

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

10

JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE



You are not alone.

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A young woman
who has achieved
the highest rank
among mages—that
of “witch.”

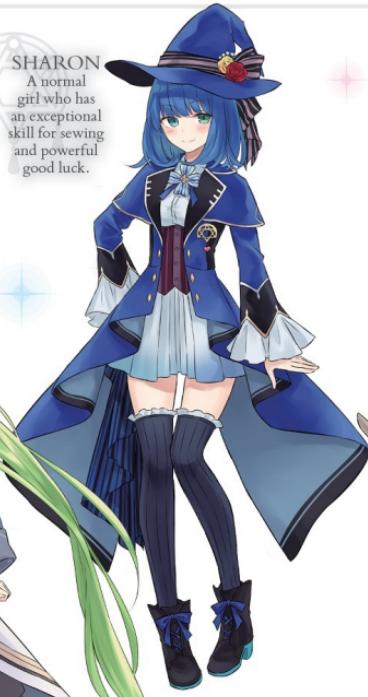
She is nearing the
end of her journey
with her teacher.



THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA CHARACTERS



CLEANOIRE
A mage from a castle that
floats over
“Orotorinne
Under the Sky”



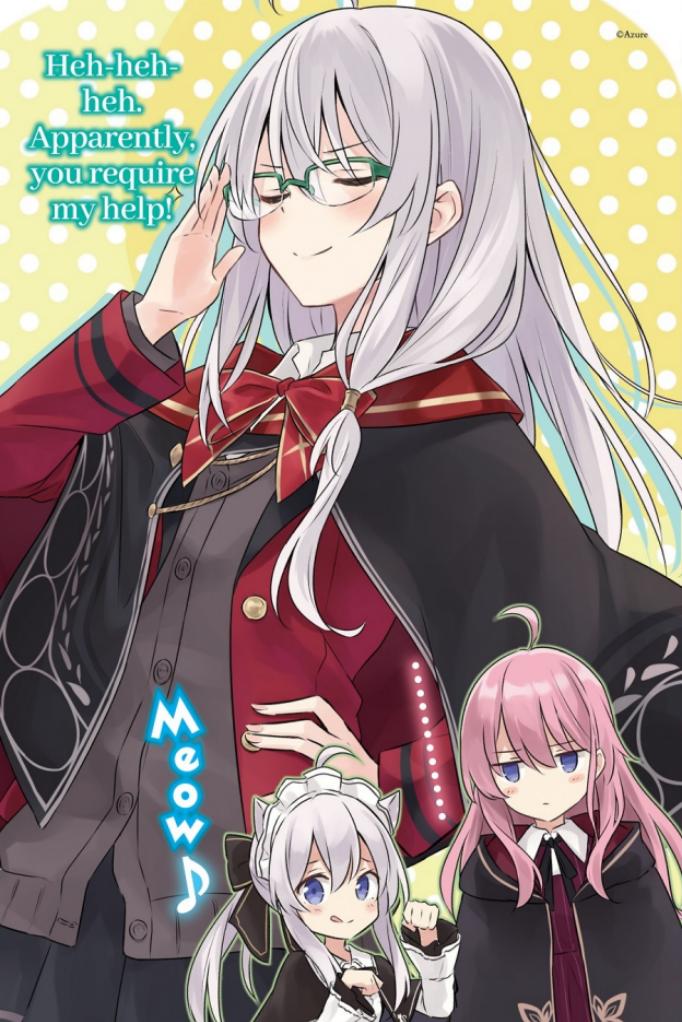
SHARON
A normal
girl who has
an exceptional
skill for sewing
and powerful
good luck.



FRAN'S
TEACHER
The enigmatic
witch who
took Fran as
an apprentice
during her
student days.

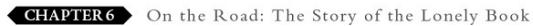


LACEY
A woman
who appeared
in a seaside
town. She is
waiting for a
certain man.



WANDERING WITCH 10 The Journey of Elaina

CONTENTS





WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

10


YEN
NEW YORK

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1: On the Road: A Story in a Book](#)

[Chapter 2: The Tale of a Mermaid Who Was in Love with Love](#)

[Chapter 3: The Land of Letters Never Forgets](#)

[Chapter 4: Witch Trial](#)

[Chapter 5: Mages in the Sky](#)

[Chapter 6: On the Road: The Story of the Lonely Book](#)

[Chapter 7: On the Road: Inside the Lighthouse](#)

[Chapter 8: On the Road: Fire Rising in a Dark Sky](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



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CHAPTER 1

On the Road: A Story in a Book

So we meet again.

That's right, it's me.

Elaina.

Do you know where this is? Yes, that's right, I mean my current location. Where do you think I am right now?

I'm almost certain you won't be able to guess right away, so I'll give you a hint.

From your perspective, this place looks packed with writing as far as the eye can see, and I'm sure it appears to be completely monochromatic. It's also totally flat! As flat as a piece of paper, one might say. And though my world may appear a bit two-dimensional, I would say it suits me just fine.

That's the kind of world I'm in.

Do you know where I am?

That's right. I'm inside a book!

My, how fascinating! Right now, I am speaking to you from this book's very pages!

.....

And so we meet again. Good morning to you, dear reader. Good afternoon. Good evening.

Can you see me waving? No, of course you can't. I'm only text, after all.

I wonder if you're even able to perceive the fact that I am here in this book, living and breathing on its pages?

All I can think about is what might happen to me if no one ever read about me. I'm a little frightened by the prospect, to be honest. So if you can, please watch out for me and never close this book, okay?

By the way, the world inside this book is a profoundly mysterious one. Sometimes, impossible things happen here, things that could never happen in the real world, and nobody bats an eye. Did you know that?

“Oh-hoh-hoh, my glasses are spectacular...”

I just said that. I put on a pair of glasses. By the way, I am dressed in the uniform for Latorita State University.

“Am I maybe...too cute in my cat maid costume?”

I look adorable. I'm enchanted by my own cute reflection in the windowpane. At some point, I changed into my maid café outfit.

“.....”

I was silent just then. Simply silent.

There are two other Elainas who look just like me here in this space.

I know this all sounds very complicated, and I'm very sorry for that, but basically, this is the situation I'm facing right now.

Let me explain it one more time.

I'm inside this book, and there seem to be two more of me in here as well. That's my present situation.

“.....”

I can't help but sigh.

“What do you think about our situation?” I ask my broom, who is standing beside me, blankly staring with unfriendly eyes at the version of me who is dressed as a cat-eared maid.

She turns to look at me with a totally flat expression.

“I think it's hopeless.”

“You sure don't pull your punches.”

“It's hopeless because you're in control of all of us, Mistress Elaina.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I said exactly what I meant.”

I sigh again at our pointless exchange. I wonder if you can read our conversations as you gaze down at the surface of the paper.

And so it is time for me to venture through this book, accompanied by two more Elainas who look just like me, as well as my broom, who looks an awful lot like me but is not quite identical.

I'm not sure what awaits us on the pages ahead.

However...

I hope you will watch over us to the very end. That would make me very happy indeed.



CHAPTER 2

The Tale of a Mermaid Who Was in Love with Love

One day about three months ago, I was traveling from place to place on my own like I always do. The city I had visited the previous day happened to be by the sea, which piqued my interest somehow. I flew along the coast on my broom.

Everything was blue as far as the eye could see.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the sea stretched out interminably before me. Small waves slowly, regularly moistened the beach and then retreated, as if the ocean was breathing. In between the waves, tiny crabs carefully poked their faces up out of the sand.

I was feeling pleased with my peaceful journey.

But in the middle of that idyllic scene...

...I discovered a corpse laying directly in my path.

“.....”

No, it probably just looked like a corpse, but...the woman lying there in the sand did appear to be dead.

Her golden hair was gathered into a single ponytail on the back of her head, and her exposed skin, which there was quite a lot of, was almost translucent white. She was very beautiful.

It was a very odd spot to be lying down for a nap, so as soon as I noticed the woman, I got down off my broom, walked over, and squatted down beside her.

“...Are you alive?”

My triangular hat cast a shadow over her face as I looked down at her. She didn't stir, but in the shade, she finally opened her golden eyes, just slightly, and looked up at me.

Our eyes met. So...

“Oh, hello.”

I said a word of greeting.

In response, this was her answer:

“...I want to die.”

She said this and nothing more, then let out a sigh.

Don't you think that's a heavy confession to make to someone you just met?

“Did something happen?” I cocked my head.

The woman finally sat up and asked, “...Who are you?”

“A traveling witch.” I’m wearing a black robe and a pointy hat, and I’ve got a star-shaped brooch on my breast. Anyone could see that I’m a witch. “And who are you?”

“...Lacey.”

The woman answered me plainly, giving only her name.

“You look like you’re having some kind of trouble...” I tilted my head again. “If you like, I could listen to your problems.”

“.....! Are you offering to give me...advice...?”

She looked up at me, and her face instantly lit up. It was like the spark of life had returned to her eyes.

“...Um, sure.” I felt like it would be exceedingly cold of me to just take off and abandon the woman when the very first thing she’d said was that she wanted to die.

I didn’t really mind listening to her story.

And so I inquired, “What is troubling you?”

Whereupon the woman suddenly lowered her gaze and muttered a single word.

“...Love.”

“Hmm?”

What was that?

“...I am troubled by love,” she told me, sounding somewhat embarrassed and yet a little happy, too.

She was troubled by love, worrying herself sick to the point that she wanted to die.

I see, I see.

“Well, there isn’t really anything I can do about that. Good-bye now.”

I stood up and grabbed my broom.

“Huh?! No way, wait! Why would you run away the second you hear it’s a matter of the heart?!”

“Sorry, that sort of stuff is kind of outside my area of expertise, so...”

...I don’t think I can give you any advice.

“Please! Just give me a little of your time! Please, listen! All you have to do is listen! Hey!”

Lacey yanked on my robe from where she was still lying in the sand. What could I do?

She must have been clinging to me pretty hard, because I couldn’t seem to shake her off. Ultimately, I let out a sigh of resignation.

There was no way out of it.

“...I’ll listen, but that’s all.”

“Fantastic! I’m so glad you’ll listen to my story, Miss Witch...!”

I mean, you’re not going to let me go until I hear you out, so...

After that, she told me of her troubles bit by bit.

She said...

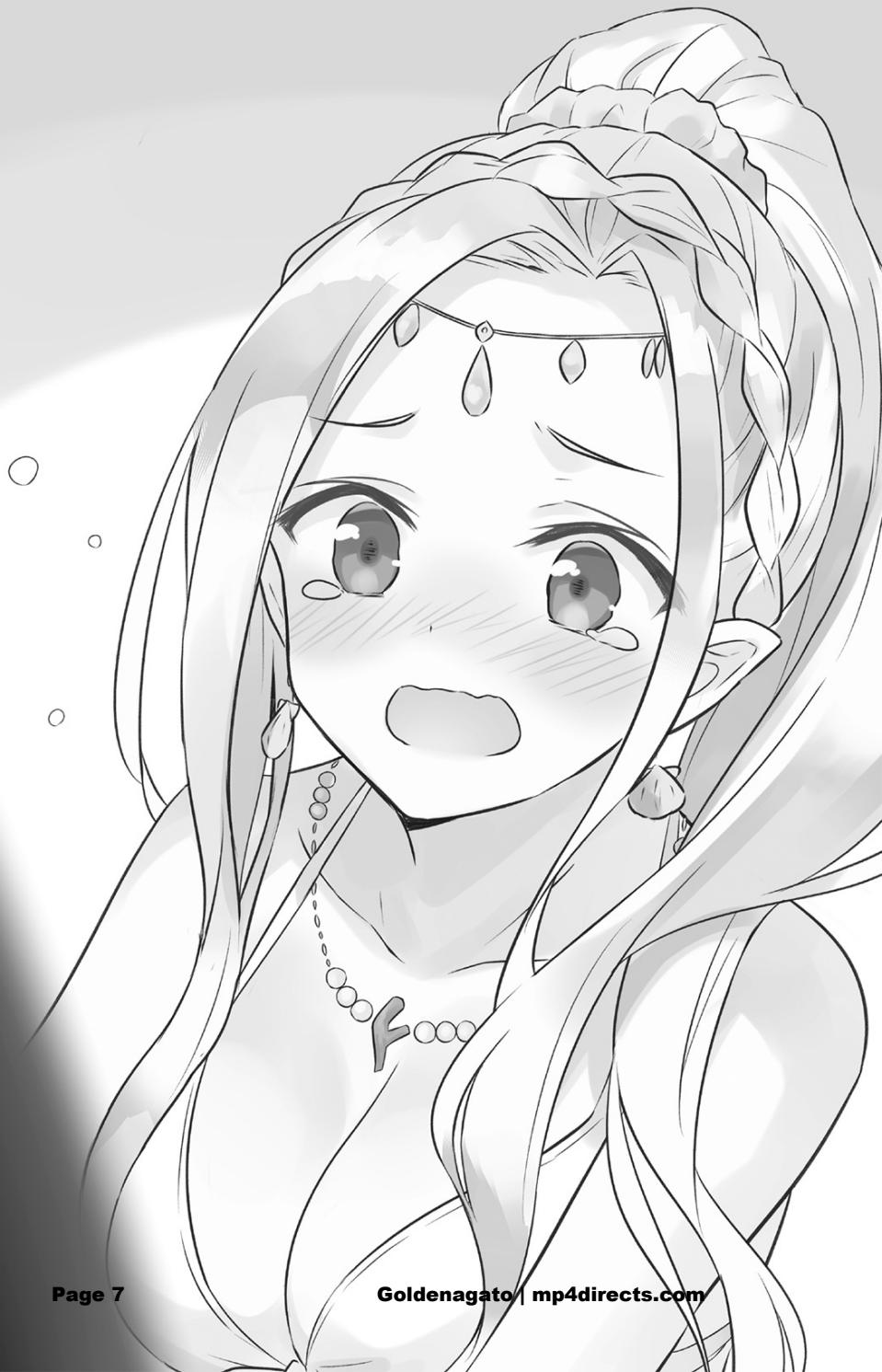
One day, she happened to meet a man.

He was in his mid-twenties. He had black hair and handsome features. He was a traveler, a kind man who spoke eloquently, a true gentleman. She immediately fell for him.

Lacey was in love, and it sounded like she was head over heels.

The man was a wanderer, and even though she had only met him once, he had become her everything.

With every passing day they were apart, her heart ached and yearned, until she wound up laying around like a corpse on the beach just outside her hometown.



"I can't take it anymore... Everything is awful... What on earth can I do to see him again...?"

In short, the absence of the man she loved had driven her into a state of despair.

I see, I see.

"Well, there's not really anything I can do about that. Good-bye now."

I picked up my broom.

"Wait! You're not going to run away after hearing that much of my story, are you? I won't let you go. Help me find romance! You're a witch, aren't you? Do something!" Lacey protested.

"No, um...it's not like witches are all-powerful, y'know..."

"Well then, at least find a way for me to see him again! I don't care how you do it, just please let me see him somehow!"

"I don't really see how..."

"And I want you to make it so that when I meet him again, we can immediately get married! I want you to make me irresistible so that he'll fawn all over me."

"What do you think a mage is, exactly?"

"An amazing person who can do pretty much anything."

"That's ridiculous..."

"Anyway, I'm begging you!"

"I'm still not sure what you want me to do, exactly..."

"Turn me into a normal woman!"

"I'm not really sure what you're asking..."

After that, she pleaded with me for a while, and eventually I gave in, let out a sigh, and decided to grant her request as best I could.

All of this took place about three months ago, before I reunited with Miss Fran in Bielawald.



In one of the countries Elaina and I visited on our journey, we heard rumors about a mermaid.

A mermaid.

They're those bizarre creatures that have upper bodies like human women but are covered in scales on the lower halves of their bodies just like fish, with tails and fins. They were a hot topic in the region.

In every place Elaina and I visited, the whole town was abuzz about the mermaid, and understandably so. Everyone was making a fuss over the rumors about a mermaid who had suddenly appeared about three months earlier.

“I’m going to marry that mermaid someday...”

We overheard such statements all through town as we walked around.

“So I went down to the ocean earlier, right? And listen, the mermaid was there, and she winked at me! She’s clearly into me, no doubt about it, man.”

There was one fellow who had apparently gotten the wrong idea when the mermaid had something in her eye. Or maybe he got something in his own eye and imagined it.

“I got her autograph!”

To make matters worse, there was a gentleman who was in possession of a framed scrap of paper with the word *mermaid* scrawled on it in twisting letters.

“I got a handshake! I’m never washing this hand again!”

There was even a man proudly showing off his sticky, unwashed palm.

But the popularity of the mermaid didn’t stop with the townspeople.

“Step right up, I’ve got mermaid meat right here! How about it? Only one copper piece!”

There were street stalls taking advantage of the hype to sell their ordinary grilled fish under a strange new name.

“Our inn has windows out onto the water, so on days with good weather, you can see the mermaid...probably.”

There were even inns that had decided they could sell more rooms by including the word *mermaid* in their advertisements.

In that way, talk of the mysterious creature was bubbling to the surface all throughout town. That said, I was one of those people getting excited.

“A mermaid, huh? ...Sounds interesting!”

If I do get the chance to meet her, I would at least like to talk to her.

I had said as much to Elaina as we walked through town.

But Elaina, on the other hand, hadn’t seemed particularly interested in the mermaid.

“...Sure does.” She’d nodded along to what I was saying with a distant look in her eyes.

That conversation took place just the day before, but I remembered clearly how she had made a very, very odd expression. It was a little strange for Elaina, the traveler, to not be interested in something so rare, and I was puzzled by her reaction.

At the moment, Elaina and I were each off on our own.

I had gone down to the seashore, where the mermaid was rumored to appear. It should be obvious what I was looking for.

The mermaid.

Actually, I had planned to go to the beach with Elaina, but she had said, “Oh, no thank you,” and stuck to it. Even though I’d tugged at her arm and pleaded with her adorably, in the end, she wouldn’t go with me. How sad...

Anyway, I was excited to see my first-ever mermaid, and I walked down to the shore.

“I think...I should be able to see her around here, right...?”

I wandered along the sand, holding a map in one hand, on which I had marked the spots where the mermaid was rumored to appear most often. The waves ebbed and flowed, and similar-looking scenery stretched out into the distance ahead.

Finally, just as the rumors had said, the mermaid appeared before my eyes.

A very, very beautiful mermaid appeared out of the water.

Her hair and eyes were golden. She had her hair gathered into a single ponytail on the back of her head. She was gazing up at the beach and didn’t seem to notice me.

Her top half certainly did look human.

But her lower half was covered in pink scales, and she had fins and a tail.

“I sure swam a lot today—”

Without a doubt, the girl coming out of the ocean was a mermaid.

“My, my...”

I never thought it would be this easy to meet one!

Her looks made a serious impression on me, and I stood there, enchanted by her, wondering what I might possibly say to her.

As I stood there—

“Okay—”

The mermaid must not have noticed me.

After pulling herself out of the water, she produced a wand and pointed it at her lower body. A bluish-white light enveloped her scaly tail, and she immediately transformed it into something else. Her fins and tail disappeared, and in their place, her lower body split in two. Before my eyes, she lost the thing that made her a mermaid.

By the time the light had disappeared, she had sprouted two lovely legs.

...Legs?

On a mermaid?

“Um...hey, you, what are—?”

What on earth is going on?

I approached the girl, my voice trembling.

“...!”

At that point, she seemed to finally notice my presence. Shocked, with her eyes open wide, she stood up on the sand using those legs of hers and exclaimed, “You saw me...!”

No matter how I looked at her, the person standing there was just an ordinary girl.

“So you’re...not a mermaid...?”

At that point, I was already incredibly disappointed, but the girl before me had no way of knowing my state of mind.

“Well...sometimes I am, and sometimes I’m not.”

She readily confessed to the truth.

On top of that...

“A passing witch turned me into a woman...,” she told me, her cheeks flushing red.

My, my.

“Who was she, and where was she from? Tell me about the witch who did this immoral thing.”



That’s right, it’s me.

I had some time to kill in town while I waited for Miss Fran, who was out on her mermaid hunt. I was sitting on a street corner, passing the time.

From there, I had a good view of the town.

The main avenue was packed with people, and their conversations flew past me in a constant stream. Above all other topics, there was constant chatter about the mermaid who had been appearing for about the past three months. At the same time, there were also a lot of businesses that were taking advantage of the popularity of the mermaid. Apparently, the word *mermaid* had the smell of money to it.

Oh, good grief.

