’d become a fine guardian like Grandmother, but I’ll always be a failure of a witch.”

Her voice was getting dark and super-gloomy. I guess she might have seemed

mature, but she really was just a six-year-old girl... Wait, that wasn't the point.

The end of her sentence was garbled with sobs, but I knew what she was trying to say. I really, reeeeeally understood how she felt.

I mean, think about it. She was a lot like me.

Like, I couldn't even ride a broom, and the professors were constantly yelling at me. Whenever I made a mistake in class, everyone snorted and snickered at me.

Every time that happened, I'd think about how I'd show them all, but even I got discouraged sometimes.

But here's the thing: Wouldn't you want the people by your side to believe in you? Even if you were attempting the impossible?

"Let's go!" I shouted. "We'll head to the Country of the Fairies to look for them! Then we'll ask the two of them what they really think!"

"...We can't." Sifla shook her head in the same melancholy way. "Not even the guardian is allowed to enter the Country of the Fairies without permission from the fairy king. We can't just open their gates, especially when we don't know if my friends are actually there. If I did that, I'd really be disqualified as their protector."

"Then I'll go there for you!"

"...Huh?" Sifla's big eyes lifted toward me with a blank stare.

"Because, like, I don't have anything to lose! I mean, they might get a little mad if they see me, but what can they do?"

"B-but it's dangerous. There are all sorts of fairies! In fact, Grandmother told me some of them are violent—"

"It's okay! It's totally fine! I'll be okay as long as they don't find me, right?"

Okay, I might have been thinking she might teach me a special spell, or that my cleverness might leave the professors speechless. I was a little ashamed of myself. *Right now, all I want to do is help Sifla get her self-confidence back!*

"A believing heart is your magic, Sifla!" I exclaimed, thumping my own chest.

“In order to start your story, you gotta reach your hand out. Whatever you do, you can’t give up! You gotta believe in yourself! Listen, I believe in you, okay?!”

Sifla looked taken aback, kind of just standing there with her eyes wide.

“Got it?!”

Totally overwhelmed by my energetic spirit, she could only nod in response. But hey—my smile must’ve been infectious, because Sifla’s lips relaxed into a grin, too.

“In that case, take this as my proxy.” She slipped a bracelet woven from thin twigs onto my wrist.

“What’s this?”

“It’s an amulet made from willow branches. See? We match.” Sifla had an identical bracelet on her own wrist. “It’s said when willows are exposed to moonlight, they make our magic stronger. I have a feeling it might be useful somehow. It’ll connect us together, Akko.” She smiled and talked with a dignity far beyond her years.

I found myself standing a little taller in response.



“Okay, I’m gonna head to the Country of the Fairies and find her cat and dog! Be right back!” I casually promised, standing in front of Stone Doras.

For starters, I just had to circle this thing nine times, right?

I was rarin’ to go, but Lotte and Sucy both looked seriously glum.

“...Isn’t this a little too dangerous?” Of course, Lotte was full of fear.

Sucy tried to threaten me out of it. “Remember what Diana said? The fairies won’t forgive anybody who enters without their permission.”

I mean, yeah, it was scary.

I really had no idea what might happen, and no one was gonna be there to save me. I didn’t want to get caught by the professors and expelled, or worse—get caught by the fairies and *die*.

But I really, reeeally didn't want to leave Sifla so sad!

When I didn't say anything, they could probably tell I had made up my mind, and they heaved the biggest, greatest sighs of the year.

Then they grabbed my shoulders, one on each side.

"Oh, Akko, you never stop surprising me."

"Well, it certainly keeps things from getting boring."

Lotte was on my right.

Sucy was on my left.

As I saw their weary smiles at close range, my face lit up. "Really? You're coming with me?!"

"I mean, it would be so annoying to lose my guinea pig."

"And I don't think you'll be able to do anything on your own, Akko."

"Thank you! I love you both so much!" I put my arms around them and pulled them close, holding tight.

"Gweh!!"

"Akko, you're hurting me...!"

"Oh! Sorry!" I zipped my lips shut.

Lotte raised her shoulders. "We'll come with you on one condition: Don't do anything reckless."

"I won't! Thanks, Lotte!"

"I said be quiet!"

"...I don't see this ending well."

The two of them looked grim, but I just couldn't stop beaming. Taking both their arms at once, I took a firm step forward with newfound excitement.

One round. Two rounds. Three.

We walked around Stone Doras at a glacial pace so we wouldn't get spotted by the teachers—or Diana's sharp-eyed group. At times, we even got down on

our hands and knees to pretend to search for something in the wildflowers.

Four. Five. Six.

They'd get suspicious if we hurried, so we sat down on the ground from time to time, pretending to chat casually. But we were actually scooting on our rears ever so slowly to the finish line.

Seven. Eight. And then.

"...That makes nine times, I think?" I gulped as I drew myself up to my full height and menacingly glared at Stone Doras.

Would lightning strike? Would we hear bone-chilling moans and groans? Would a stone fortress fly up out of the ground in a rumble?

I'd hoped for something extraordinary, but nothing happened. *Oh, come on! What gives?*

"Say, is it getting mistier?" Lotte shrank back.

Was it? Nothing seemed different to me...

Well, hmm, I guess she's right. Yeah. Our surroundings were a little hazier than before. And the other students seemed more distant and kinda fuzzy.

"Akko. There's something over there."

"Huh?!"

Sucy was pointing at the ground between the two towering boulders. Right in the middle of them was a square hole that hadn't been there a minute ago.

"Yesss! It's the entrance!" I sprang forward, peering down inside.

It looked like a long, looong stairway headed underground, and it was so pitch-black, I couldn't see anything else.

...Hmm. I guess we just have to go down.

"Akko, this is dangerous!"

"Oh, it'll be fine. It's just stairs." My chest was swelling with more excitement than fear.

I mean, this was the entrance to the Country of the Fairies. To think we'd

actually find something like that!

Nervously, Lotte peeked over my shoulder into the hole, and Sucy had taken a flask out of her robe to bottle up some of the white fog. Did, uh, did she carry that around with her all the time?

“Lotte, Sucy, are you ready? ‘Cause I’m heading down.”

“...Um, I guess there’s no point in turning back now.”

“I hope I can find some poisonous plants or mushrooms at the very least.”



“I’m sure they’ve got those! After all, it’s the Country of the Fairies!”

I bounded down the stairs. They were a little narrow, so we had to go single file. I went first, then Lotte, then Sucy.

Or that was how it was supposed to go.

“Oh no. I can’t see a thing...”

As we went farther and farther down, our surroundings became so dark, even I started to feel a little jumpy.

Thankfully, I heard Lotte singing softly, and a gentle green light illuminated the stairwell. When I looked back, the lantern in her hand was glowing. Well, the spirit sitting quietly inside, to be exact.

Now that I could finally see Lotte's and Sucy's faces again, I was back in full swing. "We'll be safe now that we can see where we're walking, huh?! Thanks a bunch, Lotte!"

"Safe... Oh, are we really 'safe'?" Yeah, Lotte was still in low spirits, but I think she cheered up just a little, too.

I continued to boldly descend one step at a time, down the stairs made of cool, rugged rock. It was pretty misty down there. From time to time, a breeze carried the smell of damp earth and grassy leaves, tickling our noses. All this reminded me that we were really going underground.

When we finally reached the bottom of the stairs, there was a narrow tunnel just wide enough for one person. Well, there was nowhere else for us to go, so we timidly trudged on. Lotte hid behind me and slunk forward nervously, and behind her, Sucy felt her way along the wall.

She was probably gathering moss or something. At a time like this. I swear, she really does march to the beat of her own drum.

Anyway, the tunnel was much longer than I'd thought it would be. We walked and walked and walked some more, and we still couldn't see the end of it.

But it gradually grew wider.

At first, we had to go in single file, but as we went on, it became wide enough for us to walk side by side, holding hands. We continued on another ten minutes or so when a shrill voice echoed down the tunnel to reach our ears.

"Now let the king's coronation ceremony begin!"



Feoras Is the King of the Cait Sith?!

“Woooooow, talking cats!” As I peeked inside, I couldn’t keep a lid on my excitement.

Well, could you blame me? When we reached the end of the tunnel, we immediately saw a bunch of cats! And they weren’t just your ordinary cats, either. They were all wearing clothes, like humans, and standing firmly on two legs.

“Look, look, look! Are those fairies? Do you think they’re all fairies?!”

“Shhhh, Akko, be quiet!” scolded Lotte, but her eyes shone brightly, too.

We all watched them with unblinking fascination. Every one of them was covered in moss-green fur and was a little taller than your average cat. Were they about our height? ...Nah, definitely not that tall, but they’d probably reach our chests.

At the center of the gathering was a single cat who’d been reverently handed a red hat. He held it up with both front paws, showing it off to the crowd, and they all cheered wildly. When the rally died down, he placed the hat low on his head and settled into a red velvet chair with a high back.

“Long live the king!”

The cat in the red hat nodded smugly, leaning on an armrest before crossing his legs in a slow, majestic way.

Though the rest of them were barefoot, he was wearing a pair of dark-brown boots.

“What’s with that guy? He’s acting like he’s some kind of big shot.”

Lotte tilted her head as she thought. “I mean, they said this was a coronation

ceremony. I think he just became their king.”

“Then it would make more sense if he wore a crown, not a hat.”

Right? Sucy had a very good point.

Squinting, we all leaned forward, farther and farther.

“Hey, Sucy, no. Don’t push!”

“Quiet, Akko. They’ll see us.”

“But Sucy just— **Waugh, agh-agh-agh-agh-agh!**”

I lost my balance. Intentionally or unintentionally, Sucy definitely pushed me onto one leg as she leaned forward to get a better look. I did my very best to hold out, but it still didn’t work.

I tumbled onto the floor. “Gack!”

Instantly, the crowd of cats hushed. Even without looking, I could tell all their eyes had turned my way.

...Oh boy. Th-this is bad.

Lotte hastily pulled me up to my feet, but it was too late to hide again.

“Humans!” a sharp voice called from the crowd, and the cats began to clamor and shout as though floodgates had suddenly broken open.

“Where’d they come from?!”

“Catch them!”

“There are three of them! This is a catastrophe!”

The cats dropped to all fours to lunge at us—incredibly fast.

“Yaaaaaaaagh!”

Yeah, okay, fine. I admit my shriek wasn’t the tiniest bit cute.

Just as their sharp claws flashed through the air, about to sink into my face...

“Stop! Don’t hurt them!” A firm command rang out, causing the cats to freeze.

The ones in midjump landed nimbly on their hind legs before offering a

synchronized salute to the owner of the voice, the cat in the red hat.

“We can’t have you injuring and leaving them unable to talk. Bring them here for now.”

“Yes, sir!” They saluted him again before firmly grabbing us by our arms.

Th-they’re just cats! Why the heck are they so strong?

We couldn’t even struggle as they marched us up to his chair and shoved our backs, hard.

“What do you think you’re—doing...?” As I saw the dozens of shining silver eyes surrounding us, my voice got quieter and quieter.

Oh... Oh, this was *really* scary.

Lotte had started to tear up, and Sucy was giving me a resentful I-told-you-so look.

Hey! You’re the one who pushed me, all right?! This isn’t all my fault!

Screaming silently, I faced the cat.

“Um. I, um... I’m sorry we disturbed you.” For starters, I tried to apologize.

He looked at us from head to toe, sizing us up. “I can’t just let you get away with an apology. No one’s allowed to enter the Country of the Fairies without permission. That’s the rule. It’s not like you didn’t know that, right?”

“Well, uh...”

As I debated how to answer, one of the cats beside me twitched his whiskers and brought his nose close to me. “I can smell magic on them. You people aren’t ordinary humans, are you?”

“What?! Witches!”

“What’s Sifla doing?! I knew a little girl like her wouldn’t maintain order!”

“Execute them! Hang them!”

“Hear, hear! We can’t let them get away with this, especially not if they’re witches!”

“Execute them!”

“Execute them!”

The cats got more and more worked up, thrusting their fists into the air, and we turned pale.

Eeeeeep! What should we do?! They're really gonna kill us!

As we shivered in fear, the cat in the chair gazed down at us again, smirking. His elbow was still braced on the armrest, his chin in his paw.

“Now, now. Everyone, calm down. We’re mourning the death of the previous king today. Let’s try to keep things peaceful,” he commanded in a very dignified way. “From what I can see, they’re just children. They don’t seem particularly hostile, either.”



“But they’re intruders!”

“They may be plotting something!”

“Perhaps. But today’s the day Luna Nova’s fledgling witches stop by, isn’t it? I imagine they were just running around and managed to circle the hill by accident. That’s about the size of it, isn’t it?”

Something about his expression rubbed me the wrong way. Like, he seemed

way too confident we'd never defy him.

Even though Lotte was on the brink of giving him a full nod, I shook my head before she could finish. "It wasn't a mistake. We came here because we wanted to."

"Akko, wait! You don't have to be that honest."

"But I don't want to lie, Lotte."

Looking intrigued, the cat flicked his taut whiskers with a long claw. "Oh-ho. You're certainly a brave one, young lady."

"I'm not a young lady. I'm Atsuko Kagari. I'm a new student at Luna Nova. Someday, I'm gonna be a great witch who rivals Shiny Chariot, so remember my name."

"...You seriously don't need to introduce yourself like that now," Sucy said with a glower.

The cat's shoulders shook in amusement. "Come to think of it, yes, there used to be a witch by that name. But she was a heretic who vanished before anyone knew what happened to her. Is that the sort of person you aspire to be?"

"Yep, that's right. To me, Chariot's the finest witch in the world." Every time I said her name, I felt more courage well up inside me. "But I guess none of that matters right now. Is there a cat named Feoras here?"

The cats started to visibly stir.

Just as they were about to raise their voices again, the cat on the chair raised his hand to stop them and then directed a question at me. "Are you a friend of his?"

"I've never even met him, but I did just become friends with his owner, Sifla. She asked us to come here and look for him."

"Oh-ho. Sifla did? And why's that?"

"Because she's lonely, obviously. After Feoras went away, she cried until her eyes were all red. I feel so bad for her."

"...She was crying?" His eyes widened in surprise.

He'd been acting all cool and collected up until he heard my answer, but now his eyes were moist. But he quickly regained his composure and put a paw to his chin as he thought. "And so, young lady, you're—"

"Like I said, I'm Atsuko. Or I guess Akko's fine, too."

"Akko, then. You're saying you came all this way for a girl you just met? That must be rough for the friends caught up in your mess."

"We're used to it."

Naturally, Sucy was the one who answered without skipping a beat.

"We decided to go with her of our own accord. It isn't Akko's f-fault," Lotte stammered.

"...I see."

"So? What about it? Do you know him? Is he here?"

"Yes, he's here. Allow me to introduce you."

I was really starting to get ticked off, but he flashed an easy smile my way.

"I am Feoras. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

I kinda figured that was the case.

I sighed. "Was this whole performance really necessary? You could've just told me, you know."

"Why, you—! Don't address the king so insolently!"

"...The king?" I turned around to look at the one who'd jeered at me. "So that's what this whole 'coronation ceremony' business was about? Did Feoras become the king?"

"Don't speak of him so casually! You are in the presence of His Royal Majesty!"

"It's fine. No need to be so cross. If they're friends of Sifla, they're important guests as far as I'm concerned," insisted the cat—I mean, Feoras.

But apparently, that didn't satisfy the other cats at all. They started complaining like crazy.

“That’s why these things happen! It’s all because you coddle Sifla like that!”

“Hey! What did you just say to our king?!”

“He only became the king a minute ago. He hasn’t even undergone the fairy king’s trial yet!”

“Even so, who besides Lord Feoras would become king, you numbskull?!”

“Oh— Ow! Don’t hit me like that! Blast you!”

“Why’d you strike me, you scoundrel?!”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! No pulling!”

The cats began to fight, pummeling one another, brandishing their fists, and yanking tails and whiskers.

With a long sigh, Feoras stood up from his throne. “Quiet! I’d like to speak with these young ladies. Would the rest of you leave this to me? In deference to the previous king and myself... Please?” he soothed, trying to calm them down with a wink.