What a mess.

I guess you can make money just by slapping the name of the mermaid on the

beach on your product. I never knew marketing was such an easy job.

I'm not impressed.

“What’s this, now? You there, is something troubling you?” I demanded.

“Huh? You mean me...?”

The mild-looking woman to whom I had called out looked at me with some surprise, her eyes open wide.

I nodded. “Yes, you. Your face says that something is causing you distress... How about it? Won’t you try having your fortune read?”

“Fortune-telling... Listen, I don’t really go for that sort of...”

“You know, despite how I might look, I am acquainted with a mermaid, and I use a method of fortune-telling that I learned directly from her. Won’t you give it a try?”

“A mermaid’s acquaintance...? Wait, you mean *that* mermaid?”

Well, well.

“I don’t know which mermaid you’re talking about,” I said, “but if you mean the mermaid on the beach who has been causing excitement in town lately, yes, she’s the one. She’s an acquaintance of mine. I’ve met her several times now. I suppose I could even call her a friend. It might not be out of line to say she’s my best friend.”

Oh, good grief.

How sketchy, using the mermaid’s name to make money!

“I’m sure you’re well aware of this, but speaking of the mermaid, she’s an incredible creature who right at this very moment has captivated men across town. And I’ve got a fortune-telling method that I learned from a woman like that. Aren’t you curious?”

“.....”

The woman sat down. Once they sit, they’re all mine.

“Looks like you are curious.” I nodded, a meaningful smile spreading across my face. I overturned a box that I had found nearby and set it in front of us. On top of it, I set a teacup filled with seashells.

Actually, the statement that I had learned a fortune-telling method from the famous mermaid was in fact the truth.

“By the way, what is it that’s troubling you?”

I shook the teacup, mixing the clattering shells as I tilted my head questioningly.

Hesitantly, the woman said, “Um...right now, there’s someone who I like, but...” Even though no one was listening to her besides me, the woman

whispered as she told me, “I’m worried about whether or not I should confess my feelings to them.”

“I see.”

Love problems, huh? That’s outside my area of expertise.

But that’s nothing to worry about.

“Well then, let’s read your fortune.”

After mixing the clattering seashells around in the cup for a little while, I sprinkled them evenly over the top of the box. The shells of various colors and sizes, which I had collected just the day before, were littered sparsely across the box.

This was the fortune-telling method I had gotten her to teach me about three months earlier.

“I have your result.”

In total, there were ten shells on the box. Seven of them had fallen faceup, and three of them facedown. According to the famous mermaid, the more shells that were faceup, the more likely it was that your wish would come true.

In other words, this result...

“It looks more or less like you’ll be able to date them,” I announced confidently.

But the woman before me looked slightly suspicious.

“It’s kind of sloppy... Are these predictions accurate?”

“Roughly accurate.”

“It’s sloppy...”

“By the way, using magic, it’s possible to manipulate the chances that a shell will fall faceup or facedown.”

“Isn’t that fraud...?”

“Well, they do say that your fortune is of your own making...”

And so...

I tried my hand at fortune-telling, in that sloppy kind of way.

One thing I had predicted was that I would be able to attract considerable popularity just by using the word *mermaid*, and I did get a fair amount of attention, even with my half-joking divinations. Word spread steadily from person to person so that by the time I had been sitting beside the main avenue for an hour, people had started coming to see me without me needing to go to the trouble of calling them over.

“You’re a friend of the mermaid? Do you think you could tell me how to get

in touch with her?"

"....." I dumped out my shells. They all landed facedown. I asked the customer to leave.

"So listen, I don't need her contact information or whatever, but what kind of things does the mermaid usually eat? Don't get the wrong idea, it's not like I want to drug her or anything, but say I wanted to offer her some refreshments that I had poured my heart and soul into making, what then?"

"....." I dumped out the shells, but they all landed facedown, so I asked the customer to leave.

"I wonder if the mermaid thinks I'm handsome. Did she say anything about me?"

"....." The shells also landed all facedown, so I asked him to leave.

"About the mermaid..."

"....." I asked him to leave.

A sigh escaped my lips.

Before long, I was showing every man who came to see me a bunch of facedown shells, making it clear that nothing would ever happen between them and the mermaid before sending them on their way.

"Are all the men in your country so forward with their advances?" I started asking in exasperation.

The men all responded with indignation.

"It's not like I want to date her, not really!"

"How rude! I'm the decent one here!"

"Wait, I'm not that bad, you know?"

"I'm just jumping on the bandwagon. I want to know more about her, that's all."

And so on and so forth.

Every one of them insisted that they were behaving normally.

Yet the mermaid and the men of the city were literally living in different worlds, and furthermore, the mermaid wasn't the kind of simpleton who would fall for every person she shook hands with. Actually, I think that's true of most girls, not just mermaids.

"I'm not getting any decent customers..."

Perhaps advertising myself as a friend of the mermaid had been unwise. All the customers who came to see me were weirdos.

I wonder if maybe I ought to close up shop early...?

"Could I talk with you for a minute?"

As I was sitting there pondering the strange ideas that seemed to fill the heads of every man in the city, another fellow arrived at my booth.

He seemed to be in his mid-twenties, with black hair and handsome features.

“I want you to predict my romantic fate,” he told me.

“Your romantic fate with whom?”

With the mermaid? You want to know how things are going to work out with her?

My mind half made up already, I swirled the cup around and readied my wand in secret.

“.....”

Then the man finally answered me.

He told me the name of the mermaid who had captivated the public.



The girl I met down by the ocean ended up accompanying me back into town.

“But how on earth were you able to do such a thing?” I questioned her as we walked along the beach.

There was no question that she had suddenly appeared on the beach three months earlier and had kept doing things that made her the subject of rumors in town.

The girl seemed very inclined to do things at her own pace. She ignored me walking by her side and crouched down nearby to roll a number of shells on the sand like dice.

“Ah! Lots of backs! Let me roll again,” she exclaimed, and she picked the shells up again.

I paused and watched her.

She was no longer dressed in a mermaid-like getup.

She was wearing a simple blouse and a long dark blue skirt. She had fully sprouted two separate legs, and I didn’t think any person would recognize her as the mermaid if they saw her as she was at the moment.

She responded to my very straightforward question with a little smile. “I wanted to see the person I loved one more time, so...this is how I ended up.”

“How you ended up?”

That’s a pretty lame reason, dont’cha think...?

“You’ve become the subject of many rumors in the city, you know? They’re

saying that a cute mermaid has been showing up frequently near town,” I said.

But she seemed to already be well aware of that. Lacey nodded. “I know. But, but...there’s no other way! My plan is to keep appearing on the seashore as a mermaid until the man I love hears the rumors about me and comes to see me again. All sorts of people have come down to meet me and spread the word about me. But I’m already in love, so I’m not selling any favors down here, you know!”

She really emphasized that point.

As she explained, the rumors I had heard in town flashed through my mind.

The mermaid winked at me! She’s clearly into me.

I got her autograph!

I got a handshake! I’m never washing this hand again!

.....

“Really? Are you sure you’re not selling favors?”

“.....” Lacey averted her gaze awkwardly. “W-well...maybe I did do a little...fanservice? Stuff like that, but...”

I already knew that.

But I wasn’t there to scold her. There was a part of me that had wanted to meet a mermaid and get a signature from her, too. Besides...

“It doesn’t seem like you’re down here swindling money off the townspeople when you do your fanservice as a mermaid, so I suppose that’s all right.” I chuckled.

“.....”

But Lacey looked away again.

...*What’s this?*

“Are you swindling money off them?”

“Oh! Um...? Whatever are you talking about?! M-m-m-money? I’m not taking their money!”

“You’re shaking terribly...”

“B-but it’s true! I’m really not getting any actual money for it! Seriously!”

“No money, specifically?”

“.....!”

It must have been a slip of the tongue. She clapped both hands over her mouth and fell silent.

But it was already too late.

“What does that mean? Are you doing something unsavory? Would you mind telling me about it in a little more detail?”

What on earth could she be up to, transforming back and forth between a human and a mermaid?

“Oh, well...” She stood there looking extremely uncomfortable. “It’s just, the people in the city, they’re...well, they’re all good people, and...when I sign something, or shake their hands, they give me various things...”

“Uh-huh. Various things like what?”

“Just like...expensive clothes and accessories...and other stuff.”

When I pressed for more detail, Lacey told me that a man from town had spotted her by chance about three months earlier in her mermaid form. The man had been amazed to see her and, in his excitement, asked her for a handshake.

Lacey had been changing back and forth between mermaid and human forms in order to catch the eye of the man she loved, so she didn’t return the man’s affections. But she did offer him a handshake and asked him to spread rumors about her around town.

The results were unprecedented.

“After shaking one person’s hand, all sorts of people started coming down to the beach the very next day, and one of them even asked for my signature...”

And once she started giving away signatures, they began offering her money.

“I see, I see.” I nodded.

“But you know, somehow, I felt really guilty getting money just for signing a piece of paper, so I turned it down. I was satisfied as long as they continued spreading the word about me.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“But when I didn’t accept the money, the next day, my fans started bringing me clothes and accessories...”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded again. “So you didn’t turn those down?”

“Well, you know, we girls enjoy presents more than money.”

“.....”

So naive...

“But I’m already in love, so...getting presents was also troublesome, and I was honest with the men about it. But they all said, ‘I’m rooting for your love!’ and stuff, and ultimately kept bringing me gifts... I don’t get it... I don’t know what those men are thinking...”

“.....”

Some people say that a woman’s mind is the ultimate mystery, but perhaps from the perspective of a naive young lady like Lacey, the mentality of the men of the world was also inscrutable.

Whatever the case, it didn't seem like she was trying to rip off her fans or anything.

"I can't bring myself not to use their gifts once I receive them, so now I wear and use the presents I get from my fans," she told me as she continued to toss shells down on the sand. "But you know, to tell the truth, I'm really not interested in money or fame."

Lacey stretched her hand out toward the sand, picked up only the shells that had landed facedown, and gazed down at the faceup shells she had left behind.

"If not money and fame, then what are you interested in?" I asked.

She answered with a brief whisper, "The heart of the man I love."

"And his name is?" I pressed her for more.

She whispered again, "Keith."

"A kind man, eloquent and gentlemanly, a fantastic guy—" she added.

Lacey told me the story of her and Keith as we walked toward town.

...She told me, but...

"That day, I was swimming in the ocean with the fish. I called out to them, 'How do you do?' and they answered, 'Ah, h-how do you do?' and smiled at me. It was part of my daily routine to swim down this part of the coast."

For better or worse, maybe because Lacey was a naive and dreamy girl, her recollections were like something from a daydream.

"On that day, I was playing tag with the fish in the ocean as I always did. They would flee, and I would chase them. Fish are really very good at running away, so like, no matter how I chase them, they always escape. And you know _____"

"Uh, sorry, but please cut out any parts that aren't related to the main thread of the story."

"....."

For a short while, she was silent, with her cheeks puffed up in discontent.

And then...

"I met Keith in the afternoon that day. Right after I managed to catch several of the fish, you see, I...got hurt."

Lacey's voice became ever so slightly subdued, and she rubbed her arm.

"Did something happen?"

As far as I could see, it didn't seem to have been an injury that left a mark.

"A jolt of ocean lightning passed through my body..."

"...What?"

“You know, ocean lightning?”

“I’m really sorry, but could you explain that in words I can understand?”

“...I was stung.”

“By what?”

“A jellyfish.”

“.....”

I had nothing to say about Lacey’s extremely ordinary injury having a bombastic name like *ocean lightning*.

“So then, like, anyway, it hurt really badly, so I got out of the water for a moment.”

She told me that was when she had met Keith.

Keith had spotted Lacey, writhing in pain on the sand, and he must have sensed immediately that her injury was no trivial matter.

Keith didn’t know how to use magic, but he was a traveler, and as might be expected of a traveler, he had a certain amount of knowledge about how to deal with such an injury.

He washed the wound in clean seawater, and once he confirmed that it was starting to swell, chilled the area.

“Ohhh...”

Lacey was suffering from the pain. Keith squeezed her hand and reassured her, “Y-you’re all right!”

Lacey told me that she had felt a pleasant warmth in the depths of her heart. At the same time, the sting from the ocean lightning had been extremely painful. I did not offer any comment.

Keith had clumsily smeared a salve on Lacey’s red and swollen skin. Travelers often have some knowledge of how to treat wounds, but apparently Keith wasn’t really used to being around girls.

Lacey found his nervousness charming.

“Looks like a jellyfish got you... I think the pain should subside if we slather this on and wait a little while, so h-hang in there!”

Lacey shook her head at him.

“It wasn’t a jellyfish...”

“Hmm? Not a jellyfish? Then what stung you?”

“Ocean lightning...” Lacey seemed strangely fixated on those words.

Keith wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Huh? Ocean lightning? No, this is an ordinary jellyfi—”

“I was struck by ocean lightning!”

"Um, right, of course! It was ocean lightning!"

Keith was a very kind and gentle man.

After that, Keith sat with Lacey until the worst of her suffering had subsided. He told her many stories so that she wouldn't be bored.

Even though he wasn't used to female company, he told her bit by bit about passing through many places on his travels.

Apparently, Keith had a dream.

It was a humble dream of a quiet life in the countryside, but his eyes sparkled as he told her about it.

Lacey, who was a simple, naive girl who had never stepped foot outside her hometown, thought his stories sounded like exceptionally lovely fairy tales.

So to thank him for everything, Lacey told him her own story.

"I'm, like, always here swimming with the fish."

"Oh? Uh-huh, um, is that so...?"

The two of them were sitting around a bonfire. The dancing flames lapped at fish impaled on skewers.

"The fish always flee and leave me behind. So I chase them, and I catch them."

"W-wow..."

Lacey smiled and chuckled as she bit into a fish roasted to perfection.

She told me that the fish the two of them ate together were very delicious.

The fish...

"So then..."

After that, Lacey and Keith had a lively conversation about anything and nothing. She was so entranced that she forgot the time and about her pain as she chatted with him. She had never talked with a stranger on the beach before, so even as the sun began to set, the words kept bubbling up out of her.

She felt like she could go on talking forever, as long as she was talking to him.

"....."

Before long, Keith was staring intently at her.

Even in the slanted rays of the sun, she could tell that his cheeks were tinged red.

This guy is in love with me!

Lacey realized it immediately. She had suspected as much from the moment they'd met.

"Say, Keith? What kind of girls do you like?"

Girls like me? You like girls like me, right? That's true, isn't it?

She asked with tremendous confidence that he would confirm her suspicions.

Keith averted his eyes and answered, "Mermaids, I guess..."

He had a thing for mermaids.

.....

A mermaid obsession?

They still couldn't get enough of talking with each other. In order to get better acquainted, they would need more time.

"...Um, so, Lacey..." And so Keith said, "Could I...see you again? If I came here tomorrow, I mean?"

Lacey told me that she found his straightforward feelings very dazzling and that she was very happy.

However...

"...You can't." Lacey shook her head. "You can't see me."

They probably could have met there the following day. They probably could have talked a lot more. But Lacey prevented it.

She was a very pure and innocent young lady.

At the same time, she also had a tendency to overthink and get herself worked up.

She figured that even if they *did* get together, there was no way it could work out between them in the long run. Keith was a traveler, and she knew nothing of the world.

"Never come here again after today."

Lacey thanked him for his help, and with that, she departed.

Even though she wanted to be with Keith forever.

And then, when the following day arrived...

Lacey went to the beach again. Even though she had rejected him, one corner of her heart was hopeful. "Maybe Keith came anyway?"

But he wasn't there.

"Aaaaaahhhhhh, nooooooooooo!"

She cried and collapsed right there on the sand.

In the end, she visited that beach nearly every day after that, but he never came again.

"...So that's my story up to this point. What do you think?"

"I think you're a really annoying person."

"....."



“...I see.”

I nodded once after I had finished listening to the story of the man who had come to me for love advice.

He told me...

He had been wandering from place to place, living as a traveler, but he had been unable to forget about one incredible girl he had encountered three months earlier, and he had come back to see her.

Her name was Lacey.

She was the mermaid who had recently grown famous in the area.

“To make a long story short, I haven’t been able to forget about her, so I came back.”

He must have heard rumors somewhere about the beautiful mermaid appearing on the nearby beach—stuff like that.

And then the more he heard about the mermaid, the more certain he became that she was Lacey, whom he had met just once before. He knew he had to come back to see her.

That was the basic impression I got from listening to his story.

I see, I see.

“By the way, when you said that you came back to town, how many days ago, specifically, did you get back?”

“Huh?”

I had gotten to the city one day earlier.

And I had spent all day reading fortunes and sitting down face-to-face with quite a lot of customers.

“Everyone’s talking about you around town, you know,” I informed him discreetly.

Innumerable men had come to me to request I predict their luck in love with the mermaid, but whenever I sighed and got fed up with them, they all said the same thing.

“*No, no, I’m not the worst of them, you know.*”

And so on.

The first time I had heard those words, I’d figured the men were so obsessed that they didn’t even realize how deeply in love they were, but once I’d listened to what they had to say, somehow that didn’t seem to be the case.

One of the townspeople had told me, “There’s a strange man who will give

you money just for going to see the mermaid and talking to him about it.”

Another person informed me that “He’ll give you money just for getting an autograph from the mermaid. I don’t really know what he’s after, but he’s probably a stalker or something.”

And yet another said, “Earlier, I was asked to deliver a gift to her. I don’t really understand why, but he seems like a stalker.”

Based on such eyewitness testimony, I could tell, in short, this stalker-like man had been making indirect contact with Lacey for at least the past month.

That was why all the other men had been able to say they weren’t the worst. It was because they knew about the one man who was deeply, deeply bogged down in his obsession.

As for that stalker’s appearance, they all said he had black hair and kind-looking features, and he looked to be in his mid-twenties.

Oh my. He looks familiar, doesn’t he?

“By any chance, have you been spending the whole last month spying on Lacey?”

“.....” Keith looked away from me forcefully. “...N-no, what do you mean...? I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

Wow, he’s really easy to read.

“Wouldn’t it be better to go talk to her directly instead of gathering information from a distance?” I bluntly offered him this bit of advice.

You can’t start anything without talking to her, you know?

But he looked exceedingly put out by my blunt words.

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t be having this problem!”

“But you’ve only ever met her once, right? Are you satisfied with nothing but secondhand information? I bet you don’t even know what she looks like now.”

“Huh? Of course I know. She’s a mermaid, right?”

“.....”

Well, yeah, that’s true, but...

“It doesn’t seem to shock you that she’s a mermaid.”

“No, not really,” he replied. “The world is a big place filled with all sorts of people.”

“.....”

It’s good that you’re so understanding, but...

“Why did a single rejection stop you from ever seeing each other again...?”

“Well, I want to see her, too, you know? But it’s impossible...”

“Never come here again after today.”

Those were the words Lacey had said to him the last time he saw her. Keith was a conscientious person and had fully accepted those words, probably believing them to be Lacey's true feelings.

"I keep thinking that she must have been bored, even when we were together, even when we were chatting, and I always lose my nerve to go talk to her... I've tried to go down to the seashore so many times! But I'm afraid of getting rejected, and I can't do it."

"....."

"Isn't that pathetic? Go ahead and laugh."

"Eh-heh-heh."

"Don't laugh at me!"

"Um..."

Didn't you just tell me to laugh...?

"Anyway, I want to know what my chances are with her. If there's no hope, I'll give up on her. So please tell my fortune. I'm counting on you."

Keith bowed his head to me very deeply.

That must have been the conclusion he had reached after months of worrying.

"...I understand."

In that case, allow me to tell your fortunes with my extremely sloppy method, as requested.

I shook my cup, trusting that Keith would make his own fortune, and quickly scattered the shells out before me.

The result was immediately apparent.

"....."

Keith huddled over the shells I had sprinkled on top of the box, staring at them for a little while. Then he looked up at me and tilted his head. "...So what kind of result is this?" he asked.

I don't mind answering, but—

"You can enjoy finding that out later."

I'm sure that's the better option—

I turned my gaze toward the city gate.

".....?"

A moment after me, Keith looked that way, too.

The timing was perfect.

Miss Fran came back into town at exactly that moment.

"....."

Keith's eyes opened wide. I'm certain he must have been surprised.

Because there with my teacher was the lovely girl he had met only once, three months earlier.

And because the lower half of that girl, who had been a mere mermaid three months earlier, had sprouted two legs.



This is the story of three months ago.

Along the seashore, I met a mermaid who was lying on the sand like a dead body.

She clung to me, shouting strange phrases like “Turn me into a woman!” and begged me to transform her into a human woman.

She was in love with a certain man. However, there was one reason why they couldn’t be together.

Lacey and Keith lived in two different worlds.

That reason alone had torn their relationship asunder.

Because Keith was a human who walked on land, and Lacey was a mermaid who lived in the ocean.

Actually, Lacey had fallen for Keith, too. What kept them from realizing their love was that it seemed very clear to Lacey that things wouldn’t go well if they got together.

That was why she had told him to never return.

But to put it another way, the only thing that was keeping Lacey and Keith apart was Lacey’s own hesitation.

Which, frankly, seemed like a problem that could be solved with magic.

And so I took Lacey by the arm as she clung to my waist, and I smiled down at her.

“I know one good way to solve this.”

Then I offered her one of my wands.

“...What’s this?” Lacey tilted her head to the side, puzzled.

I said, “You can use magic to grow legs right now.”

And then the whole matter will be settled, right?

Magic is quite the convenient thing, after all.

It is entirely possible to change one’s own form with magic. It’s something I’ve done many times myself. So then, why shouldn’t Lacey also use a wand and turn her tail and fins into legs? That was my thinking.

Honestly, at that moment, I didn’t really know whether or not mermaids

could use magic, and I figured if it turned out that she couldn't cast spells, I might just give her a potion and hand over the recipe for it. But my worries were unfounded.

Lacey could use magic. She had the gift for it. Maybe people who are a little different from normal humans have some innate talent for magic as a rule, because she immediately mastered the wand, even though it was her first time wielding one.

Still, no matter how talented she was, transformation spells and the like demand a relatively high level of skill, so it did take her a little bit of time to learn.

“Like this?”

She cast a transformation spell on herself.

“That’s a failure.”

Her tail and fins had just changed a little.

“All right, like this?”

The following day, she cast a transformation spell on herself again.

“Now you’ve turned into a different creature.”

That time, her lower half transformed into a horse.

“Hmm...how about this?”

The day after that, she cast a transformation spell on herself again.

“Um...I feel like you’re steadily getting further away from human...”

Not only her lower half but also her upper half was a horse.

In the following days, I was with her whenever I had the time, teaching her magic. I think it took about five more days before she was able to reliably turn her lower half into human legs.

“Like this?”

She had two lovely pale legs forming the lower half of her body.

“That’s a success.” I nodded.

Five days, not exactly of magic training, but of training for how to turn her lower half human. In the end, she couldn’t use any spells aside from transformation spells, but if she was just doing it in order to live with a man, I figured that should be sufficient.

And so as soon as I verified that she had sprouted legs, I started gathering up my things. “Well, I guess you don’t need me anymore,” I said.

Since I am a wandering traveler, I figured it was best not to prolong my stay.

“Huh? You can’t go, Elaina! I can only stay in human form for a short while.”

Lacey screwed up her face in open distress. Indeed, right after she made that complaint, her legs changed back into a tail.

It seemed her spells weren't perfect just yet.

However...

"Well, now you need to practice on your own. I think you'll be able to walk pretty well in no time."

"You won't stay with me...?"

She was sitting in the sand, since she had no legs, and looked up at me with pleading eyes from where she sat. There was something flirtatious about her gaze.

But I quickly shook my head.

"You'll be all right without me now, won't you? Besides..." I patted her head. "I'm a traveler, so I shouldn't prolong my stay. I'll be going now," I said.

"...Humph!"

Lacey puffed out her cheeks disconsolately, but she didn't throw a tantrum like she had the day I met her.

Instead, she asked me one question.

"Is traveling really that interesting?"

It was a question that I was unsure how to answer. Considering that Keith was a traveler, she was probably curious about travel, if only a little bit.

"Hmm." I pondered the question briefly, then smiled at her. "Well, you don't know until you try, right?"

I think it was an extremely vague and very tiresome answer.



I arrived in town with Elaina just yesterday.

The public was gushing about a mermaid, and I, too, was in high spirits, putting no small stock in the rumors, but Elaina didn't seem particularly interested.

"A mermaid, huh? Cool."

Needless to say, I felt something was out of place.

"What's the matter, Elaina? You're not acting like your usual self."

"And how would I normally act?"

"You'd be tugging at my sleeve, saying something like, 'Whaaat? A mermaid? Let's go down to the seashore and go mermaid watching!'"

"Who is that supposed to be?" Elaina narrowed her eyes. "I've never behaved

like that.”

Well, I was joking, of course. But anyway... “What’s wrong, really?” I asked. “You’re not interested? In a mermaid?”

“Well, I’m not *not* interested, but...”

Then Elaina told me what had happened.

She told me that she had met the mermaid three months earlier. And that she had taught some magic to the girl, who was lovesick over a man she had only met once.

Elaina explained that she wasn’t uninterested, she just wasn’t particularly surprised to hear about the mermaid, since she already knew all about her.

“I don’t know what to do... I can’t believe she’s still hanging around the sea even after three months... It wasn’t what I was expecting... I guess it would have been better to stay with her a little longer...,” Elaina grumbled.

Then she made a proposal.

“Miss Fran, do you think I could get you to go and see the mermaid?”

Elaina told me that she wanted me to bring the mermaid in question back to town.

I cocked my head. “I don’t mind doing so, but...I’m going to meet a mermaid, right? How am I supposed to bring her here?” I knit my eyebrows in confusion. “Won’t it cause a fuss if I bring her here? The people of this town all seem terribly worked up about the mermaid—”

But Elaina said to me in my confusion, “Oh, that’ll be fine. I doubt there will be any kind of fuss. I think you can just bring her in like you would anyone else.”

I could guess that something had happened to the mermaid when they met three months earlier. Yes, that much was clear.

“...What are you hiding?”

I stared intently at Elaina.

We had known each other a long time. I knew perfectly well what kind of answer she would give at a time like that, and still, just to be sure, I asked the question.

And Elaina did not betray my expectations. Remaining stubbornly aloof, she smiled slyly and replied, “You can enjoy finding that out later.”

The following day, I went to see the mermaid, just as I had discussed with Elaina. I was surprised to see that she had sprouted legs, but...then again, Elaina had taught her a spell to allow her to turn herself into a human.

Her spellcasting was still imperfect, but her skills had been improving day by day, and when I asked, she told me she was now able to make a round trip between town and the ocean.

So when we arrived in town together, I could tell that Lacey the mermaid was definitely surprised.

“.....”

It was obvious, because she just stood there silently, staring at the man sitting in front of Elaina.

I didn't have to ask if the man was her sweetheart. Her gait was hesitant as she slowly approached him, but she didn't shrink away at all.

She walked toward the man slowly, like she didn't want to let him get away again.

“...Keith,” her gentle voice resounded.

“Oh, Lacey...”

I was able to see that the man, on the other hand, was a little nervous.

The two of them walked slowly toward each other. Neither of them rejected the other. Questions such as why the mermaid had grown legs or why the traveler was back in town were unimportant. The two of them were completely absorbed in their own little world.

They probably didn't even see me or Elaina.

“.....”

As I walked past the two sweethearts, I leaned in close to Elaina's side. “Do you think you could have told me ahead of time that you taught her a transformation spell?”

That was my one complaint.

I had been convinced that a mage was pretending to be a mermaid at first.

Elaina smiled. “I thought it would be more fun that way.”

Oh my, no remorse at all?

Well, I suppose it's fine.

“What did you do while I went to meet the mermaid?”

When I asked, Elaina lowered her gaze.

Then she answered, “A little bit of fortune-telling.”

She was staring at a handful of shells, all faceup, scattered across the top of a box.



There's not much reason to go on at length about what happened to Lacey and Keith after that, but I think I'd better tell the tale just in case, so allow me to relay it concisely.

"Eh-heh-heh, Elaina, listen, listen! Okay, so Keith here said he wants to go traveling with me! So starting tomorrow, we'll be going to all sorts of places together!"

This is what happened the following day.

While I was wandering around town with Miss Fran and the two sweethearts, Lacey told me that. She sounded overjoyed.

I asked her about her transformation spell, and she said that while she hadn't been able to perfect it yet, with every passing day, the length of time that she could maintain her human form had grown.

Apparently, she was planning to make a tour of the seaside towns first while continuing to practice her magic. She told me all this while giggling and clinging to Keith's arm.

"Is that so...? Well, good for you."

I glanced over at Keith, who was by her side.

"Ah, wait, um...so close..." His face was bright red.

He's still...not used to girls...is he...?

In Lacey's recollections, he was fairly talkative, though... I wonder if he can't handle it now that she's got legs? I bet that's it. I bet Keith should have gone through a crash course or something to get him used to girls, the same way Lacey needed to practice her spells.

I mean...

"He was able to talk to me just fine... I wonder why he gets like that when he's with Lacey?" I wondered.

"It's probably because of his mermaid fetish."

"What's a mermaid fetish?"

"Who knows? I'm not sure myself," said my somewhat negligent teacher. She had a faraway look in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Lacey and Keith didn't seem to be listening to our exchange. They were completely inside their own little world.

"Oh, Keith darling, where should we go next? I'm okay with anywhere, as long as you're there!" Lacey was perfectly happy to leave all the decision-making up to him.

"Er, ah...um, I think I'd like to travel alone for the time being... I feel like I might die if we go on like this..." Keith, on the other hand, looked like he was

on death's door.

“.....”

The two of them were supposed to be setting off on a journey to find a new hometown, but...

“Prospects seem grim...”

Will Keith get used to Lacey's company, or will Lacey learn how to maintain her human form? Which will happen first?

I'm sure I'll find out the answer to that question if I ever see them again.

After that, once we said good-bye to the couple as they left on their journey, we also prepared to leave the city.

I was sure the news that the mermaid had disappeared from the beach near town would spread through the whole country right away. But, well, no one had been able to get a good look at her up until three months ago anyway, so in the end, they were just going back to the way things used to be, and it didn't seem like too big of a problem.

Though it might cause issues for the food stalls and other shops that had hopped on the mermaid bandwagon and given things like ordinary grilled fish funny names.

“Love is wonderful, isn't it?” Miss Fran mumbled just as we were leaving the city, almost as though she had just remembered something.

She seemed to be basking in the lingering memory of the two sweethearts and their shameless flirting (though it would be more accurate to say that Lacey was the one hanging all over Keith).

“Elaina, have you ever been in love?” Miss Fran chuckled as she asked this strange question, in the spirit of the occasion.

Oh-hoh, love, huh?

Oh-hoh!

Well then, have my honest answer.

“I've been in love ever since we first met, Miss Fran,” I said.

Miss Fran made kind of a strange face. “...Oh my, with whom?”

Her expression looked guarded somehow, and I put on a big smile.

“With traveling,” I replied.

“...What kind of answer is that?” Then Miss Fran laughed. “You say some pretty strange things!”

But there's no helping that, is there?

“People get a little annoying when they fall in love.”



CHAPTER 3

The Land of Letters Never Forgets

The next place Miss Fran and I visited was an eccentric place known as the Land of Letters.

We had spent the afternoon flying swiftly over fields on our brooms, so I was feeling a bit hungry, and my heart pounded a little when I caught sight of the front gates. But once I realized it was the Land of Letters, my excitement was replaced by a somewhat more complicated feeling.

“Elaina, have you been here before?” Miss Fran asked me after alighting from her broom in front of the gate.

I nodded. “Yes, just once, about a month ago.” I, too, got down off my broom. “It’s known as the Land of Letters, and apparently quite a few people here have jobs related to writing. By the way, as far as the food goes, we really can’t...expect much...”

Since I had visited once before, I knew a bit about the place. I think the first feature worth pointing out was that the library was absolutely enormous, with an appropriately massive collection. The country itself was known to appeal to those engaged in the authorial occupation, and as I just said, quite a few famous authors made their residence there. As I also said, in general, the food was mostly basic fare, and dinner tables were usually populated with dishes that pursued simplicity as if anything would do so long as stomachs were filled.

Normally, I’m sure I would have reacted with bright-eyed excitement, “Wow, *so many books! Amazing!*” But at the moment, I was more interested in quieting my rumbling stomach than feeding my inner bookworm.

In my line of work as a traveler, there was nothing I appreciated more than arriving at a new place and having a good meal.

But even so, I’ve got some complicated feelings here...

“Our country’s immigration inspection is conducted entirely in writing. Please fill in all of the required information. Once you are finished writing, please place your forms in the box beside the gate.”

The gate guard who greeted us gave us these instructions, handed us each a pen and a piece of paper, and showed us over to a counter.

It was my second time there, so I filled all the fields with a practiced hand. Age, country of origin, number of visits to this country, purpose of this visit,

occupation, criminal history, hobbies, favorite books, etc., etc.

“Oh...there’s no field for your name, is there?” Beside me, Miss Fran cocked her head with a puzzled “Hmm...?”

She seemed stumped.

“Apparently, you don’t need to write down your name when you enter. I heard there used to be travelers who were extremely uncomfortable writing their names, and it caused trouble, so they scrapped that field.”

“Oh...is that so? There are some strange mages in this world.” Miss Fran chuckled, then filled in all the required information.

As she was writing, she asked me, without looking up, “On that subject, how long did you stay here last time, Elaina?” It sounded like she was just making conversation.

I put my pen to my mouth and thought for a moment. “Hmm... I think...I was probably here for about a week? I had some money troubles while I was here, so I took a part-time job to make some cash.”

“It’s rare for you to take a job, isn’t it? What kind was it?”

“I was walking around the streets selling a book. The title was *The Book of Infinite Possibilities*.”

“What kind of book is that?”

“The pages are entirely blank. I found several copies at a local bookstore.”

“In other words, you were selling ordinary notebooks?”

“They were very well-made, so I bought them for fun, but once I added the title, I was able to sell them for a much higher price.”

“That’s fraud, you know...”

“Well, they were blank, so it’s true that they held endless possibilities.”

“Elaina, that’s fraud.”

“Miss Fran, you have to see these things from multiple angles. Depending on how you look at it, I was engaging in a socially meaningful activity...doesn’t it seem that way?”

“I’m sorry, but no matter how I look at it, you were running a scam and ripping off the locals. That’s the only impression I get.”

“Don’t you think they learned a lesson from my business? Something like ‘I never should have carelessly purchased a book that a suspicious witch was selling by the side of the road’?”

“So you admit it was fraud? You never change.”

Miss Fran let out an exasperated sigh, then set her pen down. She seemed to be done writing.

After that, the two of us together tossed our immigration inspection forms into the square box that was set up beside the gate. Once the papers were spit back out, the inspection would be complete.

As a matter of fact, one reason why I was so halfhearted about entering this country was because I was anxious that my misdeeds might have been discovered.

But something had occurred to me while I was filling in my immigration form.

We don't have to write our names. I'll probably be all right, won't I?

If I'm being honest, I filled in the fields on the immigration form pretty carelessly the last time I entered, and this time, too. In other words, it's all lies. But they're just words on paper; there's no way they can tell I'm trying to enter their country again after running a scheme here in the past, so I'll be all right, won't I? ...Won't I?

Before long, a bell chimed, and our papers were spit back out of the box.

“Goodness!”

First was Miss Fran’s form. There were words printed at the bottom.

NUMBER OF ENTRIES: TWO

OFFICIAL NOTICE: WE ARE HOLDING A BOOK ADDRESSED TO YOU.

...What's this?

“Miss, this is your second time coming here...?”

“Oh? Didn’t I tell you?”

“This is the first I’m hearing of it...”

While we were having this exchange, my paper was spit out of the box with the chime of a bell, just as Miss Fran’s had been.

It had words printed at the bottom. This, too, was just like Miss Fran’s—

NUMBER OF ENTRIES: TWO

OFFICIAL NOTICE: YOU ARE BEING SUMMONED FOR QUESTIONING.

.....

Hmm?

That's a bit different.

“You there, could we have a word?”

As I stood there, head tilted in confusion, a hand clapped down on my shoulder. I turned around nervously, my heart pounding loudly, and I saw several soldiers standing there.

“.....Um, about what...?” My voice cracked, and I averted my eyes.

One of the soldiers asked, “You are the witch who previously defrauded people by the side of the road, right? We would like to hear the whole story.”

“Huh? Huuuh? Fraud...? Wh-what on earth do you mean?”

“The handwriting on the immigration inspection form you just filled in for us was a match for the writing on the cover of a strange book that appeared on the market one month ago.”

“.....”

“And coincidentally, it also matches the handwriting on another immigration form from one month ago. Strangely, the country of origin, the name, and everything else were different, but the handwriting is a match for some reason.”

“.....”

“Could I ask you to come with me?”

It was obvious that he expected an answer.

“.....”

I looked at Miss Fran.

She seemed to feel sympathy for me. Borrowing my words from earlier, she told me, “Elaina, you have to see these things from multiple angles, right?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer her.

“Sorry, no matter what angle I look at this from, I can only see a future in which I’m in a lot of trouble...”

“You’re getting your just deserts.” My teacher sighed with exasperation but also smiled slightly.

For some reason, the expression on her face made her look like she was reminiscing about the past.



As we were entering the Land of Letters, soldiers surrounded the naughty witch.

And who do you think she was?

That’s right, my favorite pupil.

“I categorically deny all charges! Categorically deny!”

Even though she desperately protested, ultimately the soldiers took Elaina away for questioning, and rather forcefully, I should add.

It was inevitable that things would turn out that way. It was an undeniable fact that she had committed a crime, so the most I could do was see her off with a wave of my hand and some ambiguous words of encouragement to comfort her.

“You...hang in there, okay?” I waved.

“I don’t suppose she’ll be back by this evening...,” I said to myself.

Well, there’s nothing to be done about that.

After that, I hailed one of the nearby guards and entrusted him with a letter that I asked him to give to Elaina upon her release. All I had written was *I’ll be waiting for you in an inn near the plaza with the fountain along the main avenue.*

I was planning to stay in the same hotel I had stayed at the last time I visited this country. My first visit had been quite a long time ago, though, so I wasn’t sure whether or not the hotel would still be there.

No country looks exactly as it did in the distant past, after all. There isn’t a thing in this world that doesn’t change, not humans and not places.

If you think something is not changing, you only feel that way because you’re too close to it.

I decided that if the inn where I had previously stayed had been demolished, well then, I could just wait in the fountain plaza.

So I successfully entered the country for the second time, as I had written on my immigration inspection form.

I was greeted by a nostalgically familiar view.

I remembered the city very well.

It was the first place I had explored alone after becoming a traveler.

“...How nostalgic.”

It really was quite a long time ago.

At that time, after barely escaping my hometown in one piece, I was traveling with another mage.

She had long gray hair that was so light, it was almost white, and she wore a black robe and a pointed hat. On her breast, she had a star-shaped brooch because she was a witch.

Also, she was the second mentor I’d ever had in my life.

At the time, I was calling her teacher. I already had someone I called a mentor, so I had to call her something else. Also, she kind of pushed me to call

her that, telling me, “Listen up. From now on, you are to refer to me as teacher,” but anyway, that’s what I was calling her.

That teacher of mine made a decisive assertion just before we entered the city.

“I categorically refuse.”

Back then, I was still ignorant about the world outside my hometown, and every sight that met my inexperienced eyes seemed wonderful, even the figure of a witch resolutely refusing to back down, even when surrounded by soldiers. *Wow, how cool!* I thought.

“I will not write my name down. Not a chance. And I won’t show you any identification, either.”

By the way, the cause of my teacher’s indignation was the immigration inspection form. There was a field for writing your name. For some reason, she was entirely unwilling to write hers down.

At the time, I remember thinking—

She’s undaunted, even surrounded by soldiers...! Witches really are awesome!

I was a simple fool.

When I think back on that time, I can see that the reason my teacher was surrounded by those soldiers was actually that...

“You perpetrated fraud here in our country before.”

“We’ve got a lot of eyewitness accounts, you know.”

“Plenty of crime reports, too.”

“Won’t you write your name down?”

“First of all, we’d like you to submit to an interview.”

I think you can guess what had happened by the soldiers’ accusations. Sure enough—like mother, like daughter—my teacher had been ripping people off again.

The moment the soldiers heard her name, their reactions made it clear they were going to try to take her into custody.

“Huh? You came into our country once before, didn’t you? And you cheated people while you were here! Make sure you fill out the back of that form.”

For my teacher, refusing to write her name was a last-ditch attempt at self-defense.

But there must be some karmic rule that parent and child must both meet the same fate.