He was laying it on thick. At his imploring tone and sweet smile, the cats couldn’t help but look at one another and reluctantly turn their backs on us.

Just like that, they filed obediently toward another tunnel, different from the one we’d come through. That said, none of them forgot to flash one final glare at us before leaving the room.

Once the cats were gone, we were the only ones left in the ginormous, empty hall.

“All right. Now we can talk at our leisure.” Feoras sighed, settling back into his chair. “Don’t worry. I won’t try to harm you.”

“What’s all this about? Are you the king? Does Sifla know?”

“You’re full of questions, aren’t you? You’re a truly gutsy young lady.” He grinned. “You see, the king of the cats crossed the great divide this morning.”

“Crossed the...um, what?”

“It means he died,” Sucy offered.

He winked at her. “Now, aren’t you clever?”

She shuddered, totally grossed out.

“He was up in years, so it didn’t come as a surprise,” he continued. “But it was sudden, after all. It’d been decided ahead of time that I’d become the next king, so I had to attend the funeral and coronation ceremony. I flew out in a rush, which must’ve startled her.”

“So it’s not because you didn’t like her anymore.”

“‘Didn’t like her’! Not a chance! Not even if this land fell to ruin. I don’t know any other girls as innocent and beautiful as that one. I’m so blessed to be by her side.”

“Um...” Lotte was the one who’d spoken. Though she’d been all jumpy up until now, her eyes filled with an intense curiosity. “Could you possibly be the Cait Sith?”

“Indeed we are. Did you think there were other cats dressed like this?”

Cait Sith... Hmm, what was that again? I felt like I’d heard that word before.

Sucy noticed me racking my brain and secretly told me the answer. “They’re cat fairies. This was in your homework, too, remember?”

“Oh, right, yeah, that’s right.”

As we exchanged quiet whispers, Lotte’s cheeks became super-red. “Ooooh, I knew it! I’ve never seen any before!”

“Now, young lady, you mustn’t be rude. Don’t say you’ve never ‘seen any.’ You’d think we were an exhibit at the zoo or something.”

“Oh! I-I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t bother me personally, but quite a few of our felines are hotheads, and I wouldn’t want to see someone bully a charming young lady.”

...And again with the winking.

Even though he was just a cat, the gesture made Lotte blush.

Wow. Talk about corny. Blech.

I was turned off by the theatrics of it all, but I guess I sort of understood how Lotte felt. I mean, if this guy were a human, he probably would've been pretty hot. At the very least, he behaved chivalrously and dressed smartly, and he was more of a gentleman than any other boy I'd ever met.

But Sucy's reaction was totally different. "...I'm no good with this type." She was making a face.

Actually, I could kind of understand how she felt, too.

I turned to Feoras. "And? Are the funeral and coronation ceremony over?"

"Yes. Just now, I became the king of the Cait Sith."

"In that case, you can go home now, right? Back to Sifla."



He swung his head back and forth. “I can’t. You heard them say it yourself. There’s a trial.”

“A trial?”

“That’s right. To become the fairy king who governs Doras Hill. And”—he gave a long pause before continuing—“to settle my fight with Alan, my sworn enemy.”



The Battle Between the Cait Sith and Cu Sith

“Doras Hill is home to many fairies. Of them, us Cait Sith and the Cu Sith, or the dog fairies, are the two tribes with the largest populations and most power. We’ve been fighting for centuries to determine which of us is fit to govern the hill.” With that, Feoras theatrically gazed into the distance.

...Even though there was nothing to see over there but a rock wall. Geez, this guy was really hamming it up.

“Three years ago, Alan became the king of the Cu Sith. Basically, we’re rivals now and hold the weight of our entire tribes on our shoulders.”

“I’m surprised you managed to live together if your relationship’s that tense,” remarked Sucky.

He let out a long sigh. “When we fought, it would make Sifla so unhappy. There wasn’t anything else we could do.”

“If you know all this, why don’t you just hurry up and go back home to her? If Sifla heard you talking about sworn enemies and fighting and all this stuff, you’d make her so sad.”

When I said that, Feoras stubbornly shook his head. “When the two tribes each crown a new king, they must undergo a trial together to determine who the king of the fairies will be. It’s a custom observed for generations.”

“Well? What does this trial involve?”

“No idea. It hasn’t been written down. When I asked the previous king, he wouldn’t disclose anything. I assume he didn’t want to expose his own disgrace and failure to succeed.”

“Oh, so the previous fairy king was a Cu Sith, then.”

“No, that’s not quite...” Feoras hesitated. “Well, at any rate, whoever makes it through the trial successfully becomes the fairy king. If either Alan or I become the ruler, it’ll put an end to the fighting between the Cait Sith and Cu Sith. See, this is for Sifla’s sake as well.”

Why? I tilted my head, puzzled.

I didn’t think Sifla wanted anything like this to happen.

“There are many fairies who refuse to acknowledge the new Sifla—just because she’s young. If I become king, I’ll have more prestige, and all the fairies on the hill will have to revere me. No one will be able to say she’s inexperienced if I acknowledge her as our new guardian.”

Hmm, okay. So he really was thinking about Sifla.

“Sifla’s a fine witch,” he said. “Other than doting on Alan, she’s perfect in every way.”

“Oh. You’re just jealous.”

I almost rolled my eyes, but Feoras hissed, extending his claws. “Don’t make me sound so childish! If Alan was a worthy fellow, I wouldn’t have to say things like this!”

“Why in the world do you dislike him so much?” Sucy asked.

He grimaced, looking like he didn’t want to even *think* about him. “I’ve never seen anyone lazier. He’s always looking for an excuse to not do anything. When the water dish is empty, it’s always *my* job to go call Sifla. I mean, I was the one who had to gently nudge her and let her know cabbage was poisonous to us! He pushed that task on me! And yet he always claims it’s *his* job to lay a blanket over her as she naps. On top of it all, he always mocks me by saying I’m too small to do anything...!”

“H-hang on a second. You’re not saying you’re at war with Alan for reasons like that, are you?!”

“I just want to carry out my duty as the king of the Cait Sith!”

Really? Because I don’t believe you at all!

I raised a very suspicious eyebrow at him.

He came back to himself and cleared his throat. "In any case, that's how things stand. I'll return to Sifla after this is settled and not before."

"That's no good." I pouted. "She told me both you and Alan are her precious friends. If you two don't come back to her on friendly terms, there's no point."

"That may be, young lady," he remarked.

I clenched my fists really tightly, but Feoras just shook his head at me in his overdramatic way. "But in order to protect Sifla and this hill, I must become the fairy king."

"That can't be right. You're already the king of the Cait Sith, Feoras. You should be able to make the fighting stop."

"Both tribes have to preserve their honor. It isn't that easy."

For some reason, I could hear Feoras's inner thoughts: *Not that you'd understand.*

Oh, I knew that expression. It's one I really hate.

Back when I'd first joined the school, Diana gave me that same look and told me Shiny Chariot was a disgrace to the magical world.

But it wasn't just Diana. All the professors and other students looked at me like that, too.

Every time I said I'd come to Luna Nova to follow the steps of Chariot, they all snorted at me in the exact same way. *Huh. Good grief. You don't understand anything, do you? Oh, you silly little fool,* they'd said.

The only ones who hadn't were Lotte and Sucy.

That's unfair, I'd said.

The students and teachers were the ones who didn't understand anything. Chariot's magic show gave me dreams and hope and made everyone in the audience smile brighter than ever before.

That was all that mattered. It didn't matter if Chariot was a so-called heretic, or if I was like this or that.

Sifla didn't care about those little things, either. All that was important to her

were her feelings for Feoras and Alan.

“Do you have to protect your honor even if it means hurting her?”

My question seemed to have struck a nerve. Feoras’s face crumpled before me.

“...I’m not saying I’ll take anyone’s life. If I can just show them the Cait Sith are the rulers of this hill, that’s enough. That’s been our wish for years.” He showed no sign of backing down.

Oh no. We couldn’t go back without him, and I definitely couldn’t tell Sifla what he’d said.

But what should I say? How could I stop him?

I couldn’t think of anything, which was making me panic...

Awoooooooooooooo.

We flinched when we heard a distant howl. It sounded more like a wolf than a dog.

“There they are. It’s the blasted Cu Sith,” Feoras muttered. “Follow me. If you’re with me, the other fairies won’t attack you.”

“Yeah, that’s fine, but please don’t fight Alan, okay?!”

“...Young lady. When we meet the Cu Sith, you’d do well to keep that chatty little mouth of yours shut. Otherwise, you’re sure to come to harm.”

“Why?”

“The Cu Sith have more ferocious tempers than we do. But it isn’t just them. My tribe has been waiting eagerly for this showdown, and they won’t stand by idly if you interfere. Just don’t expect everyone else to be as much of a gentleman as I am.”

Um, you do know calling yourself a gentleman isn’t actually very gentlemanly, right?

I could tell it wasn’t an empty threat, though. I mean, the cats would’ve been super-eager to kill us if Feoras hadn’t stopped them.

Watching me go quiet, he nodded in satisfaction. “Do behave yourself, young

lady. I'd rather not see a cute little girl cry, either."

"...Like I said, I'm not a 'young lady.' I'm Akko."

This retort was the best I could do.

But seriously, how was a guy who threatened people in any way a gentleman?!



Feoras took us deeper into the cave. When we emerged, we were in a place even more spacious than the one we'd left.

"Huh?! How?!" I yelled out in surprise.

In front of us, we saw a familiar scene. It looked exactly like Doras Hill. The earth was carpeted with the same greenery, and at the center of the mound were boulders exactly like Stone Doras, surrounded by a ring of rugged rocks, further enclosed by the sacred trees and the forest in the distance. When I looked up at the ceiling, I saw a full moon in a starry sky.

For a moment, I almost thought we were back aboveground.

We weren't, though. The stars were much farther away from us, and though the moon illuminated everything in sight, its light still seemed a little dull.

I didn't know why, but this moon looked so sad and lonely, even though it was incredibly beautiful.

"You're late, Your Majesty!"

All the cats were impatiently waiting for Feoras. Opposite them was a seething crowd of animals—bigger than we were—standing on two legs.

It was the group of Cu Sith.

"They're chomping at the bit."

"This time, we'll settle it for good!"

"Show 'em the power of the king!"

Openly hostile, everyone was making a racket. *Oh no.* It really wouldn't be

easy to shut this down.

Just then, Lotte shrieked, “Akko! Look!”

“Huh? What? What’s the matter?”

“Ooh. Oh boy. What’re they doing over there?” Sucy’s eyes narrowed. She was looking in the same direction as Lotte.

They were both staring into the group of Cu Sith.

There in the crowd, I spotted three familiar-looking silhouettes in a row. *That’s...*

“What the heck?!”

Amanda, Constanze, and Jasminka had been trussed up and tied to logs.

“Something tells me this is gonna get ugly,” mumbled Sucy.

“Are those witches fellow conspirators, too?”

“Um. I’m not sure if you can call them ‘conspirators’...”

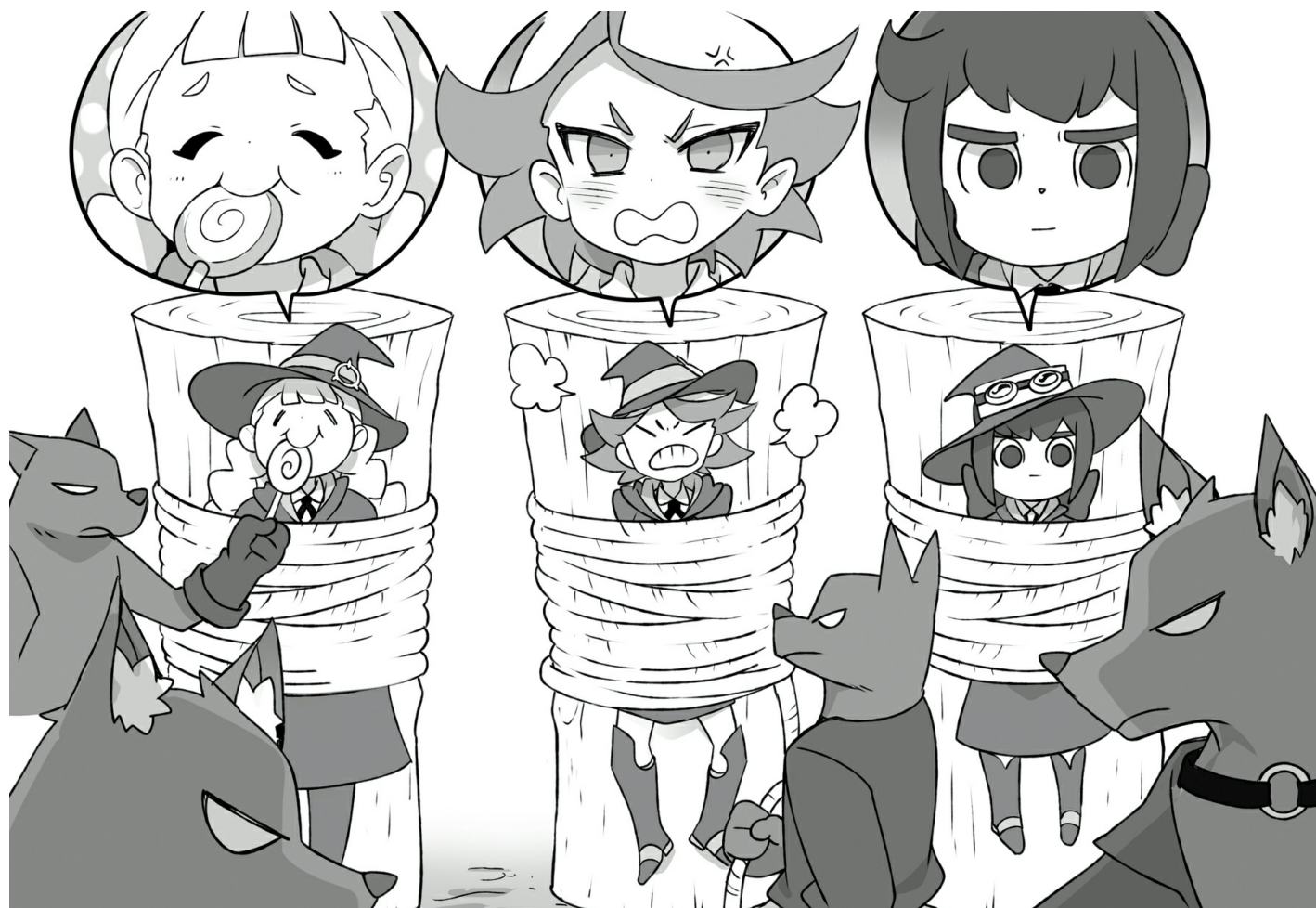
Feoras stalked out in front. “Hey, what do you think you’re doing over there?”

Amanda yelled back, “What do you mean, ‘what’? We got caught! Duh!”

“Hey, you. No talking!”

“Whoa. Ow, ow, ow! Don’t get rough!”

A Cu Sith pulled on her rope, causing Amanda’s face to twist in pain. I probably don’t have to tell you she was in a foul mood.



And, uh, Jasminka somehow had one of the Cu Sith feeding her a snack...? Though there was no telling how she'd tamed him... I just couldn't believe she still hadn't let go of her beloved snacks. I mean, I've got pretty strong nerves, but I guess Jasminka is no slouch, either.

As for Constanze...she couldn't fiddle with her machines and just looked sullen.

Well, her expression never changes, so it's kind of hard to tell what she's thinking anyway.

"Hey, Constanze. You okay?"

"....." Her lips tightened into a straight line, and she quietly stared straight ahead. She didn't respond, but...she was probably all right. I think. Right?

Amanda noticed me and immediately cursed at me. "This is all your fault anyway, Akko!"

"Huh? Why?"

"You people were acting funny, so we sneaked after you and saw you talk to Sifla, then go round and round Stone Doras. All of it. Didn't we?"

“We did. Right, Constanze?”

“.....”

“No way! Did you guys notice them?”

Startled, Lotte and Sucy both furiously shook their heads.