“Listen, you’d better hurry up and come with us! We’re taking you in!” One

soldier forcefully clapped handcuffs on her wrists.

“Stop this! Who do you think I am?!”

“A swindler.”

“A cheater.”

“A crook.”

“It hurts to hear you use such blunt words. That’s enough.”

I stood there watching the soldiers drag my teacher away.

I was on my own once again, just as I had been back then. Although at that time, I handled being left behind very differently.

“Huh? Teacher, what? Whaaat...?”

I immediately started to panic when I was left by myself.

“You can go,” a soldier told me, and allowed me to pass through to the other side of the gate, but as I’ve said over and over again, I had never walked through the outside world on my own before.

I had spent my whole life, for as long as I could remember, in the town of Bielawald.

So when I was abandoned in a new country, I was at a complete loss.

“Wh-what do I do...?”

I surveyed my surroundings.

A cobblestone road stretched out straight ahead. The buildings lining each side had white walls that were dazzlingly bright in the sunlight. Along the road, I saw a bookstore, a post office, a café that had books available to read, a museum dedicated to famous authors, and a sign for a store related to their writings. It was only afterward that I learned people called this place the Land of Letters.

I was immediately fascinated by the new sights.

The beautiful outside world that stretched out to the ends of the earth welcomed me. Every unremarkable alley in this unremarkable city seemed to glitter and gleam. I wandered aimlessly down the road that seemed to go on forever, until finally I arrived at a plaza with a fountain.

People from around town were taking breaks on the benches placed here and there. I saw that many of them had books in hand, as if they had just borrowed them from the nearby library and were using their breaks to indulge in some reading.

That said, it wasn’t as if every person there was just reading. That didn’t seem to be the case.

“Hmm...this is...! No, this can’t be...ohhh...”

An older man was sitting by himself on one of the benches that backed up to

the fountain.

I noticed him smoothly writing on the pages of a thin little book in his hands, then immediately afterward scratching his graying head and tearing up the pages he'd written.

Maybe it was because he seemed to be at his wit's end, with a moody expression on his face, but the man looked like he had more than a fair number of years on him.

So when I saw a young-looking woman approach him, I'm ashamed to say I only considered the possibility that she was his daughter.

"Darling, you're writing in a place like this?"

...But they were a couple.

They seemed to be husband and wife. Looking carefully, I could see matching rings on the ring fingers of their left hands.

"Don't come up and talk to me all of a sudden!" The man hurriedly hid the notebook behind his back and looked up at his wife. "I'm free to choose where I write. Leave me alone!" He raised his voice and rejected her.

"I'm going to have a look around the clothing stores. Do you want to come with me?" the wife asked in an extremely calm tone of voice. She seemed accustomed to the man's reactions.

"Of course I don't want to go. I'm busy preparing my new work!"

"After I look at clothes, how about we have lunch?"

"Not interested! Go do whatever you want!" the man spit. What a cold person.

"My, my." The wife chuckled and elegantly brought her hand to her mouth. "All right then, wait here for me a little while longer." With those parting words, she left the man's side again.

After watching his wife's departure, the man grumbled, "...She's finally gone," and opened his little book again. "Hmm...no matter what I write, it's not right...hmm..." As he muttered, he gripped his pen.

This was, again, my first experience exploring the world beyond my hometown. The place I'd been born had no entertainment to speak of, and so it was also my first time ever seeing a person engaged in the authorial craft.

"....."

So I couldn't help but stare at the man with curious eyes.

"What would be good for an opening passage...? What can I write that will actually be right...? Hmm...I don't know."

"....."

Even though I was peering straight at his notebook, at point-blank range, I doubt anyone could blame me. Surely it was unavoidable?

“Of course, if I use even one cheesy line here—hmm?”

“.....”

I made eye contact with the man.

“.....”

The man said nothing.

“Hello,” I greeted him.

“.....” And yet the man still said nothing. Then he slammed his notebook closed and shouted, “Wh-who are you?! Don’t go around staring at people!”

He raised his voice again, as he had done with his wife. He seemed to have a habit of yelling whenever anyone approached him, almost like a reflex.

“Ah, s-sorry...” But I was still very naive in those days, so I flinched a little when he suddenly got angry at me. “It’s my first time ever seeing an author, so...”

“Humph...what are you, a child...?”

Perhaps because he realized, a little late, that the person he was addressing was indeed a young girl of tender years, at that point the man finally seemed to remember to act like an adult. “Are you interested in novels?” he asked.

“.....” I nodded in agreement.

“Is that so?”

On the cover of the notebook in the man’s hands was written: *For My Wife*.

I wonder if that’s the book’s title?

“Is that your new work?” I pointed to the notebook, but the man shook his head.

“No.”

“...? No?”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“This isn’t a novel. You don’t know that?”

I shook my head.

“Hmm...a foreigner, huh?” The man took a long, hard look at my appearance. “This is a book for safekeeping at the library.”

Then the man slowly looked back over his shoulder toward the fountain... and the library...and told me something interesting.

Apparently, in that country, they had a rather peculiar way of utilizing the library.

Originally, as I'm sure you know, the name *library* indicates a facility that holds books that are in common circulation, books that people are allowed to read for free. However, in this country, libraries apparently had another role.

"The libraries here accept people's notebooks for safekeeping. Like diaries and memos and such."

According to that man, there had always been a lot of people in the Land of Letters engaged in the literary profession, and at the same time, there had been a fair number of writers working in the libraries.

The writers would bring their own notebooks with them, and as they read other books and did research, they also produced new stories right there at the library. But the more notebooks a writer filled, the more bothersome it grew to bring them all every time. And at the same time, writers started jotting down passages in each other's notebooks, starting a fad for a sort of game of composing novels in tandem. So the libraries started holding on to people's notebooks for them.

The writers were thrilled when it became possible for them to work at the library without bringing heavy baggage with them every day.

Before long, word got around that the library would store notebooks, and shortly thereafter, people began using the library for safekeeping of things like diaries exchanged between lovers or messages to their future selves.

Actually, at that point, the man informed me that this had become the most common way of using the library.

But in that case...

"So the thing you're writing is a love letter to your wife?"

To put it simply, that's what you're doing, right?

"....." The man was quiet for a moment. "...I suppose it is," he said with a bitter look.

From his naked chagrin, it wasn't difficult to imagine that he had only written the introduction.

"It's hard to say it to her out loud, so...I thought I could do a better job in writing, but I haven't been able to come up with the right words. And I'm supposed to be an author..." The man scratched his head.

It also wasn't difficult to imagine that he was worried about the way he had been treating his wife.

"Well, even if I don't make a point of writing these things down, I'm sure my wife already knows how I feel."

I recalled his extremely calm wife, who was such a contrast to her husband.

Sure enough, she had seemed a bit curious about what he had been writing. But she simply flashed a knowing smile as he shouted about how busy he was “preparing his new work.”

However...

“But even if she already knows, that doesn’t mean it’s okay not to write it down.” The man stroked his notebook, which was very thin because of all the pages he had torn out, and told me, “Every story, every thought, first has meaning when you put it into words. It may as well not exist while it’s still in your head. That’s why I write things down like this—”

As he spoke, he gazed out over the city, as if he was searching for his wife.

“Have you decided what you want to write?”

In response to my vague question, the man nodded.

“I guess I have. I’ve decided. But there’s too much.”

Oh-hoh.

“And that’s why you’re having such trouble with it?”

There are too many things you want to write, and you’re struggling because of it?

That was my personal understanding.

But the man smiled and shook his head.

“I’m having trouble because I’m simply embarrassed.”

I met up with my teacher again later that evening, and we stayed at an inn near the fountain plaza.

“I see...”

When my teacher heard about everything that had happened to me earlier that day, she nodded in understanding. “So that’s why the bookstores in this country are selling so many of those strange little notebooks...”

As she spoke, she pulled a notebook from her breast pocket. It was an exact match for the one the man in town had been holding.

“Where did you get that...?”

“I bought a bunch of them before we got here, for business purposes. You can have one.”

“Uh-huh...”

For business? What on earth does that mean?

“This is my second time visiting this place, but I didn’t know you all had that kind of book culture. Let’s go check out the library tomorrow. Doesn’t it sound fun to send your future self a message?” My teacher beamed with sudden

enthusiasm.

Wait, I'm really happy that you're so enthusiastic, and I appreciate the notebook, too, but I just have to ask...

“Miss, aren’t you under surveillance by the city guard? Is it all right for you to do something like visit the library?”

She had picked a fight with the authorities earlier that afternoon, so I had thought for sure that we would be leaving the country in the morning.

“Not a problem. I resolved that with a few pieces of gold.”

“With money...!”

At the risk of sounding tedious, I knew nothing of the world in those days, so I thought, *My teacher is so amazing, solving problems with money when she's in trouble!* I was a hopeless moron.

“By the way, what kind of business are you going to do with these notebooks?”

It was a simple question.

When I asked, my teacher chuckled, “Heh,” and answered me with a slightly boastful smile. “We’ll turn them into gold.”

When I looked carefully at the notebook’s cover, I saw the title written on it: *The Book of Infinite Possibilities*.

.....

It really is like mother, like daughter, huh...?



That’s the end of my story from the past.

I’ve grown up quite a lot since then, and as I walked around the Land of Letters once again, it seemed that the place was smaller and less impressive than it had looked all those years ago.

My first visit to the Land of Letters had happened many years prior, so unfortunately, I didn’t have a clear picture of the city’s layout. Consequently, I ended up wandering aimlessly around town just as I had done before, admiring the view and picking up memories along the way.

As might be expected of a place called the Land of Letters, the streets were lined with numerous bookshops.

There was one dealing in querulous academic tomes; one selling light, entertaining novels; a specialist shop selling the kind of notebooks that the library stored; and so on and so forth.



I looked around at the many shops.

“...Oh!”

Shortly thereafter, I arrived at a certain store, where I encountered a familiar face.

It was moody-looking, with a furrowed brow. The image of a man I had met long ago was there in front of the bookstore, looking entirely unchanged.

“.....”

But unlike before, he did not speak a word to me. He didn’t raise his voice at me, and he didn’t seem at all troubled. He just stared in my direction, with a keen sparkle in his eyes.

As it turned out, I had only come across the image of the man, printed on a flimsy sheet of paper in a bookstore window.

“...So you really were a famous author, huh?”

The store mostly sold popular literature, and they were hosting a book fair promoting the writing of the same man I’d exchanged words with so long ago. As his image stared down at me, I stooped over to get a better look at his novels, which were lined up in the window of the shop. At a glance, there seemed to be quite a few of them.

Since I had come all that way to get to the shop and see a familiar old face, the thought of turning around and leaving made me feel a little lonely, so I picked up a book off one of the shelves and bought it.

I couldn’t help but feel that if I let this opportunity get away, I would never happen across this author again.

Clutching the book I had just purchased, I headed out of the shop, and just before I’d left it behind, I turned to look back at the store again.

IN MEMORIAM, FIVE YEARS—read the little poster, and next to the text, the image of the man I’d once known.

OFFICIAL NOTICE: WE ARE HOLDING A BOOK ADDRESSED TO YOU.

Looking at the scrap of paper I had been handed when I entered the city, I retraced my earlier footsteps. I was supposed to present my immigration paperwork at the library, where I would then receive the book that was waiting for me.

The notice said the book had been addressed to me, but as far as I could remember, there was no one in this country whom I would have considered a

friend, much less a lover or anything like that.

But that didn't mean I had no clue about the sender.

I figured it was probably the notebook I had written for myself, which was being held in the library's collection.

Let me see, what on earth did I write in that notebook?

Unfortunately, although I remembered going to the library, I had completely forgotten what I had recorded in *The Book of Infinite Possibilities* that I had been given by my teacher. I racked my brain over it, but I hadn't remembered anything by the time I made it to the fountain plaza.

"Hello."

In fact, as I arrived at the fountain plaza, I had given up trying to tug at the thread of memory.

When I raised my head, I could see a woman sitting alone on a bench, her back to the fountain. She was looking up at me.

"That book...do you like it?" The woman's gaze fell on the single book I was carrying in my hand.

"I haven't read it yet, so I don't know whether I like it or not."

"Oh...of course. I'm sorry, I haven't seen it for a while, and I just—" The woman's hand was placed elegantly over her mouth.

She smiled in a familiar way.

There was a single tattered notebook sitting on her lap.

Maybe it was because I was staring intently at her notebook, or maybe she caught a glimpse of my immigration inspection form.

"You're not from around here, are you?" the woman asked quietly.

I shook my head.

"That's right, I came here from a country very far away."

"For what purpose?"

Instead of answering, I pointed to the notebook in her hands.

The woman seemed to understand my gesture. "Oh!" She smiled broadly.
"Who are you exchanging notebooks with?"

"My past self. Though I don't really recall what I wrote."

"I see. Well, that should be fun," she said.

I nodded. "And did your husband give you that notebook?"

The woman tilted her head. "Yes..." I got the answer I was expecting. "He was a useless man, and he had a short temper."

Her notebook, which had once been very fine, now looked shabby, and when I studied it more closely, I could see that it had become extremely thin. I was

certain that he must have tried to rewrite it over and over again after meeting me. The results of all his agonizing were in there.

The woman lovingly stroked the tattered, crumbling notebook. “But he was a good husband,” she whispered.

“...What was written in the notebook?”

I was drawn in by curiosity. I couldn’t help but wonder what the man had finally written to her, after all his agonizing.

“Just a single phrase.”

With a smile, the woman handed the notebook over to me. “I suppose he must have been too embarrassed to say it to my face.”

I took the notebook from her and opened it.

“.....”

Sure enough, inside was written something that would have been a little embarrassing to say to someone face-to-face.



The inside of the library was packed with books as far as the eye could see.

It was just as you’d expect in a place that called itself the Land of Letters. The light streaming down from the glass-paneled ceiling illuminated all the shelves full of books.

“Welcome to the library.”

As my teacher and I approached the reception desk together, the woman sitting on the other side of the counter informed us that the rumors had been accurate. At that library, you could borrow ordinary publications, but it was also possible to bring your own notebook to deposit there.

“Well then, maybe you’ll be kind enough to take this girl’s notebook for safekeeping,” my teacher said to the receptionist, and she pushed me forward.

I looked up at her reflexively. “You don’t want to leave something, teacher?”

“Nah.” She shook her head casually. “I’ve only ever done bad things in this country. Even if I wrote something, I wouldn’t be able to come back and get it.” My teacher shrugged. “One day, when you’re an adult,” she added, “you’ve got to come back to this place.”

“...All right then, please take care of this.” I handed my notebook to the receptionist with both hands.

I had filled it in overnight. After worrying endlessly about what I should write, in the end, I had written the kind of sweet nonsense that would give me a

good laugh later, when I was an adult who had forgotten she had even written such a thing.

I had written it for my adult self.

“We are honored to receive it.”

The receptionist accepted my notebook. After staring at it curiously for a few moments, she informed me that I could get it back the next time I visited the city by bringing my immigration inspection form to the library.

That was why I decided to visit again once I was grown.

Once I was so grown up that I had forgotten what I had written.

“What sort of things did you write?” my teacher asked as we left the library.

I answered her, “I posed a question for my future self.”

On a matter I’m a little embarrassed to mention out loud.



I was taken into custody by the city guard, harshly interrogated for a long time—well into the evening, in fact—and then on top of that, I was forced to pay a fine, and then finally, I received a severe scolding before they eventually set me free.

After all that, I was already completely exhausted by the time I met up with Miss Fran. I didn’t even have enough energy left to eat dinner.

“I’m back...”

My voice was weak when I finally made it to the inn. I was completely drained.

“Welcome back. Looks like you had a rough time.” Miss Fran greeted me cheerfully as always. She seemed to be in the middle of reading something. She was lying down on the bed with a book in her hands.

She’s certainly made herself at home...

Seems like she had a completely different day than I did... I’m jealous...

As I gazed enviously at my teacher, my eyes landed on a little notebook lying on the bed beside her.

“.....?”

I had seen that notebook before. It had a familiar cover that said: *The Book of Infinite Possibilities*.

What’s this?

“...Did I...give you that notebook?”

I don’t remember doing that, but...?

“No.” Miss Fran shook her head. “I’ve always had this.”

“But I feel I’m the only person who would think up such a strange title.”

“You may be surprised to find that you’re not alone.”

“Who else, then?”

“Someone very strange.”

“Must be. I can tell by looking at it.”

“.....”

Miss Fran made a face that was difficult to describe.

“Anyway, I’m extremely tired after today, so I’m going to hurry up and have a bath, then go to bed right away...”

The moment I had reached the inn, all my weariness had come crashing down on me at once.

I don’t want to do anything else today.

“That makes sense.” Miss Fran nodded from her bed. “Get a good night’s sleep.”

Her voice was much gentler than usual. As she spoke, she waved me off with her hand.

When I looked back at her, I saw her smiling nostalgically.



True to her word, Elaina had her bath, and then, after barely drying her hair, she said good night and flopped into bed without even eating dinner.

She must have been exhausted from her ordeal. Before long, I started to hear snoring coming from her bed.

I had also finished reading my book, so I closed it with a *snap* and got up.

Sitting nearby was a single slim notebook.

It was the one I had written to myself all those years ago.

“.....”

I opened the notebook.

The thin notebook had only one page remaining. It looked like the version of me in the past had had some trouble finding the right words and had rewritten the same entry again and again, only to tear out the page every time.

“So, in the end, I was only able to write this one thing, huh?”

Just like the man I had met so long ago, I must have had too many things I wanted to write and no way to sort them all out. No matter what I wrote, I must have felt embarrassed by it.

In my desperation, I had settled on a single phrase. It filled the entire page.

A message was written there for me, from the past to the future.

Maybe it was also a message for someone other than me.

“.....” I peered over at Elaina, who was still sleeping peacefully in bed.

She was lying on her side, breathing deeply in her sleep. She had seemed awfully tired. Now it looked like she was completely immersed in a dream.

She doesn't seem likely to wake up.

“.....”

Just for a moment, I felt the urge to cause mischief.

“...Hey.” I poked at her cheek.

“Nnh...” Elaina frowned in irritation. But as I had expected, she seemed to be in dreamland, and her quiet breathing remained steady.

She's really asleep.

“.....”

Perhaps because I'd just finished reading one of his books, the words of the man I'd once met passed through my mind.

“Every story, every thought, first has meaning when you put it into words. It may as well not exist while it's still in your head.”

That was what he had told me long ago.

Whether you get your feelings across or not, ultimately, if you don't put them down in words, they don't mean anything, he had explained.

“.....”

Now that she was sleeping, there wouldn't be much meaning in me saying the words to Elaina.

Because ultimately, they wouldn't make it through to her.

So I decided to treat the moment purely as a rehearsal.

I stroked her long, soft hair. She frowned a little, as if it tickled, and I put one finger on her exposed ear and whispered, “Thank you so much for saving me back then.”

I'm here by your side now because you saved my life long ago.

My past self asked my present self a question.

Just one question, about something a little embarrassing to say out loud.

Do you still like Elaina? the notebook asked.

Yes, indeed, I thought.

“I love her.”



The next morning, Elaina and I ate our breakfast in the hotel room, rubbing our sleepy eyes, then set out to leave the city at a leisurely pace.

We could have done a little more sightseeing, but Elaina had suggested, “Why don’t we leave today?” so we’d decided to do that. I don’t suppose she wanted to stay all that long in a place where she’d been so sternly reprimanded.

She was so much like her mother. I was sure that long ago, my teacher must have also actually wanted to leave the country as soon as possible, even as she headed for the library. The only reason she hadn’t left right away was because I had been there with her.

“.....”

I walked along, gazing aimlessly around the city, taking one last look.

A cobblestone road stretched out straight ahead. The buildings lining each side had white walls that were dazzlingly bright in the sunlight. Along the road, I saw a bookstore, a post office, a café where one could read books, a museum dedicated to famous authors, and a sign for a store related to their writings.

This was the Land of Letters.

A wonderful place, full of lots of words.

“Nnh...”

And then, just as the city gates came into view, Elaina turned and stared directly into my eyes and started moving her mouth impatiently, as if she had something stuck in her teeth.

.....?

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

Elaina stared at me in absolute silence.

“.....”

Then, after letting out another groan and brooding for a bit, she said, “To tell the truth, there’s one thing I forgot to say to you earlier.”

My, my...

“What is it? Were there more crimes to confess...?”

More fraud? Is there more to say about your schemes? I’m going to get cross with you this time, you know!

I frowned a little at the thought.

But it seemed my conjecture was completely misplaced.