That’s Amanda for you. Just what you’d expect from somebody constantly getting through Luna Nova’s security system and stealing their treasures.

As for her sidekicks...Constanze’s as silent as a *jizo* statue, and Jasminka behaves herself as long as she’s eating snacks. So maybe their silent sleuthing wasn’t so unexpected.

But still! We hadn’t noticed them at all?!

“It looked like you’d stuck your noses into something, so we thought we’d get in on the fun. That’s why we followed you, anyway. But when we looked away for a split second, you just disappeared into thin air. There wasn’t anything else we could do but sneak around the stone nine times, too. But even after we went down the stairs, we *still* couldn’t find you.” Amanda scowled as she spoke. “And when we were wandering around, Fido and his friends grabbed us.”

“They may have circled in the opposite direction from your group, Akko.” Feoras spoke, looking appalled. He probably hadn’t even dreamed they’d be subjected to a stream of intrusive witches like us. “If you circle clockwise nine times, the stairway leads to our home. However, if you circle widdershins, the stairway that appears leads to the home of the Cu Sith.”

“Huh. Is that so?” Amanda’s eyes were round. “I mean, the three of us circled it in midair on brooms. Guess we weren’t paying enough attention to the direction.”

“What?! You’re lucky the professors didn’t yell at you.”

“Heh. Don’t underestimate my ultra-high-speed broomsmanship.”

I didn’t get why she was boasting. Like, come on, not the time.

“Feoras. We know what you’re plotting.” The Cu Sith who’d been standing guard by Amanda stepped forward. “You intend to get the witches on your side and steal a march on us. We won’t let that happen, and we’ve captured your

spies. Pity.”

“Oh... Those girls have nothing to do with me.”

“Don’t lie to us! You even have witches by your side!”

“Well, yes, but... Good grief. This has turned into a real nuisance.” Feoras wearily drew a deep breath as he dealt with the enraged Cu Sith.

I looked back at the dog fairies and their long, glossy dark-green fur. They were all drawn up to their full heights, and since they were larger than the Cait Sith, their presence made more of an impact. Though they were wearing clothes, you could really tell they were beasts! Their thick fangs looked pretty sharp, too.

...Yeah. I’m glad we met Feoras first.

“Say, Feoras. Is Alan that pompous one?”

“No, that’s not him. Do you see the sleepy one yawning in the back? Yeah, the one in the cloak. That’s Alan.” He gestured with his chin at a drowsy-eyed Cu Sith bigger than the others.

In the same way Feoras was the only one wearing a hat, Alan was the only one wearing a bright-red cloak.

He didn’t look the least bit regal, though. In fact, he was biting back yawns and totally uninterested in our conversation.

“You’ve got to be kidding. That’s him?”

“I know what you’re trying to say. He has absolutely no dignity. Believe you me, I know how you feel. He’s astonishingly lazy, a real sloth! Even talking is too much work for him. But he’s sharper than anyone else, and when he feels like it, he can move more nimbly and jump much higher than others of his kind. You’d probably lose your lives in an instant.”

“I told you, quit threatening us like that.”

“Well, it’s the truth.” With that, Feoras stepped forward. “Alan. The day has finally come.”

Alan yawned without a care in the world.

He really didn't seem tense at all.

"Congrats on your coronation, Feoras."

"...I suppose I should thank you. Now we're officially mortal enemies."

"You're just as, uh, how should I say this? Just as...energetic as always."

"Stop talking about it like it has nothing to do with you. You came here for the same reason I did, didn't you? To the site of this sacred trial."

"Nah. Everyone else kind of just brought me here, that's all."

Alan was languidly lying down, as though he'd gotten tired of standing on two legs. When I looked closer, I saw he was on a sled. And another Cu Sith was pulling its rope.

Wait. Did he have them drag him here?

Seriously? How lazy can you get?!

I totally forgot all about Feoras's warning and dashed forward. "If you don't want to fight, you really don't have to. Listen, Alan—want to go back to Sifla with us?"

Alan's heavy eyelids rose very, very slowly. "You're Akko?"

"Yep! I'm Sifla's friend. I came to get you two for her."

"I heard from those other witches. You're an odd one, aren't you? I mean, this isn't even your problem to solve. Wow, I'd never help out with something involving so much work."

He really was talking as if this didn't concern him.

"I don't want to make Sifla cry, either, and I'd really love to go home, but...", he started.



“Then let’s—!”

“But the others won’t let me, you know. I don’t want to get yelled at. It’s such a bother.”

Huh? What’s that supposed to mean? Talk about irresponsible.

Feoras scrunched his face. “That’s the sort of fellow he is. Give it up, Akko. Our battle’s inevitable.”

“Look! Like I said, if you two fight, you’ll make Sifla sad. You can’t do that to her!” I even stamped my foot for dramatic effect, but he still chose to ignore me.

Alan roused himself just a little. “In that case, why don’t we do this? You undergo the trial with us.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Think about what you’re saying, Alan!” Feoras snapped.

But Alan wasn’t fazed at all, giving us a great big yawn. “There’s nothing odd about that, is there? It isn’t written anywhere that the Sith are the only ones who can attempt the trial, and I didn’t hear a thing about it from the previous king.”

“Don’t split hairs! It’s obvious if you use common sense!”

“‘Common sense’ changes depending on what the standard is,” he murmured. “*You* want to settle this, Feoras. But this little witch doesn’t want the two of us to fight. And *I* don’t want to do anything requiring effort. In that case, she should just become the fairy king. Then she can order us to stop fighting, and we can go back home to Sifla.”

Wait. Seriously. What’s he even talking about?

My mouth was hanging wide-open, and I couldn’t keep it closed even if I tried.

Well, apparently, both the Cait Sith and Cu Sith were in complete agreement for once. They were all equally dumbfounded, staring and staring and staring at Alan.

“Well? That way, everyone gets what they want. Don’t you think it’s a great idea?”

“You just don’t want to move around!”

“You’re right. That’s what I’ve been telling you this whole time.”

Feoras ground his teeth audibly. “I really hate this side of you...!”

“Well, I *don’t* hate the way you get all worked up like that. But it can be a pain to deal with sometimes,” Alan maintained, breaking eye contact with Feoras’s burning glare.

You know, I was finally starting to understand how Feoras felt, just a little. Alan was way too laid-back.

“So, basically...,” said a voice.

Sucy had raised her hand, next to Lotte, who was busy fretting and worrying.

Sucy was the only one here who looked unruffled.

“The three of you—Feoras, Alan, and Akko—will undergo the trial, and one of you will become the fairy king?”

“That’s right. Well? It sounds fun, doesn’t it?”

“You’re on.”

I wasn’t the one who said that! It was Amanda.

“Hey, Akko, take him up on it. If you don’t, I will.”

“Wha—? Are you serious?!”

“Heck yeah I am. Hey, get this rope off. I can’t do anything.” Struggling, she aimed a hard kick at the Cu Sith guarding her.

Wait. Me? Become ruler of the fairies? For real?

That’s— That’s just...an incredibly exciting opportunity, isn’t it?

Alan’s eyelids drooped drowsily, but he saw right through me. “So what do you say, little witch? Do you accept this challenge?” he teased.

“It’s Atsuko. My name’s Atsuko Kagari.” I rolled up my sleeves, pumped to get started. “And fine. I’ll take you up on that!”

“What? Akko, wait!!”

“...I knew she was gonna say that.”

I could hear Lotte shriek behind me, and Sucy’s shoulders slumped even further.

But I just lifted my index finger. “On one condition. Lotte and Sucy will participate with me. Because we’re a close-knit team, three hearts beating as one!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

“...Like I keep telling you, we’re just roommates.”

“Do as you please. If you’d like, the captive witches can join you, too.”

“We were gonna join anyway! There’s no way we’d shut up and watch. Right, guys?!” Amanda looked to the others for agreement.

But Jasminka was just gleefully eating her snack, while Constanze looked as sullen as ever.

“See?!” She puffed out her chest, but... *Uh, a-are you sure?*

“I like your spirit. Well, give it your best. Either way, becoming the king of the fairies is the only way you’ll ever return to the outside world,” Alan said with a laugh, clearly entertained.

I nodded decisively. “Oh, we’ll show you.”

“That settles it, then.”

“...Saying whatever you want, every last one of you. I’m always the one who has to clean up after you!” Feoras growled in a low voice and glared at Alan. “There’s only one fairy king. What makes you think we’re allowed to do this as a team?! This trial’s meaningful because you win by your own strength—”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes. I got it,” Alan interrupted. “You go right ahead and do that. But how others choose to participate is up to them.”

“...Whatever! But since you’ve decided to take part in this, you’d better not cut corners, Alan!”

“It’ll be fine. It’ll be totally fine. I’ll be serious about it. *Yaaawn.*”

“Wake up!”

Oh, Feoras. He’d completely forgotten about his coolheaded persona.

As they watched their king childishly stamp his feet, the Cait Sith were stunned. But the same could be said for the Cu Sith. They were looking at Alan in weary amusement, and I could almost hear what they were all thinking: *Oh, our king’s just suggested something ridiculous again.*

Feoras stalked up to him and snatched the rope of the sled from the attendant’s paws. Then, pulling up Alan’s comparatively larger body, he headed for Stone Doras. Only when he reached the top of the hill did he finally reclaim the dignity of a king.

He made his grand proclamation before the crowd. “We shall now begin the trial of the fairy king! Only the participants shall stay here. As for the rest, let us be. When we’ve settled this once and for all, you shall know the results!”

Alan's eyes went round at the sight of such feverish intensity, but he just mellowly murmured to himself, "Seriously, where does all that energy come from?"

The Trial of the Fairy King and a Mysterious Dream

In front of Stone Doras, Feoras looked at us with a straight face and his arms still crossed. “So you’re serious about this, then?”

“Of course! My word’s my bond.” I desperately bit back a gloating chuckle.

Whoops, can’t let that happen. If I don’t try to look well-behaved right now, they’re sure to get mad at me.

But, I mean, come on!

This was a trial to become the fairy king, you know.

Like, isn’t it totally amazing that I got to participate? If I actually succeeded, I could end up being the fairies’ very first witch ruler!

I imagined myself with a crown on my head and a heavy cloak hanging from my shoulders.

Oh, I could already see Professor Fannelan and Diana and the rest of ’em bowing their heads to me! Meanwhile, I’d be standing tall and proud.

Eh-heh! Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

“...Hey, it’s pretty obvious what you’re thinking right now,” Amanda whispered in my ear. “Don’t forget the rest of us are here, too.”

“I—I know that!”

Seeing we weren’t taking this seriously enough, Feoras heaved his deepest sigh yet. For his part, Alan was still practically asleep on his sled.

In a rage, Feoras mercilessly aimed a kick at his back. “And?” He coldly looked down at Alan, who gazed back at him blankly.

“‘And’ what?”

“What’re you after? I know you’re a lazy good-for-nothing who practically lives to cause trouble for others, but you’re not the type to stupidly suggest something without reason.”

“Oh, you give me too much credit,” teased Alan. His lips curved slightly. “Or that’s what I’d like to say, but nothing gets by you, Feoras. You know me so well.”

“Not by choice, I assure you.”

“Witches, will you all lend me your ears?” For the first time, Alan’s eyes were actually open and alert. “To put it briefly, I hate annoying things.”

Uh, yeah, we kinda noticed.

“That’s why I thought I’d have you help with the trial.”

Hmm? Help?

Weren’t we gonna compete?

“That’s just something to tell the other Cu Sith and Cait Sith. If I’d told them I wanted you to help, they definitely would’ve been against it.”

“Say what?!”

“Well, think about it. No one’s managed to succeed over the course of three hundred years. There’s no way we’d be able to do it on our own, right?”

“...! Why, you— Don’t you have any pride as a king?!”

“Not the sort I’d go to lots of trouble to protect.”

“J-just a minute,” I interjected. “Hold up. What’s this about? What do you mean by ‘nobody’s been able to succeed’?”

“...The record of the first fairy king dates back to three hundred years ago. They say there were no battles or fights when that king reigned on the hill, but since then, no one has ever successfully completed the trial to become the successor.”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaa—?! ”

“See? Sounds hard, doesn’t it? There’s no way I’d be able to figure out how to do it.”

“Figuring it out is exactly how someone becomes the fairy king!”

“Yeah, but nah. Seriously, there’s no way.”

“In that case, just bow out and concede to me!”

“I don’t wanna do that, either, though.”

The two of them continued to argue. (Well, it was honestly more like Feoras yelling at Alan.) And we just stood there, super-confused.

“You’re so stubborn.” Alan folded his arms, hemming to himself. “For now, why don’t we decide who the fairy king will be *after* we’ve given it a shot? I mean, I don’t think it’s a good idea for the Cait Sith and Cu Sith to stay on bad terms. That’s why I came to attempt the trial in the first place.”

“I have no intention of colluding with anyone!”

“Yes, yes, I know. You give it your best, all by yourself, Feoras. I’m going to join forces with the witches. That’ll be easier anyway.”

I stared at Alan in total disbelief.

...Geez, he really was as lazy as they came!

“I don’t really care whether I become king. But it’d be a real problem, Feoras, if you won and ruled us all. If nothing else, I intend to keep that from happening.”

“...Enough. Let’s begin. Everyone, drink this.”

Without us noticing, someone had prepared a glass pitcher on a small stone table in front of Stone Doras. It was filled to the brim with a pale-pink liquid.

“What’s this?”

“A concoction made from boiling the leaves from all thirteen sacred trees in holy water. If you drink it, it’s said the power of the fairy king will come to dwell in you.” As Feoras explained, he poured enough for all of us into small glasses.

Hmm. When it came right down to it, Feoras was really good at looking after other people.

When he handed me my glass, I sniffed at it. It had a curious aroma, as if all sorts of spices had been mixed together... *Wait, I take that back. It’s starting to*

smell really weird.

“Does this taste good?”

“How should I know? It’s a special drink handed down from the first fairy king. This is the first time I’ve seen the real thing.”

“...Blegh. So you’re telling me it’s over three hundred years old? Are you sure it isn’t rotten?” I pinched my nose, holding the glass as far away from me as I could.

Feoras sighed before responding, but even that seemed to make him weary. “You’re just teeming with questions, aren’t you? Go on. You certainly don’t look dainty enough for it to upset your stomach. Just hurry up and drink it.”

“You don’t have to say it like that!”

Aren’t you supposed to be a chivalrous gentleman? Excuse me, but your true colors are showing!

“All right, is everyone ready?” After checking to make sure each of us had a glass, Feoras placed a hand on his hip. “Cheers!”

On his command, we all raised our glasses, then drained their questionable contents.

...Wow! That’s bitter!

They might have boiled the leaves for too long, because it was slimy, and... *Blech, oh man, this stuff really doesn’t taste very good! It’s really nasty!*

“Urp.” I covered my mouth with my hand.

Maybe it was because I’d chugged it, but I could feel the world starting to spin, and my thoughts started to get all mixed up, and my mind grew dimmer and dimmer...

With my hand still clutching the empty glass, I passed out on the ground.

...the matter? Are you all right?

I thought I’d heard a voice as I opened my eyes.

My surroundings were pitch-black, so I couldn’t see anybody, but I could definitely hear a woman whispering.

No, wait. She was sniffing or crying, sounding terribly upset.

I groped my way through the darkness to search for her, and before long, I saw a faint glow and someone sitting in the center of it.

She was a girl about my age with long silver hair.

Sifla?

I guess it couldn't have been her, could it? I mean, she was still only six.

But...I couldn't take my eyes off her. She looked like a grown-up version of Sifla—older, mature, and very pretty.

On her lap, a cat mewed in pain, and she tried to soothe him, gently petting his head. She finally stopped crying.

You two fought, didn't you?

As she spoke, she laid her other hand on the head of a big dog lying next to her. He lowered his scarred left eyelid and kept breathing weakly.

I'll take care of both of you. But promise me you won't fight anymore, all right?

Under the warmth of her hands, their fierce expressions softened, and she gazed down at them with a face as gentle and merciful as an angel's.

If you're going to be with somebody, wouldn't you rather smile together than hurt each other?