“That’s not it!” Elaina asserted coldly.

She looked a little sulky.

“Well then, what?”

I stopped walking and asked her again, tilting my head.

We were right in front of the gate.

Elaina fell silent again and made a troubled, slightly peevish face, then let out a huge sigh.

“Miss Fran.”

She took one step toward me and straightened her back.

Then she brushed my hair and placed one finger on my ear.

And she whispered a single phrase.

“You’re welcome.”

It took a little bit of time before I understood what her words meant and what they were referring to.

After standing up tall for just one moment, Elaina then immediately stepped out in front of me, said, “Well then, shall we go?” and walked on toward the gate.

She didn’t turn to look back at me for some time.

“...Yes, let’s.”

I followed after her footsteps, feeling a little relieved that she didn’t look back.



CHAPTER 4

Witch Trial

“Court is now in session.”

I regained consciousness to the sound of these words being issued from a judge’s bench.

“.....Huh?”

For some reason, I was in handcuffs, standing in the center of a room I had never seen before.

Well now, where could this be?

I surveyed my surroundings.

The room had an atmosphere of strict ceremony. There were long tables to my right and left. When I looked forward, a familiar face was peering down at me from the platform. When I turned around to try to escape that piercing gaze, I saw a lot of people looking up at me from the other side of a simple railing. A commotion ran through the crowd.

“That’s the famous Elaina...?”

“Tch! Don’t look her in the eye! She’ll make you fall madly in love!”

“She sure does look like a criminal...”

“She looks like she would commit international fraud.”

The many whispered comments that were flying about pierced me like knives.

Every person there was directing their hostility toward me.

But I was just confused. I had no idea what was going on. I didn’t understand what on earth I was doing in such a place.

I know I went to sleep in the inn yesterday, and then...

“Silence!”

The strike of a wooden mallet rang out sharply, followed by silence. I had been about to sink into a sea of thought when the sound brought my conscious mind back to the room.

It was then that I finally realized this was a place for judging crimes.

I was in a courtroom.

That must make the person up on the platform the judge.

“First of all, I ask the defendant,” the judge said, staring at me, “what is your name?”

The defendant...? Is that me?

Leaving aside the question of whether I committed any crime, I don't have any memory of being dragged into court...?

“Um...Elaina.”

But the authoritative atmosphere compelled me to answer the question.

“Your occupation?”

“...Traveler.”

And immediately after I answered...

“Objection!”

...someone stood up behind the long table to my left.

“The defendant is giving false testimony. I do not believe that ‘traveler’ is her occupation.”

The woman who made this clear declaration to the judge was an adult with long black hair. She was striking a particularly pompous pose. She wore a black robe and a triangular hat, and upon her breast, she had a star-shaped brooch.

She was a witch.

Actually, she was Miss Fran.

“Counselor.” The judge scowled at Miss Fran. “Now is the time for questions to establish the identity of the defendant. Please take your seat. Besides, it is the prosecution’s job to expose any falsehoods.”

The judge was seriously angry.

“...I’m sorry. I just wanted to say it; I wasn’t thinking.”

Miss Fran shrank suddenly and sat back down.

“Defendant. Where are you from?”

“The Peaceful Country of Robetta.”

“I see. Thank you very much.”

I didn’t really understand what was happening, but the questions seemed to be over.

Just then, I realized something.

“*Stare.....*”

The prosecutor was looking at me. Boring a hole right through me, staring so hard I could practically hear it.

“.....”

“*Staaare.....*” The girl sitting in the prosecutor’s seat had a familiar face. She had sleek white hair and a ribbon on her head. She looked like she might be a little bit younger than me.

And for some reason, she was just as familiar to me as Miss Fran.

“...Huh?”

In fact, she was Avelia.

Why is she here...?

What is going on?

I looked behind me again.

Looking carefully at the other side of the railing—the people sitting in the spectators’ seats all had familiar faces.

“Ah...there are so many girls here...!” There was a bespectacled archaeologist, looking around her with her eyes sparkling for some reason. Viola.

“Indecent.” Beside Viola was a tan-skinned mage who spat out that single word. Atolie.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...” A goth girl was fondling an apple with a wide grin on her face.

“If ghouls got in here, there’s no doubt they would turn us all into the living dead...” Anna was there, vigilantly watching her surroundings with a serious look.

“Elaina...I believed in you...” There was a red-haired student, crying for some reason. Ariadne.

“The sins of humans run deep...” I saw a girl with white hair and a faraway look. Luciella.

As far as I could see, the entire crowd was made up of my acquaintances. I knew the names of everybody who had come to watch the trial, and I wasn’t even sure where it was being held.

All the people I had met on my journey so far were there, in that room.

“...So that’s what’s going on, huh?”

I still had no idea what in the world I could be on trial for, but in that moment, I realized one thing.

This is a dream, right?

This has to be a dream, right?

“Now then, moving on to the trial...”

“Objection!”

“Counselor.”

“Sorry.”

Apparently, this tedious dream was going to feature a trial for my crimes.



“I will read the indictment.”

Avelia stood up behind the long table to my right. She was wearing an extremely serious expression.

“The defendant has been staying in this country since last week, making sudden advances on girls as they walk around town. Moreover, not satisfied with simply causing those girls to fall madly in love with her, she has been stealing money from them by asking for loans, promising to pay back double, and then disappearing into the casino, never to be seen again.”

“Wait, I don’t remember doing any of that...”

Who the heck is she talking about?

“The defendant has repeated such conduct all around town, defrauding dozens of victims. The total amount of damages in the week leading up to today is about one thousand gold pieces. She is the lowest of scoundrels.”

“That’s awfully harsh!”

“Considering the facts of the case, the death penalty seems to be most appropriate.”

“Why would you have to recommend the death penalty for such flimsy reasons...?”

But the judge paid absolutely no attention to my question. “Understood. Thank you very much, prosecutor.” She bowed once.

Whoa, apparently the judge won’t listen to my objections...

Well, that’s fine with me.

By the way...

“Why are you wearing cat ears, Avelia?”

“Shut up.”

Avelia’s cat ears bobbed as she sat down abruptly. It seemed that since I was in a dream, things that would be impossible in real life could easily happen.

...I mean, to begin with, the accusation that I’ve been going around town seducing all the girls is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.

“Defendant. Are the contents of the indictment accurate?”

The judge looked down at me.

No, nuh-uh, no way.

“They’re complete nonsense. First of all, I may get hit on sometimes, but I have never seduced anyone.”

“...So you deny the charges. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I guess it is. First of all—”

“Objection!”

Miss Fran stood up, striking a commanding pose as she interrupted the conversation between myself and the judge. “Elaina, just a second. What do you mean, you’ve gotten hit on before? Won’t you tell me all the details?”

“Counselor...” The judge narrowed her eyes.

“Specifically, how often are people making passes at you? And has anyone ever offered to buy you a meal or anything?”

“Counselor!”

“Your Honor, I’m just curious.”

If possible, I would prefer to just move on...

“Well, yes. Actually, I’ve grown a bit curious as well.”

The judge, too...

As a strange atmosphere descended on the courtroom, a hand shot into the air from my right side.

“Your Honor.” Avelia stood up. “I’ve invited the victims who were defrauded by the accused here today as witnesses. I request a witness examination.”

Avelia completely ignored what was going on.

The judge groaned. “Hmm...”

“Oh no...” Miss Fran frowned, looking a little disappointed.

You’re really curious...? You’re really that curious about my love life...?

I feel like you could tell I’m not really with anyone just by listening to the stories of my travels...

Wait, but...

Did she just say “witness examination”?

“...So if I’m not mistaken, you’ve summoned all the victims?” I asked.

Avelia nodded to me in the affirmative. “Most of them, yes.”

Then the judge struck her mallet. “Very well, we will begin the witness examination—”

“Objection!”

“Counselor!”

“Sorry, I thought it might be getting to a good time to say it...”

“Seriously, I will throw you out of here.”

“.....”

I ignored Miss Fran as she got scolded rather sharply by the judge and instead turned and looked behind me. It was obvious that everyone in the room was an acquaintance of mine. Well, since it was a dream, since they were pulled from my memories, that only made sense.

.....

Based on how things have gone so far, I've got a bad feeling about this...



Once the witness examination was underway, I was dismissed. I took my seat next to Miss Fran.

“Miss Fran, what is all this?” I asked, tugging at her sleeve.

She turned to me with her usual cheery smile and answered, “Well...it’s a dream, isn’t it?” Then she picked up again where she had left off. “So how often would you say you get hit on...?”

What are you going on about?

“Do I have to answer you right here and now...?”

Even I have some shame, you know?

“As your counsel, don’t you think I ought to know everything about the person I’m defending?”

“But, miss, surely you already know most of what there is to know about me?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve been together for a whole year. In fact, we’re still traveling together now. At this point, there aren’t any big secrets I’m hiding from you!”

“Goodness...”

Miss Fran’s cheeks softened a little.

“Your Honor, the defendant and her counselor are flirting.” Avelia the prosecutor scowled harshly at us.

“Seriously, I will throw you out of here.”

The judge scowled at us, too.

Why are they so relentless toward me if this is my own dream...?

I let out a sigh at the nonsensical situation created by my own mind, but Miss Fran must have misunderstood me somehow, because she patted me on the shoulder.

“It’ll be all right, Elaina. I’ll try to prove your innocence,” she declared, full of confidence for some reason.

...Actually, I don’t care whether I’m guilty or not right now. What I’d like at the moment is to wake up from this dream.

Not long after that, the witness examination began.

The first person to be summoned to the stand was a girl with purple hair

whom I remembered from somewhere. She was wearing an extremely gaudy robe, along with a star-shaped brooch.

“I’m up first!”

She wore a self-satisfied expression.

After introducing her as Sharon, one of the victims, Avelia began the direct questioning.

“Sharon. Do you recall being hit on by the defendant over there?”

“Yes.” Sharon nodded effortlessly. “So listen, when I was walking around town, right? Suddenly, Elaina came up to me like, ‘You’re so cute, Sharon, you’re really cute, oh-hoh-hoh!’”

Who was that supposed to be?

“And then, you see, I turned her down, like, ‘Stop iiiit, what the heck, Elainaaa?!’ but...”

You don’t even sound like yourself. Are you going through a crisis of characterization?

But she maintained her humorous spirit as she began her testimony.

To sum it up, this was basically her story:

Apparently, the version of me in her recollection had put my arm around her shoulder and jerked her toward me, asking, “By the way, Sharon, I’ve got a good money-making scheme going just now... How about it? If all goes well, it could be a chance to get rich quick...”

“Huh?! Get rich quick...? What? I’m intrigued!”

“Oh-hoh-hoh! I bet you are. But there’s a little problem with this scheme, you hear me...? I can’t pull it off without your magic. Not without the magic of a brilliant witch like you, got it?”

According to Sharon, I had then proposed gathering up all the stones lying around nearby, using Sharon’s magic to transform them into jewels, and selling them off at the pawnshop. It was a very questionable scheme.

“See, I may be a witch, but I don’t think I can do that kind of magic... I’m not as powerful as you, Sharon, so I don’t think it would turn out well at all...,” I had whined in defeat.

“Heh-heh-heh.” Sharon had put on a proud expression. “I see, it sure sounds like you need the power of a brilliant witch like me. Elaina, for a witch, you really don’t have much power compared to me, do you?”

“Hey now, Sharon, even I get angry, you know? Sheesh,” I said, adding in a quick flick to Sharon’s forehead.

“Heh-heh-heh!”

“Oh-hoh-hoh!”

According to Sharon’s recollection, after I enlisted her help turning all the rocks into gems, I had told her that I was going to sell them all off. But apparently, I had never returned.

At the conclusion of Sharon’s retelling, Avelia spit on the floor and said, “The lowest of scoundrels!”

.....

There are so many holes in that story, though...

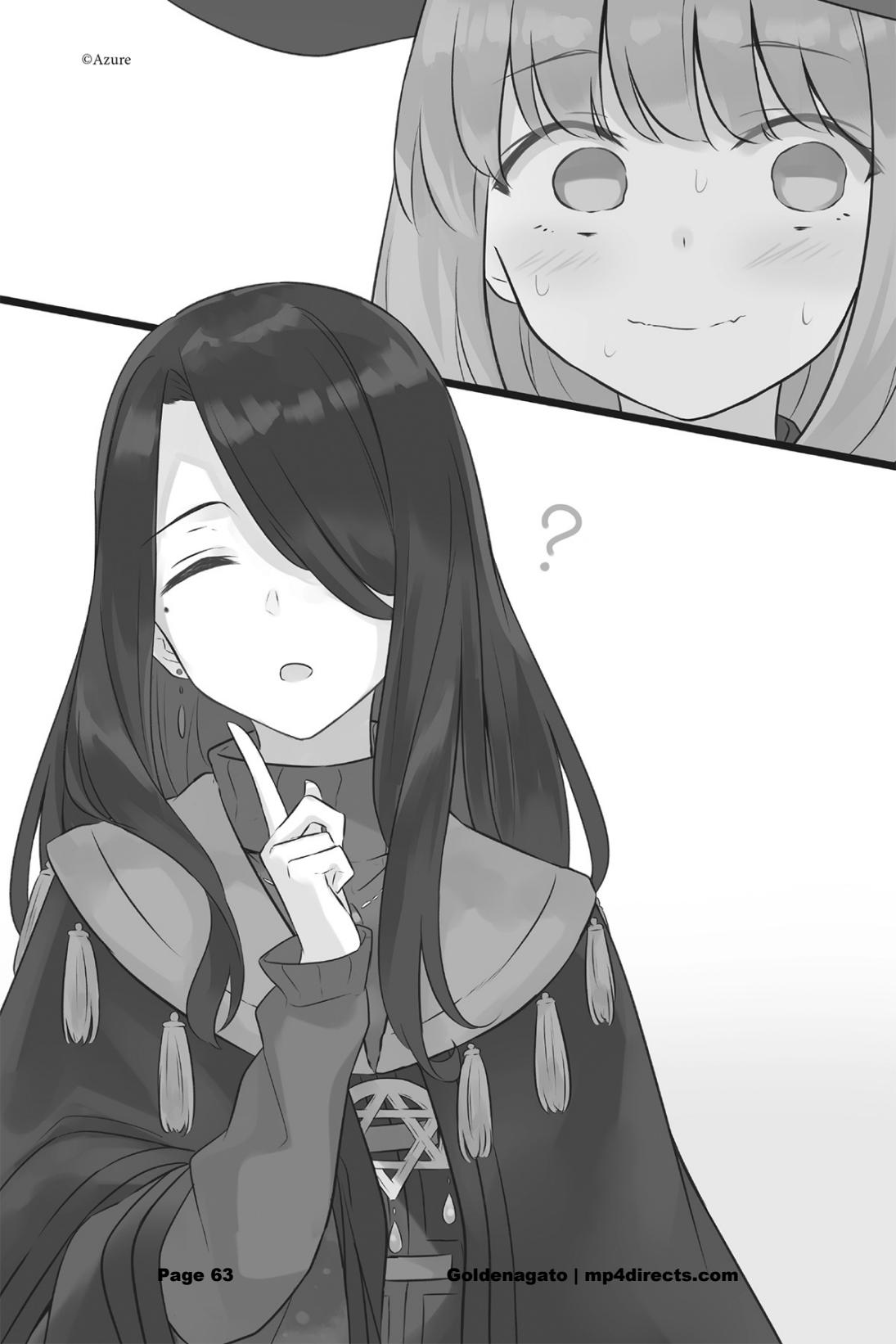
First of all, Sharon can’t even use magic, can she? Am I dreaming of a world where she can?

“Anyway, my story is basically about how Elaina caused me a lot of trouble.”

Sharon gave an exaggerated shrug. Her direct examination ended there. It goes without saying, but I didn’t have a single memory of anything in her testimony.

Miss Fran stood up and began cross-examining Sharon.

“Before the cross-examination, let’s begin with some small talk. Sharon... you are a witch, is that right? That brooch on your chest certainly offers proof that you are. My pupil also became a witch at a fairly young age, but you’re outstanding, too. Really incredible.”



The cross-examination was off to a shaky start. There was no tension at all.

"That's right. I guess I'm just the type of person who's blessed with a lot of talent," Sharon answered with a self-satisfied expression.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Then Miss Fran set a wand down in front of Sharon. "By the way, if you don't mind, could we ask you to perform some magic here for us today?"

It sounded like she was just curious. Maintaining her cheerful expression, Miss Fran asked Sharon again, "I don't do so well in this formal atmosphere... could I ask you to cast one spell, just to liven up the room? Please?"

"...Huh? A spell? Now, right here?"

"Yes. Won't you be so kind?" Miss Fran stepped closer to her.

"....." Sharon was silent.

"Hmm? Whatever is the matter?" Miss Fran came even closer.

"....." Sharon turned away.

"Is there some reason why you can't do it...?" Miss Fran put her hand on Sharon's shoulder.

"....." Sharon jumped in surprise.

"Sharon...?" Miss Fran whispered, "I'm asking to see you use magic, you know? If you're a witch, you can do that for me, can't you?" Miss Fran chuckled meaningfully.

I knew Miss Fran better than Sharon, though—well enough to know that she always laughed like that.

"....."

Sharon's face grew stiff.

She had never been a mage to begin with, just an ordinary person who yearned to be a witch and was copying the aesthetic.

When Miss Fran placed a wand in front of her, the look on her face said: "*Has this woman realized that I'm not a magic user...?*"

The drops of sweat trickling down her face were showing her inner thoughts clearly. She was so easy to read.

I bet she couldn't even use magic in her dreams.

"...What's the matter?" Miss Fran peered down at Sharon.

Sharon curled up on herself even more under Miss Fran's point-blank stare.

Her face contorted like she might burst out crying at any moment, as if she was thinking: *Wh-whaaaaat do I do...?! I can't use magic...ahh...!*

Miss Fran examined her face and said, "Oh...? Don't tell me you're...not feeling well?"

“...!” That was the lifeboat Sharon needed. She nodded dramatically several times. “Th-that’s right! I’m a little under the weather!”

“Goodness...that is a problem...” Miss Fran frowned. “And there you are standing at the witness stand, despite feeling unwell. I don’t think you’ll be able to give accurate testimony like that, do you? You must be struggling, your mind in a haze, right?”

“That’s right! I might collapse any moment!”

“Indeed, indeed. I suppose you’d like to go home already?”

“I want to go home!”

The courtroom grew noisy.

I doubt that it was Miss Fran’s intention, but the result of her cross-examination was that the accuracy of Sharon’s testimony was cast into doubt, and one way or another, any evidence she had offered was disqualifed.

This was more or less how the rest of the eyewitness questioning proceeded.

The second witness was a girl who had her chestnut-colored hair tied up in two pigtails behind her head.

It was Yuuri.

“I, too, was seduced by the defendant.” Unbelievably, she hopped up to sit on top of the witness stand, and what’s more, she crossed her legs, and furthermore, she sniffed the aroma of her coffee and took the time to say, with a composed expression, “Pairing a day in court with a good cup of coffee sure is... wonderful...” After letting that cryptic statement hang in the air for a moment, she finally began her testimony.

“Right, so it happened two nights ago, as I was drinking my coffee in my usual hard-boiled way.”

“...? I’m sorry. How in the world does one drink coffee ‘in a hard-boiled way’?”

“.....”

Yuuri was silent for a little while in the face of this unexpected quip from Miss Fran.

She sat perfectly still, not moving a muscle, for thirty seconds.

“Right, so it happened two nights ago.” Ultimately, she nonchalantly started over from the beginning, as if she had never been interrupted. “I was drinking my coffee in my usual hard-boiled—”

“Huh?” Miss Fran tilted her head to one side.

“And so I was saying...hard-boiled—” Yuuri quickly became flustered.

“Um, excuse me. I’m not overly familiar with such things, so I must ask you to please educate me... What, specifically, do you mean by ‘hard-boiled’?”

“Huh? What is *hard-boiled*...? Ummm...” Yuuri was obviously perplexed. “I guess...it refers to things that are like my present self?” Consequently, her answer was in the form of a question.

“I see. So in short, you’re saying that rudely drinking coffee on top of a table makes someone hard-boiled? That everyone in the world who gets called hard-boiled has the poor manners to sit down on top of the table to drink their coffee, is that it?”

“Uh, no, I just kind of thought this looked cool, so...”

“...? Why would drinking coffee on top of a table be cool?”

“Well, um...”