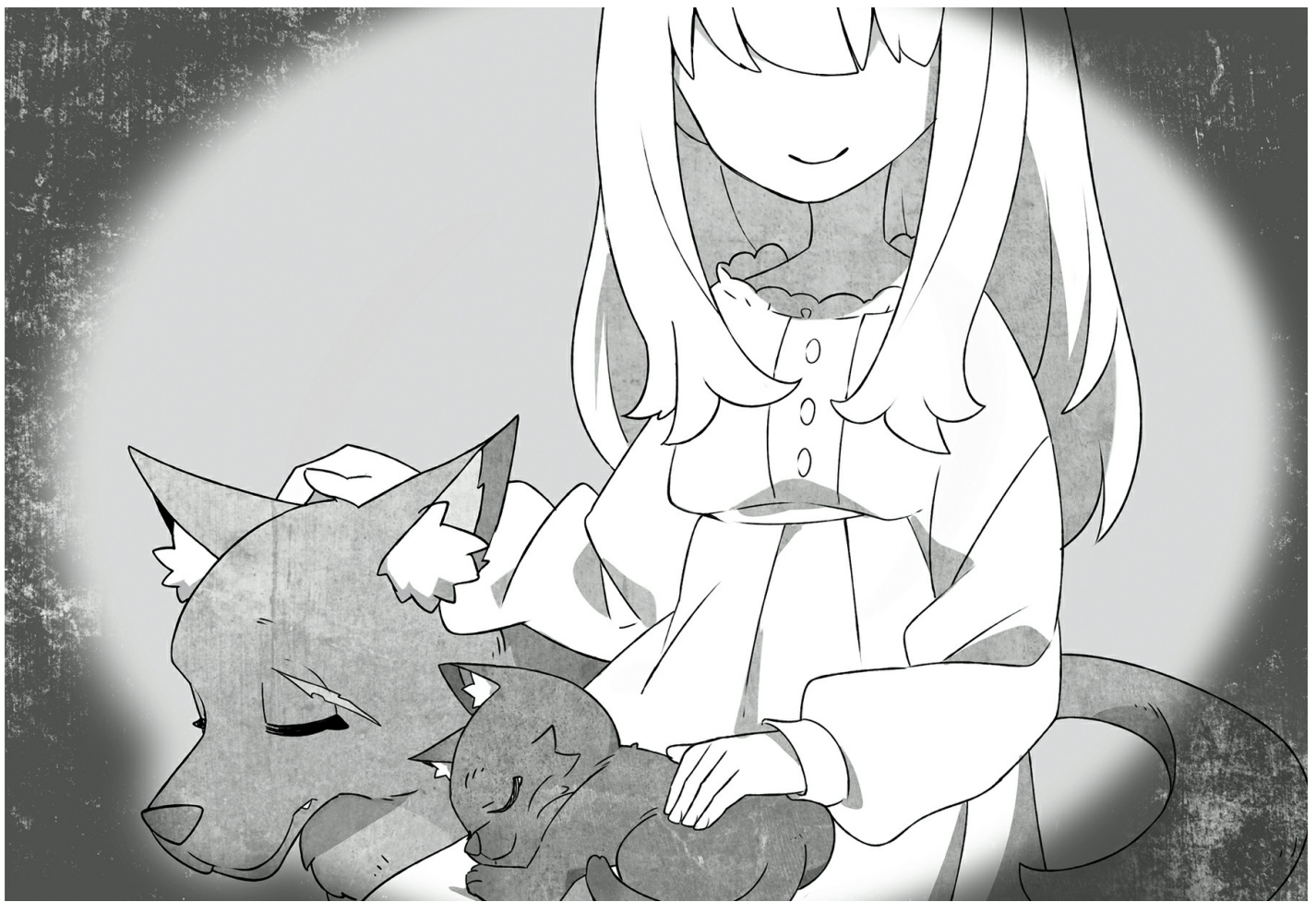
When she murmured to them sadly, the cat and dog wordlessly snuggled closer to her.

I just absently gazed at them, zoning out, forgetting to say anything.

"...Akko. Aaaakko!"

Someone was violently shaking me back and forth, and my eyes opened again.

Uh... Huh?



In front of me, I saw that beautiful girl— No, wait, it was just Sucy.

“You really do have nerves of steel, huh, Akko? How can you fall asleep right now?”

“Did you see that?!”

“See what?” She knit her eyebrows together, perplexed.

Was that a dream?

There was a girl who looked a lot like Sifla. Who was she?

Sitting up, I realized her amulet was glowing faintly on my wrist.

...Why?

“Oh, good. You’re the only one who wouldn’t wake up, Akko, and I didn’t know what we were going to do,” Lotte said with a sigh, relaxing her shoulders.

“You mean everybody passed out?”

“Yeah, but, like, just for a second. We didn’t conk out like you, Akko.”

As Amanda teased me, Jasminka’s hand snaked out from beside her.

“Want to eat thiiis?”

“Huh?”

“Sweets help with anemiaaaa.”

“Oh, sure. Thanks...”

I ate the sugar-covered doughnut, sweet and yummy, and I could feel my head grow clearer and clearer. I finally took a look around us.

Nothing had changed—nothing around us, not me.

But Feoras was glaring and frowning at the table.

“It looks like the trial’s underway,” said Amanda, grinning and pointing at it.

I peeked over the Cait Sith’s shoulder to see letters glowing faintly on the table’s surface. Whoa, they hadn’t been there a minute ago.

Oh, that’s the Luna Alphabet. It’s, um... What does this say?

As I stood there puzzled, Feoras was appalled. “Isn’t reading the Luna Alphabet a necessary skill for witches?”

“Look, I’m bad with ancient writing, all right?!”

“Is there anything you’re good at besides being a chatterbox? You can’t even ride a broom.” Amanda snickered.

“No broom, huh?” Alan’s sleepy eyes widened again.

Suddenly self-conscious, I looked down and poked the tips of my index fingers together sheepishly. “I just haven’t practiced enough; that’s all.”

“W-well, never mind that. It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

I could always count on Lotte to chime in at times like these.

“This is what it says: **‘The one who revives the sacred trees and makes stars fall from the heavens shall be ruler of the fairies.’”**

“That’s it? Piece of cake.” Amanda confidently thrust her wand up into the night sky.

“Ea Lunag!”

She cast an elementary spell, calling for some shooting stars.

But not a peep escaped her wand.

“Huh? That’s weird.”

She retrieved her broom with a summoning spell and jumped onto it, soaring up into the sky. As she circled overhead, she shouted again, louder than before.

“Ea Lunag!”

But just like before, nothing happened.

“What gives?! Is the magic super-weak here or something?!”

“If it was, you wouldn’t be able to fly all over the place, would you?”

Sucy’s levelheaded reply made Amanda blow her top. “Then why won’t the spell work?!” Irritated, she started to descend to the ground.

“It’s probably because it isn’t the right answer.” Feoras shrugged.

“Huh?”

“If this could be resolved by some fledgling witch’s spell, somebody would’ve done that a long time ago. Come on—we aren’t *that* stupid. Whatever. Reviving the sacred trees comes first. At least, that’s what the writing says,” he maintained in his imperious way.

Amanda bristled. “Then *you* try doing it. Can you do it? Huh?”

“I’m thinking about it now.” Looking out of sorts, Feoras sat down right where he was and crossed his legs. Bracing his elbows on his inner thighs, he rested his chin on a paw and began tapping his lips.

“You’ll never be able to do it. I mean, we can’t even use magic. That’s why I suggested we borrow their power to begin with,” Alan drawled, still lying down.

The sight seemed only to further grate on Feoras’s nerves. “Shut up! I’m doing this on my own!”

“Oh dear,” Alan said as he looked at me, but he really didn’t look troubled at all. As a matter of fact, he looked kind of entertained. Was this guy just messing with Feoras for his own amusement?

In spite of myself, I burst out laughing. “Do you two really not get along?”

“We aren’t friends. But we’ve lived together for a really long time. Hard to avoid getting attached.”

It was so strange. Up until a minute ago, I’d thought Feoras was the one who had everything under control, but now Alan seemed more mature.

“Feoras and I had lived with the previous Sifla since she was a child, when we were chosen as candidates for the kingships of the Cu Sith and Cait Sith. Apparently, it was an agreement between the first fairy king and the first Sifla... I wonder why they made such an odd promise.” He cocked his head.

“Which do you suppose the first fairy king was? A Cu Sith or Cait Sith?” I asked.

“...Cait Sith, obviously.”

Naturally, the mumbled reply had come from Feoras.

Alan shrugged. I had a feeling arguing required too much effort from him. “Maybe so.”

“Well, the upshot’s that we’ve known the current Sifla since she was born. I learned that human babies are just so cute. Whenever Feoras and I fought, she would start crying right away, you know. So we had to all live together in harmony—at least superficially.”

“But you’d like to stop faking it and actually get along with Feoras, wouldn’t you?” Lotte chuckled.

Alan pretended not to hear by letting out an exaggerated yawn.

The rest of us exchanged looks. Apparently, we all felt the same way.

“Aw man. And here I thought I’d get the jump on you if you gave me half a chance and become the fairy king,” Amanda spit. But she smiled.

Alan looked up to see our faces and gave a cheerful bark. “So you’ll work with me?”

“We don’t have much of a choice. I mean, we came here to help Sifla.”

“Thank you. Ah, all that talking was worth it. I’ve never spoken this much at once before.”

“Feoras, were you listening? That’s how it’s gonna be!” I called out.

He still had his back stubbornly turned toward us, but I could see he was really worked up. As he got to his feet, his tail was lashing. “Akko, if you and the others intend to side with Alan, that’s fine. Even if all of you pooled what little knowledge you have, nothing can possibly come of it.”

Well, that was rude.

“In that case, we’ll compete to see which of us can revive more sacred trees. We’ll deal with the stars after that!” he shouted.

“Are you suuure you can do this all by yourself?”

“I know I can! Don’t lump me in with Akko the Failure!”

Oh, give me a break. There’s not even a hint of a gentleman there now.

But we all smiled at one another.

First, let’s get those sacred trees revived!

...So, um, how do we do that?



Revive, Sacred Trees

There were thirteen sacred trees and thirteen months in a fairy year. Alan explained that each tree represented a month in the fairy calendar.

“You copied that down in your homework, too, remember?” Lotte asked me.

I whistled, tuning her out.

To start, we all trotted down the hill and stood in front of the first tree: a white birch. It was pretty impressive, with lots of long, slim branches curving upward from its thick, weighty trunk.

Okay, but what did “reviving them” actually mean?

Because they didn’t look dead to me.

“They used to steep the leaves of all the sacred trees and drink it as a panacea in the past,” declared Feoras.

“Is that the nasty stuff we drank?”

Blech. Gross. In spite of myself, I stuck my tongue out. The mere memory of it was enough to make the inside of my mouth sting and prickle.

“They say it was the source of the fairy king’s power. Sifla was lamenting that the sacred trees and their powers have weakened in the present.”

“Meaning if we revive them, the fairy king’s power will return as well... Right?” Lotte fell to thinking.

Sucy indifferently shrugged. “Either way, we need to do something about the trees first. Did the two of you receive any hints?”

“Good question. Feoras, did you?”

“Even if I had, I wouldn’t tell you people.”

“Except you just told us about the cure-all.”

“Th-that was charity! Because you seemed so terribly helpless!” Flushing bright red, he turned away in a huff.

As he continued to pout, Sucy put a hand on the trunk of the tree and looked up into its branches. “Wouldn’t it be faster just to ask it directly?”

“Directly? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Have Lotte summon the spirit of this tree.” She pointed directly at her.

“Wh-what?” Lotte stammered, suddenly at the center of our conversation.

“I feel like an old tree should have a spirit living in it, just the way old tools do. Especially if it’s a sacred tree, right? I’d say that makes this a job for you, Lotte.”

“Yeah! Sucy, you’re a genius!”

“U-u-u-uh, but...”

If you didn’t know, Lotte’s family runs a secondhand shop, where they have this mysterious song that’s been handed down for generations. It’s a special song to summon the spirits in old tools.

“Go on, Lotte—try it. Think about how much it’ll help all of us!” I encouraged.

“Uh, umm...”

“Unless we do something about the sacred trees, we’ll never get back to where we came from.”

“Uhhhhh...”

“I’m asking you, too, Lotte. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard you sing, and I’d like to hear it again,” Sucy prodded.

“Um...” Yes! Lotte was finally starting to waver.

Amanda reassured her with a nod. “Don’t worry. Even if you screw up, we won’t laugh or anything. Although we might if it was Akko.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“...All right. I’ll try it.” Lotte drew a big breath.

La-la-la, lu-la-la, lu-li-la-la-la.

She began to sing a gentle, tranquil melody, softly enveloping all of us.

Li-lu-lu-lu, lu-la-la, la-la-la-la-la.

I thought Lotte and her singing voice had a lot in common. They both somehow dissolved all my worries.



She was hesitant in the beginning, but as she drew deeper breaths, her voice became looser and freer. At first, the white birch tree didn't seem any different, but then its branches and leaves began to rustle, brushing against one another, to sing along with Lotte.

As she continued, a white mist began gathering around the trunk of the tree. Little by little, the fog grew denser, beginning to form a human shape.

At last, a pale, slender woman stepped out from its shadows.

Lotte ended her song when she saw her.

Was this woman the spirit of the white birch tree?

"Amazing! Incredible!" Alan earnestly clapped his paws, though Feoras still looked cross. But even the Cait Sith couldn't seem to take his eyes off her.

"Um, hello," I said, but the woman only looked down somberly. "We're trying to revive the sacred trees. What should we do?"

But she didn't answer my question, shaking her head slightly instead.

...Well, that wasn't helpful at all.

Just then, Alan gasped audibly. "Come to think of it, Sifla said the first tree and the second tree, the rowan tree, were sisters."

"Sisters?"

"Yeah, that's right. The white birch is the lady of the forest, and the rowan is the lady of the mountains. Since their respective months are right next to each other, they're very close. Isn't that right, Feoras?"

"No idea. It's news to me."

"What? You're kidding! I'm positive you've heard about it. Sifla always told us the story of the sacred trees before we went to bed. Come on—you remember that one time—"

"I don't know what I don't know! What's with you today?!"

"Then should I try summoning the spirit of the rowan tree as well?" Lotte made the suggestion voluntarily, which was pretty unusual for her, to be honest.

Yeah, if we paid too much attention to those two, there'd be no end to this.

Leaving them behind, we went over to the rowan tree. But this time, no woman appeared when Lotte sang her song.

Why?!

As we were trying to figure it out, Alan shambled over to us. "Hey!"

He was gripping Feoras by the scruff of his neck.

"Let go! All you do is sleep. I don't get why you have to be so enthusiastic today!"

"Feoras finally remembered!"

"The story about the trees?"

"No, a song. I'd never heard this one, but it seems useful. Go on, Feoras. Hurry up and sing it!"

Yanked by Alan's paw, Feoras's neck was cinched tight. His face was turning bright red either from anger or from struggling to breathe. He finally shook Alan off him, and then he began to sing gruffly, mostly because he had no other choice.

The forest lady drinks red fruit, her younger sister's offering.

Beneath the droplets from the leaves, the twitt'ring songbirds call the spring.

The witch comes bathed in moonlight; a bridge to the fairies' past she'll bring.

"Come to think of it, a rowan tree's branches grow full with bright-red berries, don't they?" mused Lotte.

But Amanda dubiously looked at the tree. "This one doesn't even have leaves."

"Maybe we just need to make it grow." Sucy took out her wand.

"Fas Doluus!"

In the next moment, the branches sprang into motion, writhing and curling,

and the dull-brown tree became fresher and younger, little by little.

Poof! Poof, poof!

It was kinda like someone pressed the fast-forward button: Glossy berries suddenly popped up on its branches. The forest lady was drawn in by an invisible force, leaving the base of the white birch tree where she'd been standing absently. She wobbled toward us on unsteady feet.

"Yesssss!" I jumped up, waiting in anticipation for the woman to eat the fruit.

But even now, all she did was stand there in melancholy, gazing up at the red berries in a longing way.