Basically, there was no great significance to Yuuri’s actions; she had just gotten a wild idea to sit on top of the witness stand. Yuuri’s face was already flushed red.

“Well!” Miss Fran frowned again, seeing her reaction. “Your Honor! It appears that this witness is also not feeling well.”

In the end, for one reason or another, Yuuri’s testimony was also disqualified.

“Miss Fran...that was amazing.”

“Oh? What was?” Miss Fran tilted her head curiously.

She didn’t seem to realize what she was doing. But if Miss Fran continued with her carefree cross-examinations that were at odds with the serious atmosphere of the courtroom, the pool of witnesses would likely run dry before too long.

I was hoping to wake up before that happened, though.

After that, the witness examination continued.

The next person to take the witness stand was a blond-haired princess wearing a dress.

It was Chocolat.

“To begin with, Elaina hit on me while I was out strolling by myself.”

Miss Fran nodded approvingly as the princess began her testimony. In her hand, she was holding some documents about Chocolat.

“Got it. By the way, Miss Chocolat, I see that there is a woman you are presently dating...”

“No, I’m not dating a young woman currently.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“We’re married.”

“My goodness. Then that makes it adultery, doesn’t it?”

“Elaina taught me how to flirt in a manner unbecoming of my station...”

Chocolat stared at me as her face reddened.

Wait...but I don’t remember...anything like that...

I averted my eyes with all my strength.

Just then...

“Objection!”

The roaring voice came from the spectators’ seats.

“Princess! What are you talking about, Princess?! You never told me about this!”

A woman with red hair was walking toward me with her sword drawn.

She was a knight who had a very close relationship with Princess Chocolat.

She was Rosamia.

Oh my, this isn’t good.

Of course, even in a dream, there was no way she could swing a sword around in a courtroom without getting in trouble, and she was arrested on the spot by the security guards.

“Princeeeeesss!”

Rosamia was slowly dragged away.

“So cool...”

Chocolat broke into a wide smile as she gazed after Rosamia. Somehow or another, her testimony concluded that “In the end, Rosamia is wilder and cooler than Elaina.”

Even though nothing had really happened, her testimony ended with me feeling like I had been unceremoniously dumped.

“...Oh, Elaina.” Miss Fran clapped a hand down on my shoulder.

“That’s not very comforting, so please stop...”

The next girl to take the witness stand had short, light green hair. She was wearing a light green coat, and for some reason, she was holding a piece of mail in her hand.

She scrawled some words on the back of the envelope.

I am Gardenia. I was seduced by Elaina just the other day.

“Huh? Why don’t you talk?”

“.....” Gardenia made a very annoyed-looking face and ran her pen

over the paper again.

Before long, she produced a single sentence.

This is my identity.

“Ah! Hang on! That’s my signature phrase! You ripped me off!”

For some reason, Sharon, who had slipped into the spectators’ seats, started making a fuss about having her signature phrase stolen, but Gardenia must have misunderstood her somehow.

Is it plagiarism for me to be the type of character who communicates by mail? All right then, I’ll use this. She held up a sketchbook.

That’s not the issue.

That’s my identity!

Someone added their own objections from the gallery. It was Eihemia, the Quicksand Witch, whom I had met previously in the Country of Truth Tellers. She was another person who used a sketchbook instead of speaking out loud.

That’s also my signature phrase! You ripped me off! was written in her sketchbook.

Then Sharon held up her own sketchbook. For some reason, she looked awfully belligerent. After that, the three of them ended up making a big fuss about which catchphrase belonged to whom, and what identity belonged to whom, and so on, and Gardenia’s testimony was also clouded.

“I think I can probably see the future.”

The next girl, who sounded awfully uncertain for someone claiming to see the future, was Anemone. Dressed in stiff, formal clothes, sure enough, as soon as she took the stand, she told the court, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, “I, too, was seduced by Elaina, probably.”

Avelia, who was in the middle of examining the witness, nodded. “And what does that mean, to say you were probably seduced? Is your memory of the past hazy in exchange for being able to see the future?”

“No, probably not. This is probably just a verbal tick. Since I can see the future, probably, you might say I’m certain about the facts; that’s probably what it means.”

“A tick...so basically in the same vein as me ending my sentences with ‘you know’?”

“Yeah, something like that, probably.”

“I get it, you know.”

“Probably.”

“You know.”

“Probably, probably.”

“You know, you know.”

“Probably, probably, probably.”

“Your Honor, that’s basically what’s going on here, you know?”

Avelia looked around the room, wearing a confident expression for some reason.

“I didn’t follow any of that,” the judge replied ruthlessly.

Maybe because the judge at this sloppy trial was very sloppy herself, or maybe because Avelia the sitting prosecutor was sloppy, all the people who took the witness stand backed down after just a little conversation, without pinning a single crime on me.

The next witness was the same way.

“...Why should *I* have to testify, huh?”

She had blond hair. Dressed in a white robe, she kept her pipe in her mouth as she let out a puff of smoke.

She was the Midnight Witch, Sheila.

“Sheila...you...” Miss Fran was dumbfounded. “When did this happen? When on earth did you develop such a relationship with Elaina? Be honest, spit it out!”

“Oh, I don’t recall getting seduced.”

“So then did you seduce her?!”

“I didn’t, and I also don’t recall lending her any money.”

“Is that so...? That must mean...you were so engrossed in the affair that you don’t even remember...” Miss Fran had a distant look on her face.

Sheila was wearing her own distant look. “You really go on the offensive when your pupil is involved...” Actually, it was more like a look of scorn.

I knew I wasn’t supposed to be allowed to interject freely during witness testimony, but I was in a dream, after all, and I had figured out from the proceedings so far that anything was fair game, so I raised my hand.

“Miss, I don’t go for smokers.”

“I see.” Miss Fran nodded firmly. “Well then, it must have been some kind of mistake that you were brought here. Thank you for your time.”

“Ah, sure...” Sheila sighed and blew out a cloud of smoke with it.

“By the way, smoking is prohibited inside the courtroom, Sheila.”

“Shut up.”

In the end, Sheila was removed from the stand after paying a steep fine.

After her, more girls took the stand, one after another, but not one of them had any plausible testimony to offer.

It was enough to make me think they were doing this for fun.

Or maybe...

If this was all happening in my head...

All the people I hadn't thought about in a long time were coming to take the stand.

"I'll go next."

A blond girl of about ten suddenly appeared on the witness stand. Priscilla.

"Have you ever seen the defendant before?" Miss Fran asked, pointing at me. Priscilla nodded readily.

"What is the nature of your relationship?"

"A depraved, adult relationship...yes."

Priscilla's cheeks flushed.

She glanced over at me, looking embarrassed.

.....

What is she talking about?

"An adult relationship...?" Miss Fran's voice trembled slightly. "What kind of relationship is that, specifically...?"

"Specifically, you ask...?" Wriggling her body around pitifully, Priscilla answered, "Well, we vowed to spend our days together in a drug-addled haze."

.....

Miss Fran was staring at me with a blank expression. She had gone right past contempt—it was like she was looking at something that wasn't even human.

I really don't want to be misunderstood here...

"Um, I don't have any memory of that, but..."

Though I do recall being somewhat unilaterally dragged into a similar situation. I do not remember consenting to participate.

"How cruel! You did play with me, and you know it!"

Priscilla ran out of the courtroom, crying as she went. There was a bottle of eye drops lying on the witness stand after she left.

The next person to take the stand was a girl with coral-colored hair and youthful features.

"I'm Little Matryoshka, meow!"

"Hold it right there." Avelia the prosecutor interrupted the girl on the witness stand. "We've already got one cat character, and that's me, so you're not

allowed.”

Avelia had a strange sense of pride about it.

“Um, Little Matryoshka isn’t really trying to be a cat character, though...”

Matryoshka was bewildered by the unexpected blame cast on her by the prosecutor, who was supposed to be on her side.

“Anyway, it’s not allowed,” Avelia insisted. “You don’t have permission to talk like that.”

“Uhhh...I’m not really sure what to do, even if you say it’s not allowed...”

“Anyway, you’ve got to stop.”

Avelia hit her with a firm “No.”

This is the most absurd thing ever...

“.....”

“.....”

The door to the courtroom had been left ajar. I could see Lucie, who I had once encountered when I met the Divine Cat, and Misty, who had worked at the cat café, peering through the gap with concern on their faces.

“...Seems like they’re not allowing more than one of the same type of character.”

“...Well, I guess we’re not welcome, then.”

The two of them looked at Avelia’s cat ears and then left, discouraged.

And then Miss Fran began her cross-examination of Matryoshka.

“Um...excuse me, but according to these documents, Matryoshka, you are over one hundred years old, but...”

“That’s right. Little Matryoshka has been alive for about a hundred years.”

Matryoshka suffers from the curse of immortality.

In short, she can’t age, and she can’t die.

“Your skin is quite smooth for someone who is over one hundred years old.”

Miss Fran launched into small talk without knowing anything about Matryoshka’s situation. “Um, would it be all right for me to just touch your cheek?”

“Huh? You’re making me blush, no way!” Matryoshka demurred, but it was an act. Miss Fran took her behavior as an affirmative and stroked her cheek without reservation.

“That’s incredible...! How are you able to maintain such lovely skin?”

“Huuuh? Is it reeeeally...? Oh, stop it!” Matryoshka sounded displeased, but she was suppressing a smile.

“I’ve never seen such lovely skin on a hundred-year-old!”

“Eh-heh-heh-heh...”

“How on earth do you maintain such youthfulness?”

“Let me see, I suppose dying at regular intervals is the secret.”

“Huh?”

“Hmm?”

Matryoshka made her exit, leaving behind a strange sense of discomfort. She hadn't really had any testimony. She had just gotten her cheeks stroked.

And then the last person to take the witness stand for the day was—

“I have experienced being seduced by Elaina.”

A girl with white hair that went down about to her shoulders and a headband. She was dressed in the uniform of some chivalric order.

“Witness, your name?” Avelia asked the girl, whom she actually knew better than anyone who had taken the stand so far.

And the girl answered, “Amnesia.”

.....

I had a feeling she would be trouble.



As part of her direct examination, Avelia asked Amnesia, “When were you seduced by the defendant?”

“I think...it was yesterday.”

She placed her hand over her mouth and hummed thoughtfully, then after retrieving the memory, she answered, “Yesterday, yes. When I was walking along by myself, Elaina called out to me. It had been a while since we'd seen each other, so I remember clearly how we stopped and talked by the side of the road for a while.”

“I see. So you two had a secret rendezvous when I wasn't around.”

Avelia bit her lower lip and whined.

Don't look at me.

I'm begging you, please, don't look at me with those eyes...

“And then, while we were in the middle of our conversation, Elaina suddenly announced, ‘Right now, I'm actually out of money.’ From what I know of Elaina's personality, it's very unusual for her to run out of money, so I asked her —what happened? And then—”

Allow me to relay the events that followed as I remember them based on Amnesia's testimony.

According to Amnesia, I had said something along these lines to her the day before:

“I kind of lost all the money I had gambling... My wallet is completely empty... What will I do...? As things are, I—I...”

Apparently, I had said something like that, crying as I spoke.

Amnesia testified that she had felt her heart skip a beat, seeing me in a rare moment of weakness and vulnerability.

Avelia clutched her chest when she heard that. Probably for some unrelated reason.

It should go without saying that because of who I am, it’s unthinkable that I would ever lose all my money gambling and then get depressed and cry about it. But since I was in a dream, I figured there was probably no point in objecting too strongly.

“A-are you all right? Elaina, how much do you need?” Amnesia had pulled out her wallet while trying to comfort me.

As I wiped my tears, I’d replied, “Tell me, how much have you got right now?”

“Huh?”

“How much do you have?”

“Um...about ten gold pieces.”

“Then ten gold pieces is what I need.”

“Um...if I give you that, then I’ll be—”

“*Sniffle...*”

“Ah, sorry, Elaina! Please don’t cry, okay? I’ll give you the money.”

“Yay, thank you so much! I’ll pay you back twofold!”

Then, according to her, I had disappeared into the casino, tossing out that line as I dashed off.

And then, as I’m sure you can imagine, I never came back.

Goodness, what an awful woman Amnesia had been with.

Who could that have been?

That’s right, it was me.

.....

No, it wasn’t me, but...

They were talking about the bad things I had done in the dream world. But even so, the viciousness of Dream Elaina was beyond words.

Avelia was angrier than I had ever seen her before. “I demand capital punishment after all! That’s all I have to say! F@#\$ you!”

That concluded her direct examination.

Then Miss Fran stood up.

"Hello, Amnesia. I am Elaina's teacher. My name is Fran."

Miss Fran walked slowly toward Amnesia. "After listening to your story just now, I have one question—what is the nature of your relationship with Elaina?"

"We're friends."

"Friends? I see, so you're friends?" Miss Fran sounded a little unconvinced. "But if you really are friends, wouldn't that be inconsistent with the testimony you just gave?"

"...?"

Amnesia cocked her head.

Miss Fran stared directly at the confused girl and pointed out the inconsistency.

"Earlier, you testified that your heart skipped a beat when you encountered Elaina. Would you say that is an appropriate feeling to have toward a friend...?"

...She pointed out something that seemed unrelated to the trial.

Is that really important? Must we really establish that clearly?

"....."

Amnesia winced for a moment at this unexpected line of questioning. But right afterward, she opened her mouth to speak, though still perplexed. "Ummm..." She looked awfully embarrassed. "Uh, well...maybe she's a little different than an ordinary friend..."

"Big sister... Auuugh!" Avelia groaned and banged her head against her desk.

Scary...

"I see." Miss Fran remained utterly composed. "When you say 'maybe,' that means it's true, without a doubt. You see, your teacher has been studying you."

But, miss, you're not even her teacher...

"....." But Amnesia seemed to confirm it, glancing at me and then casting her gaze downward.

"Big sister...!"

On the other hand, in her seat on the other side of the room, Avelia groaned again, and this time she fell over onto the floor. "Auuughhh!"

"Your Honor, the prosecution has had enough," I interjected, but Miss Fran continued with her questioning.

"So in what ways specifically is Elaina different from an ordinary friend?"

"Well, Elaina and I have done some traveling together, and back then, Elaina

was very kind to me, so I have slightly different feelings toward her than toward an ordinary friend, I guess..."

"I see."

Miss Fran was composed as always.

"Big sister...!"

From where she lay on the floor, Avelia extended a trembling hand toward Amnesia.

"Your Honor, the prosecution is spitting up blood."

But the questioning continued.

"In other words, there's a part of you that holds significant, special feelings for the defendant over there, isn't that right?"

"....." Amnesia nodded silently.

"I see."

Miss Fran nodded, too.

"...Ohhh!"

Avelia lost consciousness.

"Your Honor, the prosecution has lost consciousness."

Ultimately, Avelia was carried out of the courtroom.

I thought it would be nigh impossible to resume the trial without the prosecution, but actually, there was already a mood of closure hanging in the air.

While Amnesia was still behind the witness stand, some of the people in the gallery started to gather their things, and a few of them even stood up to leave.

It seemed like it was finally over.

"Elaina, we did it, eh?"

Miss Fran chuckled by my side.

"We sure did."

All I wanted was to hurry up and wake up so I could completely forget the dream had ever happened.

If we could just wrap everything up here without incident, that would be great.

But of course, it wouldn't be that easy.

"You there, the witness, Amnesia!"

It wasn't over.

Someone appeared, determined to resume the witness examination without the prosecution.

"A moment ago, you said you have a special relationship with the defendant.

Is that true?"

The question was fired off from directly opposite Amnesia.

The person who was looking down over the entire court from her podium—the judge—asked personally, "Is it true?"

Wearing a broad grin, the judge repeated the question.

The judge.

She was a girl with black hair that went down to her shoulders. A girl whom I would know anywhere. A girl who worked for the United Magic Association.

Saya was sitting in the judge's seat.

There she was, wearing an intimidatingly large smile.

"....."

Apparently, the real nightmare was just beginning.



Saya looked extremely angry as she banged her gavel over and over again.

"Hang on! What is the meaning of this, Elaina?! Are you cheating? You're cheating, aren't you?! I've kept silent this whooole trial because I'm playing the role of the judge, as far as it goes, but now! Don't you think you've been seducing a few too many girls?! How many conquests will you have to make before you're satisfied?! You philanderer!"

"What an awful thing to say!"

"But I don't hate you for being a lady-killer!"

"Well, which is it...?"

"When you're with someone for a long time, you learn to accept everything about your partner, no matter their faults..."

"I thought I knew what was going on, but I have no idea what you're talking about..."

The Saya in my dream was the same Saya as always.

Well, maybe she's not acting exactly like Saya does, but she certainly looks like Saya anyway.

"What's going on here, Elaina?! What kind of relationship do you have with her?!"

"It's a long story..."

"You've built enough of a relationship that it's a long story?! What's the meaning of this?!"

"....."

She's going to get mad at me no matter how I answer her, isn't she?

I didn't know how to check Saya's anger anymore. She was bursting into flames with the fires of jealousy.

"Elaina and I traveled together for a time."

Amnesia dumped oil onto the blaze.

"Together?! Travel?! Seriously?!" She took the bait with tremendous force.

"But Elaina and I never even did that!"

"Well, I mean, that's just sort of where our story took us..."

It's not like we decided to travel together because we already had a deep connection or something, you know?

No, really.

But Dream Saya wasn't listening to any such arguments.

"I want to go traveling with Elaina, too."

The only thing she was doing was puffing her cheeks out in a pout.

"Wait, um...listen, the circumstances being what they were back then, we just got together..." At that point, no matter what explanations I gave, she wasn't going to hear anything but excuses.

"You're so mean, Elaina... So your relationship with me was all business, huh...?" Amnesia said.

"Don't say it that way; you'll give people the wrong idea."

The inside of the courtroom was reduced to chaos. It wasn't just Saya—even Amnesia was acting weird.

Things were already out of control.

"Elaina."

In the middle of the chaos, Miss Fran grabbed the sleeve of my robe for a moment.

She looked at me with an expression of fondness, then said, "I'm currently traveling with Elaina, too, you know?"

"Why are you entering the fray, Miss Fran?"

"It seems like fun..."

The mood in the courtroom got silly.

And in a silly atmosphere, generally, once an idea catches on, it tends to get out of hand, so...

"Fine, then let's decide who will go traveling with Elaina next."

Saya made this puzzling proposal.

"Makes sense to me."

"No argument here."

And then Amnesia and Miss Fran agreed, like it was no big deal.

“Um, what about what I want...?”

Are you ignoring my wishes? Don't I have any human rights here? This is my dream!

The three of them huddled up and began an intense discussion.

“First things first, let's decide who is going to travel with Elaina next.”

“I've already gone traveling with her, so I'm not as ravenous for it as you are, Saya.”

“Me too. I'm actually traveling with Elaina as we speak, so I don't really...”

“Well! Then it's all right if I travel with her?”

“No, not exactly.”

“I'd be concerned for her safety if you two were alone together.”

“That's an awfully harsh estimation of me, isn't it?

About as harsh as the way you're treating me here, wouldn't you say? Wouldn't you say that's the case? Aren't I being left entirely out of the loop?

“Ah! I just had a great idea!” Amnesia had a flash of inspiration in the middle of their debate. “Let's make it so the person who can list the highest number of positive things about Elaina gets to travel with her.”

“Wait...”

What are you saying? Are you out of your mind? Seriously? Are you an idiot?

But Miss Fran nodded. “Sounds good.”

Then even Saya nodded. “Good idea.”

No, no, no, no.

“Um, seriously, what are you talking about? Listen, all three of you...”

But by the time I tried to stop them, it was already too late.

The real nightmare had begun.

“All right, I'll go first! Her face is cute!”

“Okay, I'm next. She's very kind.”

“Next is me. She's stingy with money.”

“Wait, you're only on the third turn and you're already listing bad points?!” I cried.

But there was no way the three of them could hear me butting in; they were so engrossed in their conversation.

“All right, next! She's good at magic!”

“She gets up early in the morning.”

“She likes bread.”

Then the three of them went on endlessly praising me. Right in front of me.
Of all things, right in front of me.

“And, um...she’s unexpectedly shy!”

“Uh...her hair’s pretty!”

“Um...she’s young.”

“And, uh...cute!”

“Um...she’s cute.”

“Right, she is cute.”

.....

“Cute!”

“Cute.”

“She’s cute.”

.....

“Cute!”

“Cute!”

“She’s cute!”

.....

Unable to restrain themselves, they surrounded me, repeatedly chanting,
“cute.”

“Huh? Doesn’t Elaina look like she’s blushing?”

“She is blushing. How cute.”

“You’re right, she is cute.”

“...Um.”

“Cute!”

“No, come on...seriously, stop it...”

My face was on fire. It was unbelievably embarrassing to be called cute over
and over again to my face. I’ve called myself a beautiful girl and other things
before as a joke, but this was unbearable.

Naturally, it was a nightmare.

There could be no crueler torture.

“Um...”

Averting my eyes from the three of them as hard as I could, I said, “I think

I'd prefer the death penalty, please..."



Then I woke up.

I was looking up at the simple ceiling of an inn room. A peaceful air wafted in through the open window, and I could hear the hustle and bustle of the people of the town outside.

It was morning.

I had finally been released from that nightmare.

"Elaina...are you all right? You seemed to be having quite the nightmare...," said a gentle voice.

When I sat up in bed, Miss Fran was staring at me as she sipped her coffee.

Unlike the Miss Fran in my dream, who had repeatedly called me cute, the Miss Fran before my eyes was her usual mellow self.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

Miss Fran chuckled quietly.

I answered her with a heavy sigh. "I had a terrible dream..."

"My, my. What kind of dream?"

"A dream where I cheated a bunch of girls and ended up getting sentenced to death."

"What kind of dream is that?"

"A nightmare."

"My, my..." Miss Fran set her coffee cup down, then sat on my bed. "But there must have been a little something good about the dream, too?"

What are you talking about?

"It was the most embarrassing thing I've ever been put through, so I don't think so."

"Oh really? Is that true?"

Huh, what a strange response.

"Why do you ask?"

Miss Fran smiled. "You looked like you were sleeping very peacefully early on. You seemed to be having a very good dream."

You say that, but...

"....."

I bet it was a happy experience for me to be able to see people who I will probably never meet again, even if it was in a dream.

I may have been getting called nasty names in my dream, but here in the real world, I probably looked quite content.

Miss Fran must have seen me like that.

How embarrassing.

It makes me wish even harder for that death penalty.

“But you were making a terrible racket there at the end... I’ve hardly ever seen you make such expressions. It was cute.”

.....

Cute, you say...?

“Miss...”

I gazed out the window.

Staring into the endless distance, I said, “For the time being, just for a while, I’m going to ask you to treat the word *cute* as a dirty word when you’re with me...”



CHAPTER 5

Mages in the Sky

I had deep regrets.

Regrets that I could never fully repent for, despite my best efforts.

My big sister was accused of a crime she couldn't have committed and expelled from our country after having all her memories erased.

Much time had already gone by since she came back to me, but I was still sorry for the mistakes of my past.

When my big sister was shunned by everyone around her and banished from our homeland, I wasn't able to do anything to stop it.

If I had been smarter, I might have been able to prove the charges were false. If I had been braver, I might have been able to strike back at the witch who ensnared my sister.

Ultimately, I had not been able to do a single thing for her. The only thing I could do was wait for her return.

Even though I, her younger sister, was the only one who stood by her at the time...

Still...



My big sister and I had been traveling in search of a new hometown.

Our old hometown hadn't wandered off somewhere on its own. Neither had it been destroyed.

We were traveling in search of a replacement hometown.

“.....”

My sister and I each had defined roles as we traveled. I'm able to use magic, so I put my sister on my broom and flew us from place to place. Transportation was my responsibility.

My sister, on the other hand, was not able to use magic. But I figured she would be bored just sitting by my side the whole time, so I made her in charge of navigation.

“Avelia, our destination is straight ahead from here.”

My big sister's arm whipped out to point in the direction the broom was heading. When I looked back at her, she smiled. "We'll be there in a little while."

My big sister's name is Amnesia. She has jade-green eyes, and short white hair that she adorns with a black headband. She lacks magical ability, but she's skilled with a sword. Plus, she's good at navigation.

"How long do we have to go until we arrive, exactly?"

"Huh? We'll get there when we get there, won't we?"

"....."

...She's good at navigation. I want to believe she's good at it.

I puffed out my cheeks a little bit as I stared at my big sister.

"Big sister, are you really looking at the map? Are we even going the right way?"

"Huh? I think we are, but...there, see? You can see a city far up ahead, right? Isn't that likely to be Ootorinne Under the Sky?"

Sure enough, my sister was pointing at a city.

"Ah.....?"

But I tilted my head to the side in confusion.

We would probably make it to the city in under an hour. It had a large castle gate standing right in our path. That was all we could see from where we were; there didn't seem to be any tall buildings or other structures that surpassed the gate in height. The city was supposed to be fairly large, big enough that it looked like it would be difficult to see the whole thing in one day.

On the whole, what I could see agreed with the information we had gathered about the city during our previous stops.

But I really didn't think the city standing before us was Ootorinne Under the Sky.

"...What is that?"

I could see that there was a single large castle above the sea, some distance beyond the coast.

I could see a castle floating weightlessly in the air.

"It's floating...", said my sister as she stared vacantly up at it.

"What on earth is that thing?"

According to the information we had gotten our hands on ahead of time, there was nothing particularly interesting about Ootorinne Under the Sky, and it wasn't special in any way—additionally, no mages lived there. We had heard it was an extremely ordinary, utterly commonplace, run-down city. That was

exactly why we were interested in it.

Because I thought for sure that in an unremarkable country, my big sister would find relief and be able to live a peaceful life, which would make it a wonderful place for us.

And yet there was a castle floating in the air.

“That doesn’t match what we heard before,” I said.

“But it looks like an interesting place, huh?” Contrary to my somewhat defeated tone, my big sister’s morale was apparently boosted by the sight.

“But it seems like it would be hard to live there.” *I would be anxious about the castle dropping on us from above.* “When will we ever reach a place where you can be at peace, big sister...?”

“But I’m perfectly relaxed right here on the back of your broom?”

Bam!

My broom lost its balance. We nearly fell to the ground.

“What’s with the turbulence?” came my sister’s voice from behind me.

“It’s because you said something weird, big sister,” I answered without looking back at her.



Apparently, the strange castle in the sky was just as strange to the people who lived in the city.

Immediately after we passed through the gate...

“Hey, you’re a mage, aren’t you?! We saw you flying in on your broom! Is the lady next to you a swordswoman? What good fortune!”

A soldier appeared, bounding up to us without hesitation. “Please come with me! This is perfect timing! There are people who will want to meet you two!”

Without pause, the pushy soldier led us away, dragging us to the local government offices.

“Excuse me, everyone! Travelers have come to visit our city!”

His overly enthusiastic voice reverberated through the hall. Inside, a number of adults were gathered, and their eyes landed on us all at once.

The next moment, they all rushed over to us.

“A mage and a swordswoman!”

“Oh, this is quite a stroke of luck!”

“I can’t believe it! This is a miracle!”

“Please! Please save our city!”

“We’re begging you, please, Lady Mage!”

S-so pushy...!

The spirit of compromise was nonexistent in that place. The adults who crowded around us were all telling us about the disaster that had befallen their country, but we couldn’t make out most of it. My sister and I stood there flustered the whole time they were talking.

“Please! Please do something to help our city!”

Finally, a man who looked to be some kind of official spoke up while showing us some gold coins. I counted ten gold pieces in his hand.

That was certainly a lot of gold to us. We were constantly worrying about not having enough money.

“Wow!” My sister swooned with that much money in front of her.

“Whoa!” I nearly reached out to take it.

I mustn’t!

If I accept this money before I know what’s going on, I’ll be forced to take on the job! Later on, they’ll say, “We already paid you, right? Get to work!” I mustn’t accept the money unless I’ve heard what they have to say first!

“Wait a minute.”

A young woman interrupted my musing. She seemed to be the youngest person in the group, but when she spoke up, all the adults immediately stopped talking over one another. It was clear that her words carried more weight than the rest of them.

Staring fixedly at us, the woman spoke. “We’re asking them to save our city, aren’t we? We have to give them this much.”

Jingle-jangle-jingle-jangle.

A huge sum of money tumbled into our hands.

“Wow!”

“Whoa!”

We just swooned in astonishment.

“It was just last night when that castle appeared over our city.”

The woman, who called herself Diana, sat us down and explained the situation to us after forcing the money into our hands.

“Now, won’t you listen to what happened? You can still refuse if you don’t want to take the job.”

According to Diana...

“The mages who used to live here a long time ago were the ones who built

that castle.”

It wasn’t until recently that all the mages had left the city. Up until about fifteen years earlier, there were magic users living in the castle above the city. That was the story we had heard.

Then one day fifteen years ago, all the mages, along with the castle floating in the sky, had disappeared.

“The castle only recently came back. We don’t know what it’s here for, but...”

The sudden return of the castle had caused confusion throughout the city. Though the castle had been floating buoyantly up in the air since its unexpected reappearance, if you looked carefully, you could see that it was gradually losing elevation.

Moreover, its reason for returning so suddenly was still unclear.

The floating castle apparently got the power it needed to hover in the sky from the magical energy of the mages who lived there. In other words, the mages couldn’t come down out of the castle, but in exchange, they could steer the castle at will. For example, they could raise it high above the earth as they had done last time they left, or they could fly so low that they grazed the ground.

The castle was currently parked very close to the city.

But it wasn’t doing anything, just loitering motionlessly.

Its goals were unclear. On top of that, the people of the city had no way of knowing what the mages inside the castle were up to.

That was because there were no mages in the city.

It was at this crucial moment that my older sister and I—a swordswoman and a mage—had appeared at the city gates. Our arrival must have filled the locals with wholehearted glee.

They were so happy to meet someone who could actually approach the castle.

“So you’re saying that you want us to go and investigate the castle, is that it?”

My big sister tilted her head inquisitively.

“I’m glad you’re so perceptive.”

Diana nodded.

Right, of course. Of course they would want something like that.

“.....”

I just stood there silently beside my sister.

I don’t mind accepting their money and taking on this job, but—but it is an awful lot of money. I wonder if it’s really such a simple job, just going to

investigate?

Is that really all there is to it?

“...Do you think we could get you to tell us everything about the job, without concealing anything?” I asked. “Are you sure there’s nothing you’re hiding?”

“.....”

“My sister and I both heard a lot about your city. Regardless of what this city used to be known for, it is now known as a nice, normal place.”

When I said that, I thought I saw Diana’s eyes waver for a moment.

I couldn’t imagine that she would pay us that much money without any hidden reasons. Surely we had been paid enough to reward us for the corresponding task. I could only assume a large payout implied there was a concomitant level of danger.

Diana looked away from us, and after a moment of silence, she let out a sigh.

“...You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Apparently, she had been keeping quiet about it, as I suspected.

At that point, she laid out the whole situation for us again.

She told us everything, without concealing anything, from the reason why there used to be mages, to the reason why the city was now such an unremarkable place, to the reason why the mages had gone to live in the air.

“.....”

“.....”

It was a weighty story.

A heavy story that, in reality, contrasted with the castle floating weightlessly in the sky.

After we had heard the whole story, Diana asked, “I know it’s selfish to ask this, but please do something to help us save our city.”

I said nothing.

I remained quiet for a while. Silence dominated the room.

After the movement of the clock hands pounded persistently in our ears for a minute, my big sister stood up. Without so much as glancing at the money sitting on the table, she turned to me and said, “Avelia, could I ask you to fly your broom?”

Her slightly cold tone of voice startled me. I looked up at my sister and asked, “Where to?”

She smiled. “Up into the sky. We can collect the money after we get back, right? It’ll just weigh us down.”

She laughed boldly.



Until fifteen years earlier, Ootorinne Under the Sky had been known as a rather unusual city. Back then, the castle had floated through the sky over the city only during the night.

The castle was where all the mages lived.

During the day, they would come down to the ground and patrol the city, and at night, they would do their surveillance from high in the sky. In that way, the mages apparently protected the city.

The mages who lived in Ootorinne Under the Sky were known to all be great and powerful individuals.

Whenever a criminal was detected in town, the mages would mobilize and search the whole city, chase down the culprit, catch them, and enact punishment without mercy. Anyone who committed a crime was arrested by the mages, without exception.

Since there were mages walking around everywhere during the day and monitoring the city from the air at night, there was hardly anyone in Ootorinne Under the Sky who chose to get involved in criminal activity. Of course, rumors of the overbearing mages reached the neighboring cities, so no outsiders dared to attack the place, either.

But to answer the question of whether the city was a peaceful place or not: It was not.

Because while there was hardly any crime, neither was there any peace. All the people in the city lived in fear of the mages.

Wherever a mage went, the people would wait on them hand and foot.

If a mage headed into a shop, all the other customers would flee.

Throughout the land, the mages were symbols of fear.

“Kill anyone who defies us, no matter who they may be. The lives of powerless creatures have no value.” That saying was attributed to the witch who led the mages. She apparently said such things often.

Knights and merchants who could no longer bear the foulness of the mages and took up weapons against them were struck down indiscriminately.

It was said that mage children born without powers were treated equally cruelly. The mages cast them out and pushed them off the floating castle in the sky. From the mages’ perspective, power itself was the only thing that mattered in the world, and whether or not someone could use strong magic was the most important question of all.

It was impossible to know what kind of awful fate the mages had devised for any who opposed them. The people of the city had no choice but to obey.

For a long time, the city was ruled by fear.

And then, about fifteen years ago...

Sparked by one small incident, the balance of power in the city crumbled.

Maybe the residents of the city got fed up with the tyrannical mages. Maybe they reached their limit. People everywhere raised their voices, proclaiming that the city had no need for mages.

And then, one day fifteen years past, the mages' castle ascended into the sky as always.

But it didn't come back down to the ground, not even after the next day dawned.

Earlier that day, when the castle was vacant, some people had snuck in and tampered with it. The people were led by one of the mages who had been expelled from the group.

The castle's driving power was the magical energy of the mages. It had a mechanism which collected all the energy it needed to float at night, before powering down as the morning sun rose in the sky.

The turncoat mage directed the people to meddle with that mechanism so that it would never stop collecting magical energy, ever—so that the castle would never come back down.

As a result, once the mages ascended into the sky, they were unable to descend again. And since their magical energy was being constantly absorbed, they couldn't escape from the castle on their brooms, either.

They were trapped high in the sky, looking down on the people, no longer able to return.

Then peace came to the city.

This was the part of the story we had heard in neighboring lands.

The tale of the fate of the mages and the people in the city.

“.....”

After hearing the whole story from Diana, my older sister and I decided to help them with their request.

We want you to investigate the reason why the mages in the castle came back.

I felt certain that it was probably for a selfish reason, like Diana said. Even so, the two of us chose to cooperate with Diana's request.

I flew my broom toward the castle soaring high in the air. I flew far up into

the sky, higher than I had ever gone before.

I never looked back. I was too scared.

I'm sure my sister felt the same way.

"...Sorry. If I were a mage, I could have come on my own."

My sister's hands clung to me tightly, so tightly.

"You have nothing to apologize for, big sister," I answered her without turning around. I touched her arm, as if to check she was still there.

The mages' castle had suddenly reappeared over the city.

I knew there were probably terrifying mages inside, mages who had once cast a shadow of fear over the city. I knew their existence had shaped the city below.

Then they had departed, leaving peace in their wake.

Leaving a typical, boring city, with nothing unusual about it.

"We're here."

I brought my broom in for a rough landing. I was exhausted.

From that point forward, I would no longer be able to cast spells. The castle was draining my magical energy and storing it for later use.

By that point, we had already prepared ourselves for the worst.

We were aboard a castle floating weightlessly in the sky. We had alighted in the courtyard.

The whole area was covered in flowers, all of them in full bloom. Although we were high up in the air above the city, the blossoms swayed under a very gentle, soft breeze. Just as if they were growing back down on the ground.

"...Beautiful," my sister mumbled, staring into the distance.

Viewed from far away, the castle had seemed to loom grandly overhead. But the building before us was an old, decaying castle that looked like it might crumble apart if you touched it too hard, surrounded by a veranda.

Yet it was beautiful.

Still, there was no time to admire it.

It was a fantastical sight, so very lovely. But it was the home of the mages who had ruled over the city with absolute terror.

We couldn't be careless.

"Avelia, you stay behind me."

My sister pulled out her saber the second I landed the broom. While we were on the grounds of the castle, I couldn't use my magic properly.

Diana had given me a magic potion that would let me recover just a little bit of magical energy for the return trip, but I would have to think carefully about when to use it. If I didn't drink it as we were escaping, we could find ourselves

suddenly stranded in the castle.

And so I would basically have to stay hidden behind my big sister.

Clinging to her from behind, I peeked out at our surroundings.

“.....”

My big sister's handsome features were set in an uncharacteristically serious expression as she also examined our environment.

There was a feeling of tension hanging in the air around us.

“Avelia,” she whispered quietly.

“What is it?” I tilted my head.

When I did, my sister said, without making eye contact with me, “It's kind of...hard to do my job...with you staring at me like that.”

“.....”

Whatever are you talking about?

“Big sister. Please stay on guard.”

“On guard, huh? ...Right. Well, I'm kind of nervous, too, you know? But listen, it sort of seems like it's not really a hostile atmosphere, right?”

As she spoke, my sister put away her saber.

What's this?

“Big sister? What are you doing?”

There are probably swarms of scary mages up here! Is it all right to put away your saber? Are you serious right now?

I made a puzzled expression and stared even harder at my sister. I stared so, so hard, but as expected, she was as beautiful as could be.

“I told you not to gawk at me like that.” My sister let out an embarrassed sigh and pointed toward the flower beds. “Look over there.”

“...?” I did as I was told.

I looked in that direction.

There was a lone woman standing there.

One of the mages who had left Orotorinne Under the Sky fifteen years earlier was standing there.

“Welcome!”

Greeting us in the most carefree voice imaginable, the woman standing there waved at us.

“Hi there! My name is Mage Cleanore!”

She looked to be about in her mid-twenties. Her hair was chartreuse, and her eyes were a dusky orange color. She was wearing a robe and a long skirt. Just going by appearances, she looked like a composed young woman.

But my sister and I were petrified. We just stood there staring at her.

“Heeey! Hello? Maybe you didn’t hear me? Oh, perhaps we speak different languages! What to do?! We’ve been left behind by the times because we’ve been up in the sky for fifteen years!”

The woman got all flustered.

In her hands, she was carrying a large banner that flowed in the wind. It had the word WELCOME! written on it in big bold letters. It conveyed an air of hospitality.

“Oh no, oh no, what should I do?! It’s been so long since I talked to people, I don’t know how to handle them! Maybe I came on too strong? Oh no, oh no...”

The woman put both hands on her cheeks and shook her head side to side. Her two long pigtails swung wildly.

“.....” I stood silently by my big sister’s side.

“.....” My sister simply stared at the woman with cold eyes.

We had been expecting to find terrifying mages in this castle.

So what the heck is this?

“Uh-oh...they’re...staring at me? Staring at me with extremely cold eyes...? Ah, but you can’t give up, Cleanore, you mustn’t! Those two girls are your very first customers! You have to greet them with polite hospitality!”

And then—

Waving the banner that said WELCOME! the young woman tossed her ridiculously huge pigtails, struck a bold pose, and gave a huge smile!

.....

“What the heck is this?”

“...I believe we’re being welcomed.”

“What the heck is that?”

I don’t understand at all.



“I’ll take you on the Mage Castle Tour! Yay!”

Cleanore guided us toward the castle, shouting, “Our first customers are here!” and waved her banner around vigorously.

Inside the gloomy, crumbling castle, bereft of any signs of human life, in the corridors that were so narrow that we could just barely pass through them, her excitement was at an all-time high.

“As you would expect, now that the castle’s been off the ground for fifteen years, no one has any idea what it looks like, right?

“So we thought, wouldn’t it be interesting if we started up a tour for visitors to see the castle?!”

Her explanation did not make the situation any clearer.

“All right, so, as we move along, you can learn about the story of the castle with your tour guide, Cleanore! I’m sure there’s lots you don’t know!”

I tried to somehow grasp the meaning of the words she was saying, but in the end, it was nonsense, so I finally quit thinking about it.

“Okay! Well then, we’re going to start the castle tour now! Do you want to know the secrets of the mages’ castle?”

She seems to be mistaking us for tourists.

But nobody would come to a place like this for a tour.

Maybe she’s an idiot?

I almost wanted to ask her, but she was supposed to be part of a group of dangerous mages. There was the possibility that this was all a clever trap.

“.....” And so I stayed silent.

“.....” My big sister was silent, too.

She looked kind of stumped. She’s very cute when she’s confused.