Oh, come on! Why not?!

"Wait a sec. Yo, Feoras. A moment ago, you said, '**The forest lady drinks red fruit,**' right?"

"...Yes."

Amanda gave a little grunt. "That doesn't mean we're supposed to make her swallow it whole, does it?"

She was right: I'd feel really bad if we made her do that.

"Oh yeah. Jasminka, I bet you can do it, can't you?" Amanda shouted with shining eyes.

"Meee?"

"Yeah, you. Use those berries and make some juice. Right here, right now."

"Juuuice?"

"It's not a bad deal for you, either. I hear rowanberry juice is super-duper tasty. Bet you'll wanna try it."

"...Can I driiink it?"

"Sure, why not? Right, Feoras?!"

"Don't ask me."

"He says it's fine."

"Okay, I'll tryyy."

Perched on a nearby stone, Jasminka polished off the rest of her doughnut in one bite and brushed the crumbs off her. Then she rose into the air on her broom as slowly and leisurely as Alan.

When she floated up to the tree, she plucked its red berries, dropping them into a flask she'd taken out from...somewhere. But where? She, uh, somehow took out a big bag of powder, too.

What *was* that stuff? Sugar?

Scooping it up with a spoon, she began shoveling it into the flask until you couldn't see the red berries anymore.

“Avi Brasta!”

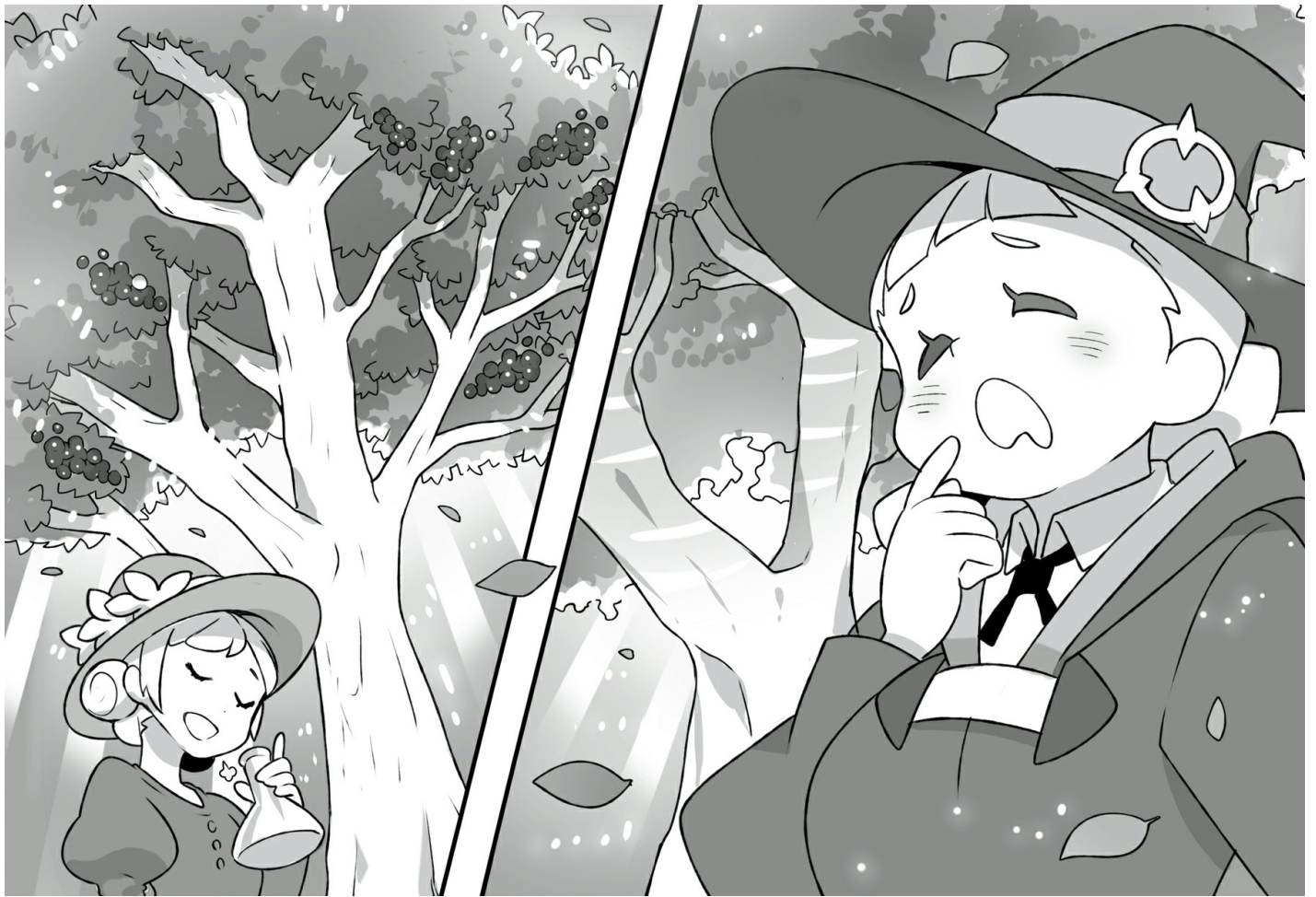
And then—

—there was an explosion, scattering light, and the flask was filled with a transparent red liquid. Jasminka eagerly took a single sip, then nodded in satisfaction before descending on her broom in the same floaty, laid-back way.

“Here. It's goood.”

When she held the flask out to her, the woman finally smiled and daintily began to drink the juice. Jasminka watched her enviously, but as you'd expect, she somehow managed to control herself from snatching it from her.

Before long, the woman drank the last of the juice, and then...the white birch and rowan trees blazed with light. It was honestly so bright, we couldn't keep our eyes open, and we involuntarily covered our faces with our hands.



When we peeked again, both trees seemed livelier and full of light, glistening as if a long, dreary storm had finally ended.

I jumped up. “That was fantastic! Way to go, Jasminka!”

“That’s my team for ya!”

Amanda and I were so worked up, cheering and high-fiving each other.

Beside us, I noticed Jasminka was munching away on something... Were those rowan berries? Geez! That was fast!

“How’s that, Feoras? We’re not totally worthless, are we?!”

“You didn’t do anything, Akko! Besides, I’m the one who remembered the song, so this was all thanks to me!” Feoras fired off another one of his retorts, but he was looking back and forth between the two revived trees in awe.

“Amazing.” Alan’s nose twitched just a little.

“So we should just do what the song says, right? I bet that’ll revive all of them!”

“You say that as if it’s easy, Akko.” Alan laughed.

Well, I mean, it *was* easy. All we had to do was combine our strengths.

If we continued reviving them at top speed, we'd have this solved in no time flat!

"What was the next thing again? Um..."

"**'Beneath the droplets from the leaves, the twitt'ring songbirds call the spring.'** ...I wonder if that means we should get a tree wet." Lotte read aloud from her notebook.

What? She'd heard the song only once, but she had it all written down. Nice!

"That sounds like your cue, Constanze." Amanda grinned. "That new project of yours. Show 'em what it can do."

"....." Constanze nodded, pulling out a big cylindrical object.

Huh? What's that? A bazooka? Wasn't that the one she'd been working on when Professor Finnelan yelled at her?!

Wait, now it's got even more switches! And it's way bigger than Constanze!

Ignoring our surprise, she jumped onto the bazooka.

"....."

"Yeah, nice. Do it!"

Seriously, Amanda, how are you actually holding a conversation with Constanze?!

Impassively, she pushed some switches. Wait, that was...a keyboard. Was she inputting a spell instead of chanting it?

"I like that. It looks handy."

Um, no, uh-uh, if people started using things like that, we'd all lose the ability to talk to one another. Like, how lazy can you get, Alan?!

As I was thinking that...

Boomf!

...a blast of water hit the third tree—the ash tree—and the whole thing got soaked.

“W-wait, you’re gonna break the tree!”

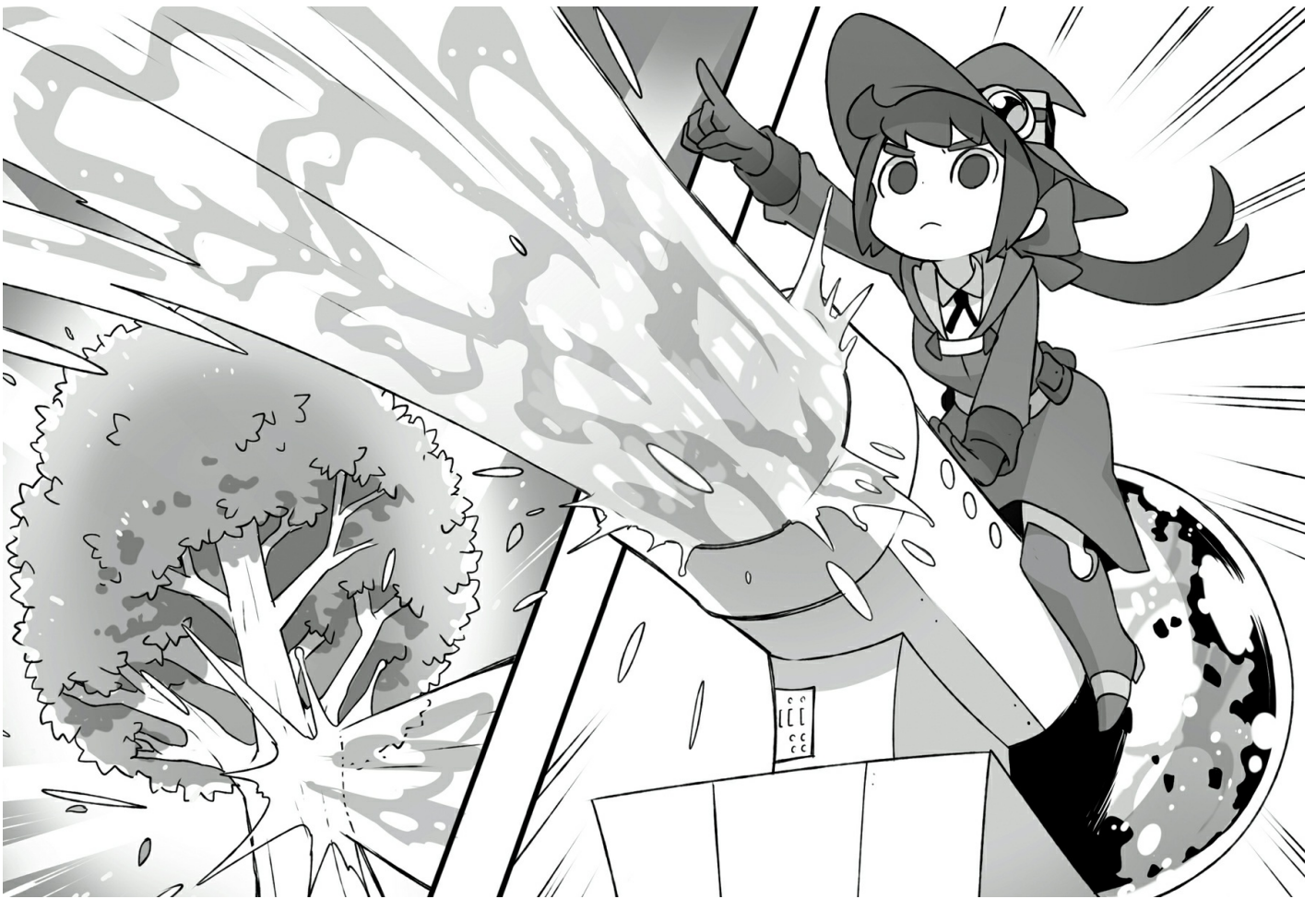
“Zip it, Akko. Constanze wouldn’t screw up like that. See? She’s adjusting the water volume.”

“I-is this even okay...?”

I mean, sure, the tree was completely drenched, but...

“Yeah, of course it is. You’re doin’ awesome, Constanze!” Amanda flexed her biceps, and Constanze flashed a thumbs-up in return.

Her face was as blank as always, but...she looked...happy? I think.



“Okay, it’s my turn next, huh? Lotte, what’s after this?”

“**‘The twitt’ring songbirds call the spring.’** I think that might be talking about the alder tree.”

“The alder tree? That’s the fourth one?”

“Uh-huh. It’s the first tree to blossom in spring. I’m not sure what ‘twittering songbirds’ means, though. There aren’t any songbirds here, are there?”

“Leave that to me! Anything that flies is a friend of mine.” No sooner had

Amanda spoken than she launched herself into the sky on her broom again.

Her broom flew around freely but with perfect control, and white smoke sputtered from its tail.

“That’s incredible! Broom trails!” Lotte gasped, sounding impressed.

Broom trails were a type of cloud that originally got their name because they meant witches had gone by. I’d never seen any before, either.

Wow, Amanda’s acrobatics were like something out of the circus! I couldn’t stop staring at her.

...Wait. We needed songbirds, not clouds, right?

Just when everyone was starting to wonder, Amanda yelled confidently:

“Ku Bhagga Lins!”

Twit-twit-twit-twit!

Chirping sweetly, pure-white songbirds appeared in the night sky. What?! How?! *Holy smokes! She transformed those clouds into birds!*

“Okay, you guys. Come sing by the tree!” Amanda dropped into a steep dive, bringing the songbirds with her.

They formed a twittering choir around the alder tree.

Pop! Po-po-pop, pop!

In rhythm with their song, the hanging alder flowers began to bloom. Life returned to its branches, and both the alder tree and ash tree began to glow.

“We did it! We did it! Everybody’s amazing! We’re the best!”

“Like I said, Akko, *you* haven’t done anything,” Feoras pointed out with a snicker.

“...Ugh! Well, I will! My big scene’s coming up!”

“Oh yeah? Show us what you’ve got, then.”

“J-just you watch me. Next! Lotte, what’s next?!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Akko, please stop shaking me...”

I'd grabbed Lotte's shoulders and was rocking her back and forth until she was super-dizzy.

Um, what was it again? I peeked at her notebook.

"The witch comes bathed in moonlight; a bridge to the fairies' past she'll bring." ...Hmm.

A witch bathed in moonlight... I felt as if I'd heard that somewhere else.



I looked down at my hand.

Oh yeah. That's right! This thing. The willow amulet Sifla gave me. She said when it absorbed light from the moon, it made your magic stronger.

I was inexplicably drawn toward the fifth tree, where I set both hands on the willow's thick trunk. Once again, the amulet shone faintly silver.

Shimmer, glimmer, gleam.

Whoa, the willow branches began getting brighter, too.

"Akko? What's the matter?" I heard Lotte calling out to me, but I couldn't answer her. Not now.

The silver glow grew bigger and bigger, enveloping me from head to toe.

And the next thing I knew, I was surrounded by light.

Sifla was standing in front of me.

"Why are *you* here?!"

"That's my line, Akko. What are you doing in my room?"

"Your room? Wait, no, what are you saying? This is the Country of..."

She and I both looked at our amulets simultaneously. So these guys were to blame, huh?

"Did you find Feoras and Alan?"

"We did, but...um."

I briefly explained what had happened up until now: I told her that Feoras and Alan were the kings of the Cait Sith and Cu Sith, respectively. That they were both undergoing a trial to become the fairy king. That to make that happen, we were trying to revive the sacred trees. That Feoras's song had given us a hint.

I watched as she lowered her eyebrows and pursed her lips, sad and gloomy.

"So Feoras is trying to become the fairy king to make the fairies acknowledge me as their guardian?"

"Uh, well, I don't think that's the only reason, but yeah."

“In that case, if I said I didn’t need to be recognized as one...would he quit the trial and come back home?”

“No, you can’t do that!” I yelled reflexively.

She widened her eyes. “Akko...?”

“You absolutely can’t. If you do that, everything they’ve done so far will be for nothing. Would you be okay with that, Sifla?”

“But...there’s nothing else I can do...”

Ugh. I was getting more and more irritated with her whining.

Like, if you think there’s nothing you can do, then find something else to do! Start with what you *can* do and go from there!

“Listen, Sifla. A little while ago, I dreamed about a girl who looked just like you.”

Sifla’s eyes got even bigger with surprise.

“She was hugging a cat and dog who’d been fighting and said, if they were going to be with each other anyway, it was better to smile together than hurt each other... You know what? If you’re not gonna do it, I will. I’ll figure out a way to let them laugh together. But, Sifla, listen to me: They’re your precious friends, right? In that case, let’s do something about it together!”

I wasn’t sure how she responded.

That was because I came to in the next moment.

I was back with everybody else... Huh?

“What’s wrong, Akko? You touched the willow and then kind of just spaced out.” Worried, Lotte peered into my face.

“...I don’t know. But...” I looked down at the willow amulet, which wasn’t glowing anymore. “...I think I’m the witch ‘bathed in moonlight.’”

“Huh? Oh, get over yourself, Akko,” Amanda snarked.

But I didn’t back down. “I know I’m right... Well, technically, it’s probably Sifla. But she’s not here, so I’ve gotta do it in her place.”

“Huh... I wonder what ‘bridging the past’ means.”

Beside Lotte’s contemplative face, I spotted an ominous smirk. Oh, yikes! I scooted back—fast.

...Seriously, Sucky, what’s your problem? What’s that sweet smile of yours for?

“Lucky you, Akko. It’s finally your turn.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Drink.”

“Huh?”



“I said drink this.” Sucy thrust a flask of questionable liquid at me. “It’s a potion with powdered hawthorn in it.”

“Why me?! I don’t wanna! I mean, I obviously don’t wanna! Who would?!”

“You promised.”

“What?”

“You promised you’d be my guinea pig.”

“Uhhhhhhhhh, well, yeah, I did, but—now?!”

“Now.” Sucy wouldn’t budge.

When did she make this stuff anyway?!

“You said you wouldn’t complain.”

“I did. I did, but... But!”

Honestly, if she’d given me hawthorn juice, I would have drunk it—gladly! But the liquid in the flask was purple and bubbling in a gloppy, gross way.

I couldn’t possibly just gulp down something like that!

“How in the world did you make something that looks *this* dangerous?!”

“I may have added a few things from my collection.”

“That means it’s poisonous, doesn’t it?!”

“Not necessarily. As I keep telling you, poison and medicine are two sides of the same coin.”

“You can’t really expect me to put something that scary into my mouth!” I lit into her. “First of all! Why do I have to be the one to drink this anyway?!”

“Well, the one after the willow tree is the hawthorn tree.”

I complained and persisted, but Sucy was dead set on her decision.

“You know, they say fairies live in the hawthorn tree, and memories of the past flow through the heart of its trunk. This potion has hawthorn in it, so if you drink it, you may be able to bridge the fairies’ past or whatever.” Sucy’s indifferent explanation was weirdly persuasive.

I-if what she was saying was true, then drinking it would be worth a try, but —!

“Is there any guarantee I’ll be all right?”

“At the very least, nothing in there will kill you.”

“That’s not what I’m asking...!”

“Akko. Are you trying to break a promise?” Sucy leaned in, looming over me. “Do you think it’s all right for witches to break their contracts?”

“Contracts? It wasn’t that big—”

“You also said you’re the one going next. You’re gonna be useful, aren’t you?”

“Guh, guh-guh-guh-guh-guh.”

Ugh. I knew I shouldn’t have made that promise!

I snatched that flask from Sucy!

“I just have to drink it, right?! Fine! A woman never goes back on her word!”

“That’s it. That’s the spirit.”

As Sucy cheered apathetically, I glared at the flask. Wow... The longer I looked at this stuff, the sketchier it seemed... *Hey, wait a second. Just now, just for a second, did I see bubbles in the shape of a skull?!*

It was no good. The more I looked at it, the more I wanted to run away.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pinched my nose. Then I opened my mouth wide and poured the contents of the flask into it, all at once. Now that I was drinking it, it actually tasted pretty go—

“Ugh-ga-gi-go-ge-gi-gah!”

Yuck, that was really nasty! It was way more awful than that earlier stuff! And it was so bitter, too!

With an unearthly scream, I fell over backward for the second time.

“A-Akko?!”

With Lotte’s panicked voice echoing in my ears, my consciousness dimmed.

Ahhh... What a short life...

When I came to my senses again, I was standing in darkness once more.

I knew it. This dream again.

On impulse, I looked for her...and there she was.

The girl, the cat, and the dog: The three of them were cuddled together, happy and contented.

You see, magic exists to make everyone smile.

Her silver hair was so transparent, it practically melted into the light of a full moon, and her large eyes shone the same silver.

Wow. She really did look like Sifla.

Did you know? They say falling stars make wishes come true. But I wouldn't be strong enough to call down a falling star for each wish of every fairy on the hill—not on my own.

The cat meowed, calling out to her.

The dog woofed softly, begging for attention.

The three of us will rule the hill together in harmony.

She smiled, hugging the two animals closer to her, one on each side.

The cats will bring freedom, the dogs loyalty, and the witches the power to protect. As long as the three of us combine our strength, we'll preserve peace on this hill.

They both snorted in agreement.

Together, the three of us are one fairy king. It won't work if even one of us is missing... All right? It's a promise.

Gradually, the three silhouettes faded in front of me.

No! I impulsively stretched out my hand. "Wait! Are you...?!"

I couldn't reach them—not with my voice or with my outstretched hand.

Quietly and slowly, I drifted away from the darkness.

I opened my eyes.

I'd been crying.

"What's the matter, Akko? What happened?!"

"Ungh..." I sat up, rubbing my eyes. My back was in a whole lotta pain from falling over so many times.

The girl in my dream was Sifla.

I didn't have any proof, but I instinctively knew. There was no doubt about it.

“Listen, I had a dream. About Sifla.”

Alan twitched at the sound of her name and raised his heavy eyelids, waking up from his nap. I kinda had a feeling he was faking it, though. Feoras also tossed a dubious look in my direction.

“It wasn’t the current Sifla, though. She was probably...the first Sifla. I bet the cat and dog were your ancestors, too.”

I told them everything about my dreams, starting with the first one, with as many details as I could remember.

As Feoras and Alan listened, their expressions clouded over.

“Hey, are you sure the fairy king is just one person? Weren’t you actually supposed to work together right from the start?” I asked.

“...It really is odd, isn’t it?” said Alan as he sat up. “It was a spur-of-the-moment idea to have you all help, but everything so far would’ve been impossible for the Sith to do by ourselves. It’s almost as if borrowing the power of a witch is required.” He gave an uncharacteristically thoughtful frown. “We’ve always been told the point of this trial was to determine whether the Cait Sith or Cu Sith was best suited to rule the hill...but maybe it isn’t. What do you say, Feoras?”

He didn’t respond.

Oh no. I had a sinking feeling that maybe Sifla should’ve been here with them. Right from the very beginning, *she* was the one supposed to help them, not us.

Softly, I laid a hand over the amulet on my wrist.

“Akko. Look...” Lotte tugged at my sleeve, and I turned around.

The willow and hawthorn trees were enveloped in a warm glow.

At long last, six of the trees had revived.



A Huge Mistake and a Huge Rampage!

“If songs are the key to reviving the sacred trees, then I might know one that’s useful, too.” Even though he was still bemused by this turn of events, Alan fully intended to keep going. “It’s different from Feoras’s, though,” he said before beginning to sing.

His rhythm was just a little off, but he sounded as if he was enjoying himself.

The old one overlooks the hill; snow-white flowers guide the lost.

And at the end of their journey, love’s paradise is not so far.

A wish shall become your strength on a blessed night of falling stars.

So should we just do what this song said?

Well, to start, we decided to summon a spirit, just as we’d done earlier. Lotte sang and placed her hand on the thick, imposing trunk of the oak tree—the seventh of the sacred trees. As she did, a stout elderly man appeared in front of us.

Could he be “the old one”?

As we silently looked on, the spirit called over the forest lady from the first tree and clasped her hands affectionately.

From that point on, everything happened so fast.

Together, the two approached the eighth tree, the holly tree, and blew little white flowers and red berries into being, one after another. The songbirds pecked at these flowers, scattering silver pollen snowflakes in the direction of the ninth tree, the hazel tree.

Then the pollen was gently stirred up by their fluttering wings, drifting and

rising into the night sky to form the shape of a pillar.

Upon seeing this, the old one and the lady nodded to each other and floated up into the sky. As they began to dance and waltz among the stars, the tenth tree—the apple tree—started to bear bright-red fruit below their lithe steps.

The next thing we knew, all four sacred trees were bright and alive once again.

“...Wow.”

Not that I had helped out with anything.

But my heart was pounding like crazy—the way it had when I’d first watched Chariot’s show. To think Lotte’s song would spark a chain of events and produce a miracle like this! Magic was really, reeeally fantastic!

My heart was beating so fast, it could have jumped right out of my mouth.

“We only have three to go!”

But Lotte was totally drained from singing three times, wiping sweat from her forehead. So we all decided to take a short break, sitting down right where we were.

And you know, Jasminka’s snacks really came in handy!

Ivy, the eleventh tree, was a little different from the rest.

To start with, it wasn’t technically a tree, and there was a big stone marker as tall as the other trees in its spot. There, the plant’s stalks intertwined, meshing around it and covering it with a thick blanket of leaves.

“There’s something written here, too.” Amanda parted its leaves to reveal more of the Luna Alphabet on the stone.

I’ll get it this time, I thought, squinting at the monument.

I sighed with relief. Oh, good, I could certainly read that much.

“What is your wish?”

The moment I said those words aloud, the world around me went pitch-black.

This time, I knew it wasn’t a dream or anything. It felt as though we’d all been

left behind in the dark abyss of outer space.

Even though they had to be right beside me, I couldn't hear anybody breathing.

I almost called out to them.

But I stopped myself when I saw a woman appearing from the depths of the darkness. She radiated an iridescent light and wore silver bracelets that jingled delicately.

You're—! I tried to yell, but the words wouldn't leave my mouth.

It was the first Sifla, the one I'd seen in the dream! But something about her was different. What was it? She was still pretty, but she emanated a cold frigidity at the same time.

Involuntarily, my hands tightened on the Shiny Rod.

“What do you wish for?”

Agh, she spoke! Startled, I backed up hastily.

Um, um, my wish, my wish is obviously... I was *this* close to answering, but she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were fixed on someone else.

Another light appeared in the direction of her gaze, brightening to reveal Feoras.

Oh, he was on edge, his fur standing on end and his tail lashing. It sort of made him look like a normal cat.

“Who are you? The first Sifla?” He tensely responded with a question of his own. “What on earth are you trying to do here? One role for three people? There's no way we could do that! I'm the one who's going to become the fairy king. I'll protect the current Sifla and the hill!” he spit out, on the brink of tears.

In spite of myself, I wanted to hug him, but I couldn't move or speak, either. Someone or something was telling me not to get in the way.

She just repeated her question.

“What do you wish for?”

“...I've said it over and over already. I want to be the fairy king.”

“Why?”

“That’s the wish of all Cait Sith. We want to dominate the Cu Sith and put them in their place for good. Not just them but all the fairies on the hill. This is necessary to protect Sifla.”

“Necessary? Why?”

“You need power to protect someone. And I want enough power to silence anyone who dares complain and make them acknowledge me as king.”

Liar. That couldn’t really be what he wanted.

I mean, he looked so alive when he was with Alan—even when he was upset!

Sifla gazed steadily at him and sighed.

“So that’s your wish.”

She tilted her head, then looked past me on the other side.

“And what do you wish for?”

Under a bright light, Alan appeared, just as I expected. His tail stuck out stiffly, perfectly horizontal and full of fear.

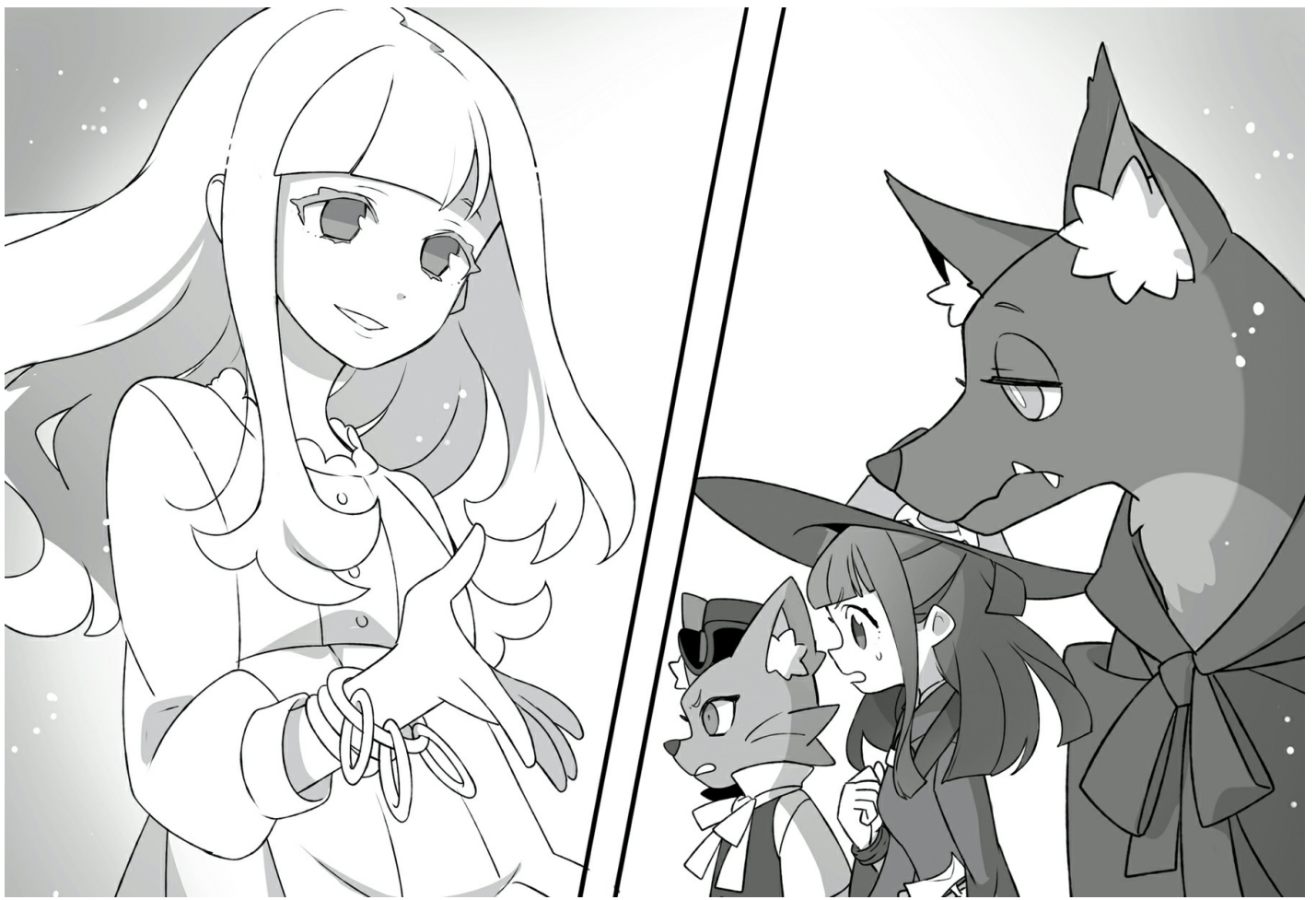
“I...” He faltered, looking troubled and shooting a glance at Feoras out of the corner of his eye for a fleeting moment. He looked down again right away. “... Feoras can do what he wants,” he choked out.

Her face clouded over again.

“Then you have no desires of your own?”

“Well, I...” Alan glanced again at Feoras. “I don’t really care about being the fairy king, and it’s not as if I want to fight the Cait Sith. It’s just, Feoras is really stubborn.” He grimaced. “It’s all just a pain. If he wants to settle this, then I’ll do that.”

“...You’re always like that,” Feoras snapped. “I’m amazed you can call yourself a king when you’re that indecisive. Oh, how I pity the Cu Sith.”



“It’s because you don’t listen! It makes me feel bad for *your* tribe. Why can’t you be mature?!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you! ...I was right. I can’t leave the hill to a coward like you. I’m going to become the fairy king! If you think it’s too much work, then shut up and obey me.”

“...I told you—that’d be its own kind of annoying.”

“In that case, we’ll settle this with force.” Feoras’s eyes flashed with anger. “We should’ve done that in the first place. Who cares about the trial?! If we fight with our fists, it’ll be clear which of us is stronger. No one will be able to complain about the outcome.”

“Enough. I understand your wishes.”

Her voice was icy and expressionless, causing Feoras and Alan to actually shut up for once.

“I’ll grant them all for you. Acquire vast power and fight each other to your hearts’ content.”

“...What?”

“What do you mean?”

Shing, ting, ting-a-ling-a-ling.

Her silver bracelets jingled as she extended her right index finger and swept her hand up, pointing toward the sky.

“Pity. With those wishes, you won’t be able to make the stars fall from the sky. Let us end this trial for now.”

She swung her finger at the two of them, and they were enveloped by motes of light like sparks from a fire.

I didn’t have time to stop her.

I didn’t even have time to speak up.

All I could do was watch what was happening in front of me in disbelief.

Expanding and growing.

Stretching and lengthening.

Their bodies swelled out to make them bigger and taller.

Basically, they were growing enormous. As they got bigger and bigger, the light around them grew until the force sucked me in.

When I finally opened my eyes again with a gasp, I saw I was standing on top of the hill.

Feoras and Alan immediately filled my field of vision. They’d gotten so big, they could have bumped their heads on the moon as they grappled with each other, their fur bristling.

At their feet, everyone was running around in confusion, screaming shrilly.

...Hold up. *Everyone?*

“Did we...make it back?”

“Sure looks like it,” replied Lotte, and Sucy nodded in agreement.

They were right. Although there was no telling when we’d gotten there, we were standing in front of Stone Doras aboveground.

“Girls, get back! Calm down!” Professor Finnelan shouted with a stern face. As

she issued directions, Alan took a thundering step right beside her.

“I’ll take care of it!” shouted Diana, and a light shot out of her extended wand, protecting the students from getting crushed.

“Thank you, Diana!”

“Never mind that—just evacuate. Hurry!”

Following the professors’ instructions, they flew into the entrance of the leyline, one after another. I watched them leave with my hands still clenched around the Shiny Rod.

“Girls, why are you just standing there? Let’s go, quickly!”

Professor Ursula grabbed my shoulder, which brought me back to my senses. But I ignored her as I clung to Amanda’s arm.

“...Amanda, let me ride with you!”

“You got it. **Tia Freyre!**”

Straddling her broom, I put my arms around her waist.

“Huh? Um? What?”

Leaving the flustered professor below us, we shot up into the night sky.

“Feoras! Alan!” We got right up close to their ears and shouted. But their burning, bright-red eyes couldn’t even see us. “Feoras! Hey, Alan!”

Instead of a response, Feoras’s paw flew at us, sharp claws extended. His paw pads knocked us away before he aimed his fist at Alan’s left eye.

“Awooooooooooooooooooooo!”

As his claws pulled through Alan’s cheek and left diagonal gashes in their wake, Alan let out a long howl.

“Alan!”

His heavy-looking eyelids snapped wide-open. In fact, there wasn’t a single trace of his lazy attitude anywhere, and with another snarl, he bared his fangs and bit down on Feoras’s shoulder.

“Mroooooooooowr!”

Why did things have to turn out like this?! These weren't the two I knew!

As my eyes blurred with tears, I saw Diana racing smartly toward the two of them on her broom. She started chanting some sort of spell, pointing her wand at the pair. Before I could open my mouth to shout, Amanda flew in front of her, shielding the combatants.

"Diana, wait!" I yelled, and she froze for a moment. "Please don't hurt those two."

"What is the meaning of this?" She scowled fiercely. "What are those monsters?!"



“They’re not monsters! They’re Feoras and Alan. And neither of them is bad. There’s just been a little mistake, and... Agh!”

Feoras lashed his long tail at us, appearing irritated by the way we were darting around him. Because he’d moved so suddenly, Amanda didn’t manage to dodge him, and he hit her on the shoulder and knocked us both off the broom.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!”

We almost plunged to the earth, but Diana caught us just in the nick of time. Right before we would’ve been dashed to the ground, she circled around beneath us, and we fell onto her broom.

“Gweh!” The thin broom hit me right in the stomach so hard, I thought it would knock my guts out.

“Would you kindly explain what on earth is going on here?” Diana asked me sternly after she set me down on the ground.

Even though Professor Ursula looked nervous, there was a sharp light in her eyes as well.

Ooh, yikes. She’s mad for sure.

“Well, they’re both Sifla’s friends, you see, and she asked us to...,” I started to explain.

As they listened, their expressions got more grief-stricken and stiff, and both heaved deep, deep sighs.

“Really, Akko, nothing good ever comes out when you’re involved.”

There it was: their go-to line.

They both put a hand on their foreheads and shook their heads. I could almost hear them thinking: *Good grief. Th-this isn’t all my fault. It’s Feoras’s and Alan’s fault for being stubborn!*

But I didn’t want to waste time arguing now.

“Anyway, we have to stop them. I know they really don’t want to fight each other like that!”

“Miss Kagari, how did the end of that song go?”

“Huh? Um...”

I started to hum.

A wish shall become your strength on a blessed night of falling stars.

Unless our hearts soften and melt into one, the world will never settle into harmony.

That was something the first Sifla had said.

Did this happen because they were both hardheaded? Was it because they just wouldn't get along? Was this punishment?

My eyes filled with tears. And when I looked up, I saw that the wrinkles between Professor Ursula's eyes were deeper than I'd ever seen them.

“...These two got it wrong.”

“Huh?”

“Miss Kagari, you told them the first Sifla's wish was for the three of them to become one. When she asked what their wishes were, I think she may have been testing them to see whether her own wish had gotten through to them.”

“But...they both refused it, so...”

Was that why they'd gotten so big? Was it because they'd said they wanted vast power?

I was this close to bursting into tears when the professor raised her head abruptly.

“Miss Kagari. Do you remember the characteristics of the twelfth tree, the broom tree?”

Huh? Seriously? She's testing me on homework at a time like this?!

But I combed through the depths of my mind, desperately trying to remember.

“I think it was, um, that it links the human world with other worlds and brings with it a mystical peacefulness...or something like that.”

“That’s right. Well done.” Even in a situation like this, Professor Ursula smiled softly. “If used correctly, leaves from a broom tree can act as a medicine and as a healing power. But if misused, it’s just like a drug, agitating the soul and even making you hallucinate.”

Whud. Feoras’s foot came crashing down just behind Professor Ursula.

“...There’s no need to ask if it’s acting as a medicine or a drug right now,” she said.

“Oh no! Then what should we do?”

“Unfortunately, all we can do is restrain the two of them somehow...”

“No, don’t!”

We heard a scream rip through the air. When we turned around, Sifla was standing there.

Her face was crumpled and tearstained, and both her fists were clenched. She was shaking. “You can’t do that. Please don’t hurt them!”

Professor Ursula turned her intent gaze onto Sifla as the young girl spoke through her sobs.



“Oh, so you’re... To think we’d meet like this.” She hugged Sifla by her shoulders as if to give her courage and strength.

Sifla clung to the professor. “It was my fault. It’s all because I just waited too long, because I didn’t do anything.” Her tears spilled over endlessly as she spoke. “That dream Akko saw about the first witch, I’d seen it for ages. I knew it was my job to make the two of them get along. But I didn’t know what to do, and I kept waiting, thinking they were sure to understand someday!” Sifla sobbed. “I knew it wouldn’t work. I knew I had to do something, but still I...”

I looked at Amanda, but she frowned back at me, shaking her head. “My shoulder took a hit back there. I won’t be able to keep my balance. Riding double like that’d be too risky.”

“No...”

Just then, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand, Sifla straddled her own broom. “Get on, Akko.”

“Sifla... You can ride?!”

“Uh-huh. I’m not much of one, but I am still a witch.”

“But riding double is...”

“...I suppose I’d better help.” Lotte mounted her broom with a wry smile. “You fly by yourself, Sifla, and I’ll take Akko with me.”

Nodding in agreement, we all took off together.

“Ah, wait, Miss Kagari! Girls...!”

Shaking off Professor Ursula’s attempt to stop us, we soared up into the sky.

During the few moments our attention had been elsewhere, Feoras’s and Alan’s faces had gotten all scratched up.

“Feoras! Alan! Please go back to your old selves!” Sifla was half crying, half chanting a spell at the two of them. But they didn’t so much as twitch.

Honestly! After those two swore up and down that they didn’t want to make Sifla sad! Where was the sense in making her cry this hard?!

“Mroooooooooowr!!”

“Awooooooooooooo!!”

As the pair fought each other, howling, their eyes blazed and burned. I saw through them, though: Those eyes were moist. Both of them were crying large translucent tears.

One of those giant drops came down right onto our heads.

Kabloosh!

We were soaking, sopping wet. It was as if someone had dumped a bucket of

water on us.

And bleh, it was salty. I felt sticky and gross all over. Arrrgh, once those two were themselves again, I was gonna give them such an earful!

We'd stopped our brooms with a start, and this time, Alan's tail nearly slammed into us. But Diana fired off another light at him to keep it from happening.

When Sifla heard Alan give a little shriek in response, she looked as if she might faint off her broom. I glared at Diana, who was calmly holding her wand at the ready.

"I thought I told you not to attack them...!"

"It won't do any physical damage. It'll just inflict a little bit of pain. Unlike you, I do have that much control."

"...Rgh."

"But we won't get anywhere this way. What do you intend to do? I understand you don't want to hurt them. But if we're going to stop them, there may be no other alternative, you know." As Diana spoke, there was no hesitation in her voice.

She was right. I knew that.

And I knew she wasn't the type to recklessly hurt people at random. She obviously didn't really want to do anything like this in the first place. I got where she was coming from: If things went on like this, those two were gonna keep hurting each other, and she wanted to stop them before they got seriously injured.

I couldn't do anything, so I wasn't qualified to argue. But... But!

It was at that moment.

"...Elder," Sifla murmured slowly. "Say, Akko? Sucy's particularly good at experiments, isn't she?"

"Huh? Oh yes. She is, but..."



“In that case, do you think she could boil down some elder and make some holy water super-fast?”

“I think she probably could, but...”

Why elder? That was the thirteenth sacred tree, wasn't it?

Her comment had come out of the blue, so I was still trying to process it as Lotte suddenly cried out, “I see! Akko, don't you remember? Sifla mentioned it before we went to the Country of the Fairies.”

“Huh? Um...”

Come to think of it, it was when Sucy had said she wanted elder leaves.

Sifla had said it presided over death and rebirth, and it was perfect for breaking curses.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Eep! Akko, you're being loud!”

“S-sorry.”

The broom rocked back and forth, and I clung to Lotte's waist. We had to get back to Sucy, fast.

As we tried to descend, Alan's thick, fluffy tail whooshed toward us. At the very last second, we somehow managed to avoid it, but that took us right into the path of Feoras's long, slim tail, curled around like a whip.

G-geez, that was dangerous!

But the impact made me remember something: the reason we'd been trying to revive the sacred trees in the first place.

“Sucy!” I shouted down toward the ground. “Gather leaves from the sacred trees! Boil them all down together and make the panacea!”

“...Ah yes, I see.” Without looking particularly surprised, Sucy nodded to herself a few times. “Okay. Hang on a minute,” she responded in an easygoing voice.

“...I really like that side of Sucy,” I said.

Lotte nodded. "It is nice, isn't it?"

Then, even though this really wasn't the time to do so, we looked at each other and laughed.

"Loperial Phasmor!!"

A brisk voice echoed around us, and the little trees on the hill began to glow abruptly. Their trunks swelled, and their branches wriggled, growing at a terrific pace.

"Wh-what?!"

The branches shot up to twine solidly around Feoras's and Alan's legs. The startled pair froze as the branches continued to crawl up them, winding around their arms.

"Diana, what *was* that?!"

"It's a secret spell, handed down within the House of Cavendish. I simply provided the trees with nourishment, making them grow longer branches to trap those two."

"...That's amazing!"

"It's nothing special. In any case, it'll only buy us time. Once they tear their way out, it's over." Diana sounded as undaunted as ever. Then she shot me a sidelong glance, testing me. "And? You do have some sort of plan, don't you?"

I nodded vigorously.

What's going on?

I'd done magic with the Shiny Rod only once, and yet...for some reason, I felt as if I'd be able to use it right now.

The time was exactly midnight. Maybe that was why I felt this way: At this hour, the magic in moonlight was at its peak.

I raised the Shiny Rod firmly above my head as I continued to think. The first Sifla had gotten angry and transformed those two into their massive forms, but...she must still want them to go back to normal and grant her wish properly. *I think.*

I felt as if she had shown me these dreams, too, so that I could convey these wishes to them.

What do you wish for?

My wish was obvious. It'd been so ever since that day when I was six.

I wanted to become a fantastic witch like Chariot, to excite and thrill people all over the world. I wanted to let everyone know that if they believed in themselves, everybody could perform magic.

And if the first Sifla entrusted me with her desires...then there must be something I could do, too.

After all, a believing heart was my magic!

At warp speed, I handed Sifla the cure-all that Sucy had made. "Drink this."

"Is it...?"

"The source of the fairy king's power, apparently. We couldn't get all the trees to revive, but we got most of them. I think it'll probably work—at least a little."

"It has elder in it as well, so I'm sure it'll break the curse on those two and return them to normal." Lotte smiled, trying to cheer her up.

"...Thank you." Sifla's eyes grew damp, and pulling herself together, she took several gulps from the flask. Then she looked straight at me. "Hey, Akko. Will you drink this, too?"

"Huh? Me? Why?"

"Well, you had that dream about the first Sifla, too, didn't you?"

"I did, but I've got nothing to do with the fairy king."

"No, you do. After all, your words inspired me to try my very best."

"Sifla..."

"So drink. And then, if you wouldn't mind...come with me. I'm sorry to keep dragging you into this mess, but I want to have you close to me, Akko." Sifla smiled shyly at me.

I saw an aura around her—fragile yet somehow majestic. She made a splendid guardian of the hill.

I nodded and took a single swig from the flask.

“Let’s go.” With that, Sifla mounted her broom.

I got onto the back of Lotte’s, then glanced at Sucy out of the corner of my eye.

“...Aren’t you coming?”

Sucy gave a resigned shrug. “I suppose I should stay close to see how effective my potion is.”

“That’s my Sucy. That’s the spirit!”

All four of us soared up into the sky.

Bound tightly by the branches, the two animals continued to struggle, flailing their arms and legs. Little by little, the vines were snapping, and Sifla approached the pair cautiously as we anxiously watched her from behind. She tried to pour the concoction into their open mouths.

At that moment, I noticed that the Shiny Rod in my arms had begun to sparkle and gleam. Just like the revived sacred trees.

It was as if it was absorbing the moonlight, and I gingerly held it up, raising it into the sky.

For some reason, Feoras and Alan’s song echoed in my ears.

A wish shall become your strength on a blessed night of falling stars.

I felt like I finally understood.

I knew what my role was.

A believing heart was my magic.

In order to turn a wish into power...

...I’d show my magic to those three, to my new friends: Feoras, Alan, and Sifla.

“Awoooooooooooooooooo!”

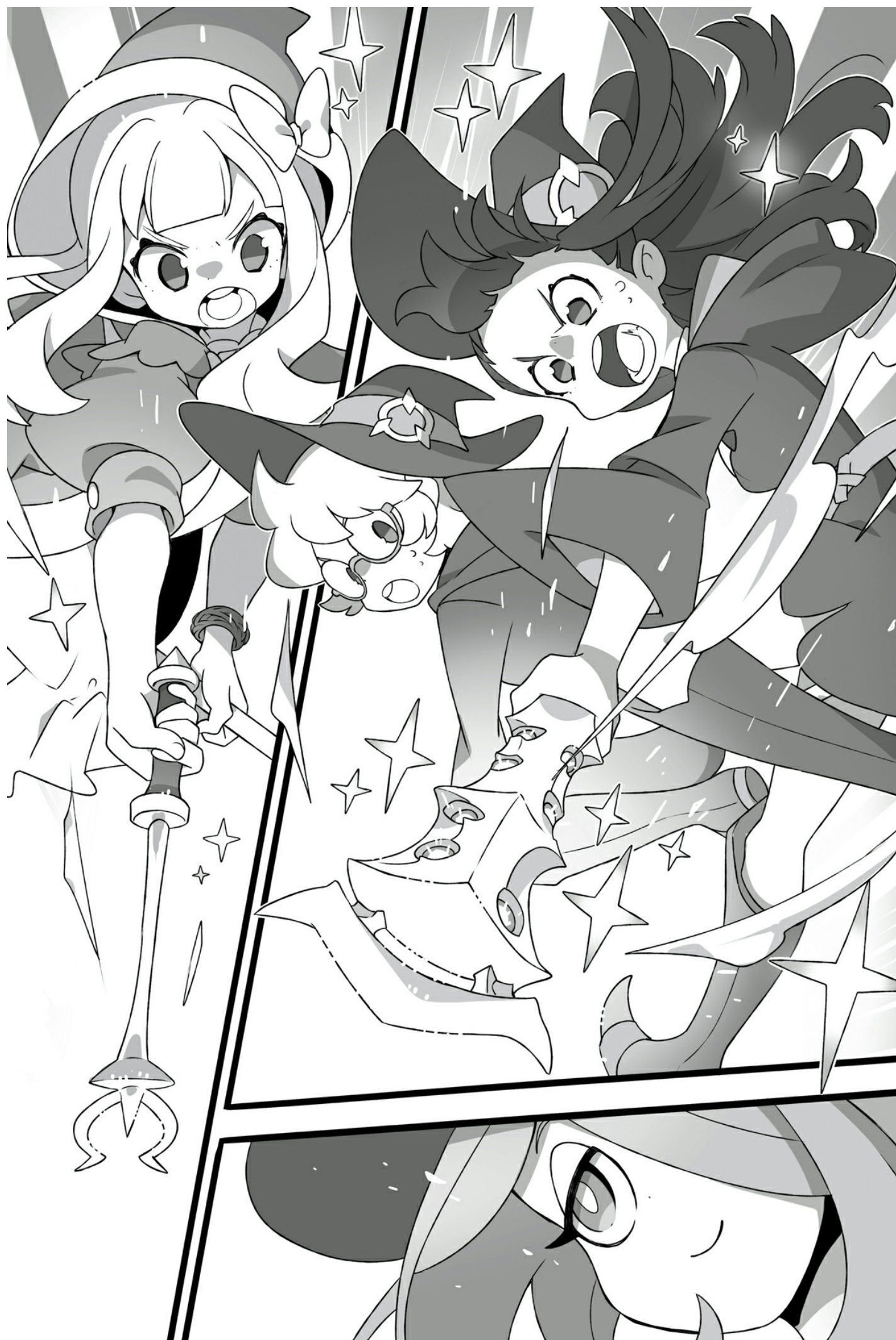
“Mroooooooooooooowr!”

Once Sifla got them to drink the potion, the pair began yowling again. Their combined vocal force nearly sent Sifla flying, but she pointed her wand at the two of them.

The amulets on our wrists were shining silver.

Under moonlight, our magic grew stronger and stronger. I could feel it welling up from the pit of my stomach, and at this point, I felt like I could do anything.

“Arnei Tolskal!!”



Without realizing it, at the exact same time I had brought the Shiny Rod down under the moonlight, Sifla had pointed her wand at Feoras and Alan.

Right then, the stars in the night sky seemed to puff up, swelling larger and larger, and I gulped.

They continued to expand, bubble, and sparkle. It was hard to think these stars were once just scattered dots in the sky. They were now so bright, everything else was dark.

And then, when it didn't seem as though they could possibly get any bigger...

Baaaaang!

With an earsplitting noise, all the stars burst into countless fragments falling toward us. They scattered silver powder as they fell, whizzing through the night sky at an unbelievable speed.

Still clutching the Shiny Rod, I stretched out my arms.

"L-look!" someone shouted as I simultaneously gasped.

The old man and the lady had disappeared earlier, but there they were, up in the sky again.

They beckoned the first Sifla to climb up through the falling stars, and she turned to look back at us, smiling.

Next to her were two familiar figures: a cat and a dog. They were her friends, the ones I'd seen in the dream. Nestling close to one another, the three figures faded away against the moon.

I was sure they were bound for a paradise of love, a place where everyone got along, where all their wishes would come true.

"That's the fairy king..." I murmured. Lotte nodded emphatically, looking enraptured next to me.

...Incredible.

Magic was so awesome.

As the silver dust from the falling stars showered over them, Feoras and Alan shrank back to their normal size, slowly and quietly.

The silver dust sifted down onto Sifla, Feoras, and Alan and shone like crowns on their heads.

The Cait Sith and Cu Sith had finally returned to their four-legged forms, their eyes gentle and filled with tears.

✧✧ Epilogue

On a Blessed Night of Falling Stars

“I’m sorry.” Feoras bowed his head meekly.

He wasn’t acting like the king of the Cait Sith anymore. He was down on all fours, like a normal cat.

“I seem to have been too stubborn... It must’ve angered the first Sifla. It must’ve been why she turned us into those things. She meant to say, ‘If you want it that badly, then fight each other forever.’”

Alan hung his head in agreement, looking like an ordinary dog, too. “I should’ve faced you squarely, Feoras. I should’ve asked us to stop, instead of thinking it was too much work.”

“No, you’re both wrong. It was my fault for not being able to be a proper witch.” Her eyes brimming with tears, Sifla hugged the dejected-looking pair tightly. “That’s why I couldn’t hear your voices. I wasn’t really trying to listen. I’m a failure of a guardian...”

Even as she said this, she held her eyes wide-open, determined not to let the tears fall.

While the rest of us were touched by her courage...

“If you put it that way, I’d say you’re all too inexperienced to be trusted with this hill,” Diana cut in frostily. “Attempting to rule it by yourself... You must esteem yourselves too highly.”

“Hey, Diana, you don’t have to be nasty about it—”

“I’m saying for that very reason, the three of you must join hands. You’ll have the necessary power to guard the hill when you do so. In any case, you saved those two, Sifla. You showed great courage in the face of danger.”

“...You should’ve started with that.”

“You’re the one who interrupted, Akko. You should listen until others are finished speaking.”

“Yes, fine, whatever!”

Diana snobbishly looked away, and I pouted.

Come on. Give me a break. I worked hard, too, you know.

“It’s just as Diana says... From now on, I’m sure the three of us will combine our strengths and guard the hill together,” said Sifla.

I was still feeling sulky, but Sifla gently held my hand. “Thank you, Akko. Because of you, we’ll be able to become the new fairy king.”

“Huh? R-r-really?”

“Yes, really. If it hadn’t been for you, we would’ve gone our separate ways.”

I blushed.

Diana folded her arms and nodded reluctantly. “Well, one could say that, yes. This was rather well done for you, Akko.”

“D-Diana...!”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not complimenting you. Had it been me, I would’ve settled this before things got out of hand!” Her eyebrows came down in a scowl, but her expression was softer than usual.

Eh-heh. Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh. My cheeks relaxed into a goofy grin.

Sifla nodded firmly several times. “I managed that last spell because you were there, Akko. I don’t know who this Chariot is, but I’m sure you’ll become an amazing witch.”

“O-oh, I know! You’re so right! After all, I’ve got this Shiny Rod. No one but me could be the next Chariot, huh?!”

“...You get carried away much too easily, Akko,” Sucy grumbled at me.

Whoops, I must’ve gotten a little too high-and-mighty over this.

But hey, there’s nothing wrong with getting carried away once in a while! And

besides, I almost never get complimented this much!

Feoras and Alan quietly came up to me and rubbed their muzzles against my legs, as if asking for my attention.

“Akko, I’m truly grateful. This was all thanks to you. At first, I did think you were an absurd young lady, but...”

“Oh, come on! But then I turned out to be a splendid, magnificent young lady, didn’t I?!”

“Yes, you did... Sort of.” Feoras smirked.

Beside him, Alan gave a soft bark. “I’ll take note of that energy of yours and work to cure a bit of my laziness.”

“Huh? Reeally? Can you?”

“I’ll try. Maybe.”

“Boy, do I not trust that.” Amanda laughed. “For starters, quit making people pull you around on that sled. Have some dignity.”

“Hmm, that’s rather... Oh yes. Constanze.”

“.....?”

He’d suddenly directed the conversation at her, and she cocked her head, puzzled.

“Would you make me something? Like some sort of vehicle that will carry me around while preserving my dignity? You’re good at that kind of thing, aren’t you? That bazooka of yours was very cool.”

“.....!”

Oh, wow. That startled me. Constanze’s eyes sparkled so brightly.

And her face actually looked cheerful for once?!

Nodding several times, she took a notebook from her pocket and immediately began to sketch out a blueprint. Alan peered at it, looking happy, too. He was putting in all sorts of requests: “I’d like to attach a water bowl here. I want a pillow of some sort...”

You really haven't learned your lesson, have you...?

"Never mind that. Would everyone like some tea? We still have the herbal blend that Sifla has been keeping for us."

Sifla's face was the first to light up in response to Lotte's suggestion.

"Yes! I want to talk more about *Night Fall* with you, Lotte!"

"Of course! Professor Ursula, we don't have to go back yet...do we?" she asked timidly.

The professor shook her head. "Of course not."

"Hooray!"

As everyone jumped up, Diana frowned slightly. "Honestly. I wish you wouldn't be so childish."

"Then I guess you don't want any tea or snacks, huh, Diana? Wanna go ahead and leave?"

I needled her spitefully, and her eyebrows came down in anger.

"I said nothing of the sort!"

"Man. Just be honest for once, wouldja?"

"Now, now. There's enough tea for Diana, too."

"Have some snaaacks."

As we picnicked, we gazed at Stone Doras and the moon. For something so spontaneous, our little party was quite magnificent: We had some tea, and Jasminka passed around one snack after another as she stuffed her face with marshmallows.

Now *this* really felt like a school trip!

As I was on my way to get some more tea from Lotte, Professor Ursula stopped me.

"You worked very hard back there, Miss Kagari. There may have been a few problems, but for a new witch, you certainly did an excellent job."

"A compliment from a teacher? That never happens! Yaaay!"

“Are you beginning to understand the importance of studying magical history?”

“Eh-heh-heh. Well, a little.”

I did think I could probably stand to listen to the lectures a bit more seriously from now on. It was just, you know... Professor Fannelan’s voice made me so sleepy.

“‘A believing heart is my magic.’ You made superb use of that, Miss Kagari.”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. You think so, too?! Am I just bursting with talent or what?!”

Professor Ursula didn’t answer. Instead, she gave a dry smile and looked up at the full moon.

“Besides, the Shiny Rod responded to your heart again. Someone like you... you just might be able to do what I couldn’t...”

“Huh?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. In any case, excellent work. All right, I believe I’ll get some tea as well.”

For a moment, I thought the professor’s profile had kind of looked like somebody else’s under the moonlight. I rubbed at my eyes. She’d seemed like someone I’d met before.

Just as I was about to call out to her...the professor tripped over absolutely nothing and took a mighty tumble.

“Ouch! Oh, why does this always happen?”

Somehow, she hadn’t gotten hurt when Feoras and Alan were fighting, but I swear...this teacher.

...Yep. She’s the same as always. Professor Ursula is just Professor Ursula. I must’ve been seeing things. Yeah, it was probably only my imagination!

“Say, Feoras. Alan. Want to try using our power to make more shooting stars?” suggested Sifla as she drank tea with Lotte and looked up at the night sky.



“I wouldn’t mind that, but...how?” asked Feoras.

“We were out of control the whole time, you know. We still don’t know how it’s done.”

“There’s a song Grandmother taught me. I’m pretty sure you two know it, too. Don’t you?”

“...Is it—?”

“Is it the one we both remembered parts of?”

Sifla smiled and nodded. “Grandmother said when my heart became one with the fairies, we’d be able to make the stars fall if we sang that song under the

light of the full moon. She said I mustn't teach the cat more than the first half and the dog more than the last half."

"...I see." Feoras's eyes scrunched up with a smile.

"Three people as one, hmm? In other words, it never would've worked if we didn't cooperate," Alan said, poking Sifla with his nose.

She set down her cup and hugged Feoras and Alan, one on either side, with her slim arms.

It was just like that dream. Like the three I'd seen nestled together.

I bet this was what the first Sifla wanted to see.

"Let's all sing, okay?"

Sifla began the song in a clear voice.

The forest lady drinks red fruit, her younger sister's offering.

Beneath a tree dripping water, twittering songbirds summon the coming of spring.

Bathed in the moonlight, a witch will arrive to bridge the fairies' past.

The senior overlooks the hill; white flowers show the way to those who are lost.

At the end of the path, one finds the way to a paradise of love.

Turn a wish into strength, and blessings will dance on a night of falling stars.

Every time the three of them sang in unison, stars streaked across the night sky. The sight of it all made me catch my breath.

At long last, they had become the fairy king.

You know, I had a feeling there probably hadn't been any sort of contract between the fairy king and the first Sifla. She might've just convinced the Cait Sith and Cu Sith to get along with each other and decided the three of them would always protect the hill together as friends.

But somewhere along the way, everyone had gone back to fighting. And the fairy king had disappeared.

Tonight, they'd come back as one, alongside the sacred trees.

As we leaned against each other, wordlessly gazing up at the night sky, Lotte poked my arm. "Say, Akko? I was wondering."



“Hmm? What?”

“Why did you want those three to get along so badly?” she asked, looking sincerely mystified. “I mean, I wanted to help Sifla, too, but you seemed oddly determined.”

“I was curious about that myself. You may be an impulsive pushover, Akko, but you put a little *too* much effort into that.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment, Sucy?

Calling her on it would’ve made the conversation drag on longer, so I let it slide. But, hmm. *What should I do?* I was a little embarrassed to talk about this.

They were both looking straight at me, though, and I couldn’t fight it anymore. I scratched at my cheek awkwardly.

“Well, um, I’d always dreamed of going to Luna Nova, and I was looking forward to it, but I was also really lonely when I came all the way from Japan by myself. I was nervous, too.”

“You’re kidding. You did everything your way right from the start, Akko.”

“Yeah, and you were shockingly pushy to boot.”

“I was! ...But the thing is—I managed to get by without being all alone because you two were there. So yeah.” I couldn’t bear to look them in their eyes, so I glanced away. “How should I put this? It feels like if the three of us are together, we can do anything. Even the stuff I can’t do on my own. I think that’s really incredible.”

“...Yeah.” Lotte nodded, visibly bashful.

“I mean, sure, you’re a too-serious Goody Two-shoes, Lotte, and Sucy’s constantly doing bizarro experiments, and sometimes I do wonder what’s wrong with you people, but...”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from, Akko,” Sucy sullenly retorted, but her ears had gone unusually red.

“So I thought it would be good if Sifla and the other two could be like that, too! The end!”

Lotte and Sucy glanced at each other and smiled.

“Akko. The stars are pretty, aren’t they?”

“...Yeah.”

“I suppose I’ll do you a favor and count my sacred-tree potion as one of my experiments. But brace yourself for the last one.”

“Really?! You’re telling me this now?!”

“Yeah. I mean, this whole adventure has me feeling generous, so I’ve reduced it to one more time for you.”

“What’s with you, Sucy?! Unbelievable!”

“Th-there, there. Sucy’s just hiding her embarrassment. Right? Aren’t you?”

“That’s a lie! She’s absolutely just having fun with this!!”

“Hey, Akko, pipe down, wouldja? Shut up for a little. We can’t hear the song.”

“Honestly. You really don’t know how to relax.”

“Why do people always talk to me like that—?!”

It wasn’t fair at all! I exploded in anger, but everyone just shrugged it off, as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

Just you wait.

I was absolutely going to become a fantastic witch like Chariot—as soon as possible!

As I declared my intent at the top of my lungs, a host of falling stars raced across the sky over my head.



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