“Hmm? What? I can’t hear you!” But Cleanore was apparently in high spirits and seemed intent on continuing her strange farce until we answered her. “I said, do you want to know the secrets of the mages’ castle?”

“.....”

“.....”

Of course, we had no idea how to respond to this strange development. We exchanged looks and did not answer her at all.

“...Sniffle.”

Finally, Cleanore’s eyes filled with tears. She didn’t seem adaptable enough to ad-lib a response.

“I knew it! No one is interested in my Mage Castle Tour...” She seemed to wither in disappointment.

“Uh...” My sister looked even more confused. “Um, miss? We didn’t exactly come here for a tour, but...”

We came to investigate. This is our job. It’s business.

“Oh...sniffle. I knew it. Everyone hates us mages...! I could see that we had visitors coming today, so I got excited and did all sorts of things to prepare, and yet...”

Cleanore curled up on the side of the corridor, sobbing.

I looked at my big sister.

Big sister, I think that for the time being, we ought to make an effort not to hurt her feelings. We don't know her objectives at the moment, and we can't afford to act carelessly.

There was a firm bond between my sister and me. Even if we couldn't exchange words, just by making eye contact, I knew my sister would understand what I was thinking.

Finally, my sister noticed me making eye contact, but all she did was tilt her head a bit, which was adorable.

“...?”

Ultimately, I was the one who proposed, “We will take your tour.”

“I—I knew you would! After all, you did come all this way to take the tour, didn't you?!”

“Ah, actually, that's not quite right.”

...*We came on business.*

“...Sniffle.”

“We will take your tour. The two of us.”

“Hooray! Thank you! I love you!”

Cleanore came bounding down the corridor toward me.

Sh-she's coming straight for me...!

“F-for now, we'd just like you to show us around the castle...”

Then I once again sent a signal to my sister with my eyes.

Big sister, her companions are probably in hiding. Let's be careful as we go along with her little game.

That was the message I put into my gaze.

“It's embarrassing when you look at me like that...”

Amnesia averted her eyes bashfully.

“.....”

Nothing's making it through after all...

Anyway, after this sequence of events, we began the Mage Castle Tour, led by Cleanore.

“Okay, here we have the great hall of the castle! In the olden days, they used to hold celebrations here.”

It was a mountain of rubble.

“All righty. Next up is the dining hall! In the olden days, the chef, a mage whose specialty was cooking, would serve courtly banquets here.”

It was a mountain of rubble.

“Long ago, this castle was used as a dwelling by the mages. So it has living space, too! This whole section was housing.”

No matter how I looked at it, it was all just a mountain of rubble.

Not much of a tour...

Walking around a bit made it clear that the inside of the vine-covered castle was basically all rubble from end to end. It was in no condition for people to be living in it. I could infer from the building’s apparent age that the sky castle had fallen into ruin long ago, but—

No person could live in this environment, so how on earth has she survived up here?

Wait, more importantly, what about the other mages?

“Okay then, next we have the bathhouse! It was very spacious! Although it’s rubble now!”

Any questions I had were completely forgotten in the face of her whirlwind tour. Cleanore led us along, showing us the (complete wreckage of a) bathhouse, then when that was over, we visited some more rubble, then proceeded along to some rubble, and after that, we made our way to a big pile of rubble.

“All right, and here’s some rubble!”

She finished the tour by telling us about yet another pile of rubble. It seemed like she couldn’t even tell what was what anymore.

Is there any part of this castle that’s intact?

“Ah, maybe you just thought to yourself, ‘Is there any part of this castle that’s intact?’ Oh-hoh-hoh! You did, didn’t you? You’re curious, I’m sure!”

As if she had read my mind, Cleanore guessed precisely right. She sounded fairly pleased with herself.

Then, with a big smile still on her face, she said, “Actually, there is one spot that is still perfectly preserved,” and led us onward.

Let’s see, now, where could that be?

As far as I can see, it’s all rubble, but...?

I was skeptical. Cleanore led me and my sister down a set of stairs that extended beneath the castle.

“Okay! This is the only place that has been preserved! The basement!”

It was a gloomy, vaguely ominous space. Cleanore unlocked a door at the

very back.

“Here we have the showpiece of our tour!”

Then, after inviting the two of us into the back room, she spread both arms wide and presented, “The power reactor for this castle!”

There was a glittering orb, about as large across as I was tall, emitting a dazzling bluish-white radiance.

A futon had been set up in one corner of the room, and there were a number of cooking utensils scattered about. It seemed like she had been sleeping down there.

According to Cleanore, the orb in this room sucked up magical energy from the mages and held the castle up in the air.

“The mechanism broke fifteen years ago, but before that, it would stop absorbing magical energy during the day and lower the castle down to the ground.”

It was probably shining because it was still pulling magical energy from us automatically.

It made sense that this was the only room that was still preserved.

If this room had also been destroyed, surely the castle would have fallen into the sea by now. The reason we were able to be up here in the air was because the power source itself was still functioning.

“...When we were little, my baby sister and I used to play together here all the time,” Cleanore mumbled quietly as she stared into the bluish-white light in a daze.

“...You played in a place like this?”

This room seems like it would be really bad for your eyes. I get the feeling that if you stayed too long, it might take your eyesight from you along with your magical energy.

Cleanore looked at me with my eyes screwed up, and she laughed quietly.

“Oh, my father was in charge of regulating this reactor. Fifteen years ago, I was eight and my sister was five, so we didn’t want to leave our beloved father’s side. That’s why we were always in here playing with him,” she told me.

“You never played with your mother?” My big sister tilted her head quizzically.

Cleanore’s smile didn’t fade, but a little bit of sadness crept into her eyes.

She looked away and answered matter-of-factly, “She didn’t play with us. Our mother’s job was to rule over the other mages.”

There seemed to be only one possible meaning behind those words.

The terrifying mages who had once dominated the city below. I had heard they were led by a witch whose cruelty was legendary.

It wasn't impossible that the witch could have had daughters.

"Are you the only one here?"

Against a background of bluish-white light, Cleanore nodded sharply. "As you can see. Everyone else died."

Her tone of voice was a little subdued. She had probably been forcing herself to act cheerful until just a minute earlier.

We were finally seeing her true self.

"By the way, who asked you two to come here to the castle?"

Cleanore peered at us with her pretty dusky-orange eyes. The depths of her eyes were very, very gloomy and looked like they concealed a darkness deep enough to suck me right in.

I probably just felt that way because she was so brightly backlit.

But I could see that she was wearing an equally dark expression.

"There aren't supposed to be any mages in Ootorinne Under the Sky, are there? Did you come here after hearing about it from someone?" she asked.

There was no emotion in her voice anymore.

We had blithely followed Cleanore's guidance, letting her lead us into the depths of the castle without a second thought.

But at that point, I finally remembered something.

Cleanore was the last survivor of the mages who had once lived in the castle.

She was one of those brutal and merciless mages.

I still could not discount the possibility that this had all been a long, elaborate trap.

We were currently in the basement. Probably not a place that we could easily escape. Even if I drank the potion, my magical energy would likely be drained away in an instant.

"....." In the brief silence that followed, my big sister placed her hand on her saber. "We are travelers. We just so happened to be passing by the city below, when the people there asked us to come investigate the castle."

I could sense a little bit of strain behind her calm tone.

"Ah, is that so?" Cleanore clapped her hands together and said, "The people of the city haven't forgotten about us? They remembered we were here?"

"....." I was a little unsure as to how I was supposed to answer her. "Yes, that's right. They remembered all about you." Ultimately, I arrived at this bland response.

Cleanore was still standing in the darkness with a blank look on her face.

“That’s great.”

She let out a little chuckle.

Then she told us, “I never forgot them for a second. I never forgot what happened to this castle, either. Or about my fellow mages who used to live here. And what the townspeople did to them. And I still remember what happened fifteen years ago. Everything, I remember everything perfectly.”

That was all she said, and then she smiled.

I couldn’t tell whether she was feeling resentment or something else.

At least, I wasn’t able to read anything from her expression.

“Could I wrap up the tour by telling you a little story?” she asked us with a tilt of her head.

My big sister and I looked at each other.

“...What kind of story?” I asked.

She answered in a few words, waving the banner in her hands as she spoke.
“A story that I’m sure you’ve never heard.”

Her story started a little more than fifteen years earlier.

When Cleanore was three years old, her little sister was born. Both her father and Cleanore herself were overjoyed by the birth of her small, adorable sister.

“She’s so cute.” Her father smiled, touching the cheek of the baby sleeping in her mother’s arms.

The mother responded to his words, “And I’m sure that she will become a splendid mage just like us.”

The two of them did not make eye contact.

The mother was gazing off into the distance somewhere.

Cleanore’s father was a very kind man. He was always smiling, and he took the girls with him, accompanying them as they played near the castle’s power reactor. That was how they spent their days.

Since the other mages went on patrol during the day and monitored the whole city from the sky at night, their father was the only true companion for young Cleanore and her sister to talk to or play with.

As Cleanore grew up, naturally, so did her little sister. The baby who at first couldn’t even walk soon learned to stand on her own two legs and to talk. Gradually, the little girl learned to do more and more.

Whenever she learned something new, her father and Cleanore were delighted.

One day, at the dining table, their father was full of excitement and talked about the baby's developments.

"Today, she started walking for the first time! She's our second daughter, but still, watching a child grow up is remarkable..."

"Any magic?"

Cold words cut off the father's story. Their mother didn't seem particularly interested in what their father had to say. She only ever asked about that one thing.

Her father looked very troubled.

"No, not yet, but..."

"Hmm."

Their mother looked off into the distance. She seemed disinterested.

When Cleanore was six and her sister was three, they began training to ride brooms.

As far as Cleanore could remember, she never seemed to have much trouble riding brooms or handling magic. It had only taken her a year to learn to cast basic spells and pilot her own broom. Cleanore remembered clearly how her mother, who was always cold, had intently watched her on her broom and smiled. "Just as I'd expect from a child of mine."

But the same was not true for Cleanore's younger sister. She was different.

She didn't seem to be endowed with any magical abilities.

No matter how hard she trained, Cleanore's sister couldn't even hover in midair, let alone fly through the sky straddling a broom.

"How long until she can fly on a broom?"

"Can't she cast a proper spell yet?"

"Cleanore's been able to use magic for a long time already. What about her?"

Their mother never directly said anything to the younger girl. Instead, she often scolded their father harshly.

Each time, he would answer with something like "Don't worry. I'm sure she'll become like Cleanore very soon."

When her little sister was just a tiny thing, Cleanore had been happy whenever she did anything. She had talked to her all the time. Once her sister began her magical training, though, Cleanore found that she couldn't talk to her anymore or intervene in her training with their father.

"....."

Sometimes, her little sister's eyes would be racked with sadness as she watched her older sibling intently. That made it even more difficult to talk to her.

So Cleanore stood by and watched her sister and their father train.

But in the end, no matter how many years went by, ultimately her little sister never learned to ride a broom.

And then when Cleanore's little sister was five years old—

"She's a failure."

Their mother spit out those few words before thrusting her youngest daughter off the castle at night.

Looking down at the ocean spread out far below the castle, their father broke down crying with grief.

That was when Cleanore had realized something.

The lives of powerless creatures have no value.

Her mother often spoke those words and didn't care whether they condemned fellow mages or even her own family.

Two weeks after that, the mages' castle lost the ability to descend from the sky.

One morning two weeks later, the mages realized that the people had risen in revolt.

The castle's power reactor experienced a critical failure and was impossible to fix. It started to absorb magical energy continuously, without stopping. Unable to find a way to return to the ground, the mages were ultimately left to drift about in the sky.

No one was sure who to blame, or what had gone wrong, or why they had been betrayed by the people. Countless angry words were exchanged in the sky. Some were furious, insisting that the mages should kill all the people when they got back down to earth. Some blamed Cleanore's mother, convinced it was the witch's fault that the humans resented them.

The atmosphere in the sky castle was dangerous.

The mages had reserves and gardens, but their resources were limited. Before long, they began to fight over the dwindling food rations and argue over living space.

Ironically, the discord they experienced in some ways closely resembled the scene in the city that had been tyrannized by the mages.

After several years, the tensions finally came to a head.

The inciting incident was a trivial matter.

Cleanore's father prevented an infuriated witch who was going to fly down and exact revenge on the people—their mother—from going. That was all that

happened.

From such a trivial start, their accumulated resentments exploded.

Cleanore told us that it happened just as she was approaching her twelfth birthday.

“...Cover your ears. Do you hear me? No matter what happens, you absolutely do not leave here,” Cleanore’s father said as he hid her inside the castle’s power reactor, locked her in, and headed off toward the warring mages.

For a long, long time, the shouts and cries of the mages reverberated around her. No matter how hard she covered her ears, even if she closed her eyes, she could not escape the dreadful sounds.

Terrified, Cleanore didn’t take a single step outside the glowing reactor. She stayed there the whole time, until the screams stopped.

“.....”

It seemed like several days went by, or maybe the whole affair had lasted no more than a few hours—at some point, Cleanore realized that the castle had fallen deathly silent.

Perhaps it was over, she thought.

She crawled timidly out of the power reactor.

“Anyone...is anyone here?”

When she left the basement, she was greeted by bright sunlight.

But no people came to do the same.

The whole place was covered in blood. There were bodies with blades still sticking out of their chests. There were shapes crumpled on the ground, not moving a single muscle. There were many figures of people around, but not one of them turned to look at her.

Ultimately, their terrible battle had no winners.

The castle was full of corpses.

Cleanore walked around the castle grounds in a daze. She called her mother’s name. She called her father’s name. But there was no answer.

She called her parents’ names over and over again.

She ran all around the castle, searching for them.

Finally, she found them.

“...Ah!”

She found the bodies of her father and mother in a corner of the castle, where they had each breathed their last breath. They were nestled close together and had possibly stabbed each other.

In the end, the only one left alive was Cleanore.

Left behind all by herself in the spacious castle.
She wondered how such a thing could have happened.
Maybe it was because the mages were much too vicious, bad enough to get expelled from the city. Maybe it was because they were angry about the people striking back at them.

No, there was another reason for what had happened.

The cause was something much simpler.

“I’m sorry.”

Cleanore was filled with deep remorse.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

Ever since the castle had started drifting in the air—no, since even before then, there had been one intolerable regret in Cleanore’s heart.

The night that the castle had risen into the air, never to return—

Cleanore had seen her little sister down in the city.

She had spotted the figure of her sister down a sunlit alleyway, leading a group of adults toward the castle.

She had thought her sister had died.

But she’d been there, alive and walking around.

Cleanore was overjoyed. But she couldn’t call out to her sister.

Her little sister was walking surrounded by adults, as if they were protecting her. Walking toward the castle where the mages lived.

But all Cleanore could do was stare at her sister from afar.

The next morning, she understood.

She knew who had destroyed the castle’s reactor.

Without even having to think about it, she knew who had done it. But Cleanore concealed what she had seen and buried it forever in her heart.

The reason why the mages wouldn’t be able to return from the sky was because, in their cruelty, they had failed to save just one little girl.

“I wasn’t able to help you. I’m sorry.”

But no matter how badly she regretted it...

Her little sister was already far away, out of reach.



Let me tell the story of one little girl.

One day, the girl fell from the sky, and as she did, she rode a broom for the first time in her life. Just before she tumbled from the flying castle, she grabbed

hold of a broom, and she rode it.

It was her first ever experience riding a broom, and on top of that, she had just been thrown from the sky, so understandably, it was not a smooth flight. But even so, the girl managed to avoid an untimely death.

She fell into the sea and drifted ashore at a city port.

Sobbing from the pain of her injuries, the girl despaired.

Her despair was caused by the fact that she had been betrayed by her own kind, pushed off the castle by her own mother, and abandoned to her fate by her own father.

The townspeople rushed over in a panic to the little girl who had suddenly fallen from the sky.

“How cruel!”

“She’s just a child!”

“She’s still breathing!”

“Somebody, call the doctor!”

The people helped the mage girl. The doctor came running right away and treated her wounds.

The girl was saved from death.

But the price was that she would never be able to use magic again. The injuries she suffered during the fall had paralyzed her hands.

The events that followed one little girl being dropped from the castle are already well-known.

The people were furious with the mages, who didn’t even love their own relatives, and realized that unless they did something, their city would fall to ruin.

Then the people decided to drive the mages out of their city.

In order to drive them out, they decided to pull a trick from inside the castle. But the people weren’t familiar with the castle interior.

However, their plan was successful thanks to one little girl.

“I know how,” the girl told the townspeople. “My father operates the castle, so I know how to work it.”

Her father had always treated her with kindness. He had frequently taken her to the basement where he raised the castle into the air, and he had taught her how to use magical energy to make it fly.

She knew how to operate the castle and how to tamper with it.

The girl decided to cooperate with the townspeople. Taking some of them with her, she snuck into the castle during the day. They went down into the

basement, sabotaged the power reactor, and then left.

That night, the castle rose into the air as always.

But it would never come back down again. It remained floating high in the sky, never to return.

The cruel mages, her unsparing mother, her kind father, her older sister—

None of them came back; they all remained in the sky.

The people were grateful to the little girl who had brought peace to their city. Her name was Diana.

She was Cleanore's younger sister.

"In the fifteen years since, the city has changed a great deal."

Before we went up in the sky—

Diana had spoken to us.

It had been fifteen years since she fell down to the city. Apparently, the city had continued its decline after losing the mages.

There was something the people of the city hadn't known.

The mages, who were so frightening and cruel to them, were equally frightening to the city's neighbors.

"Orotorinne Under the Sky is a blessed place, a land of great bounty. Our neighbors were just waiting for us to grow weak. They were waiting, always, to steal precious resources from our lands. It was the mages who kept them in check."

During the day, when the mages appeared everywhere throughout the city, it was not solely for the sake of intimidating the people who lived there.

They did it in order to check that there weren't any outsiders mixed in with the population.

At night, when they all gathered in the flying castle, they weren't just looking down on the city.

They were safeguarding the city from invaders.

By the time the people realized these facts, Orotorinne Under the Sky had already been invaded.

Fifteen years had passed since then.

The former brilliance of the city had long faded.

"We were attacked as soon as the mages left, and we were easily defeated. Our crops were taken as tribute, and our livestock was stolen by their merchants. By now, the conflict has largely receded, and we've regained some stability, but we lost much as a result. Do the two of you know what this city is known as?"

An utterly commonplace, run-down city.

There was nothing left there anymore, because they had cut loose the people who had been protecting them.

“The people of this city were extremely regretful of what happened in the past. They wanted to get the mages to come back and just to apologize.”

But no matter how remorseful they might have been...

The mages had already disappeared, far off and out of reach.

There had probably been other ways to handle the issue. If they had only sat down for a proper discussion, they might have been able to understand each other.

Maybe they hadn’t been smart enough to do that. Maybe they hadn’t been brave enough.

However.

No matter how remorseful they may have been...

“We would never see the mages again...that’s what we thought. But then their castle reappeared, right over the city. I just know my big sister is up there inside.”

“That’s why,” she continued, “I want to see my sister again and apologize properly. So we can start over.” But Diana couldn’t use magic anymore. “I know it’s selfish to ask this, but please do something to help us save our city.”

She bowed her head.

I said nothing.

I stayed silent for a while. Silence dominated the room.

After the movement of the clock hands pounded persistently in our ears for a minute, my big sister stood up. Without so much as glancing at the money sitting on the table, she turned to me and said, “Avelia, could I ask you to fly your broom?”

“Where to?” I asked.

She answered right away, in an unusually cheerful voice given the weighty story we had just heard.

“Up into the sky. We can collect the money after we get back, right? It’ll just weigh us down,” my big sister said with a smile.

Just as we were about to leave the government office...

My big sister abruptly turned around and stared at Diana, who had her eyes cast downward.

“Everything will be all right, I’m sure of it,” my sister said in a gentle voice. “Big sisters, you know, no matter what our little sisters may have done, we smile

and forgive them.”



She had deep regrets.

Regrets that she could never fully repent for, despite how hard she tried.

After Cleanore had finished telling us everything, our surroundings were enveloped in silence. Just like her younger sister, she was extremely regretful of what had happened fifteen years earlier.

“There must have been a better way of doing things. There must have been another path—this whole time, for fifteen years, that’s all I’ve been able to think about.”

If I’d only been smarter, if I’d only been braver...

Such thoughts had constantly been in the back of her mind, she said.

“Before long, this castle is going to run out of power. The well of magical energy it has been collecting for many years has just run dry, and it’s already to the point where my energy alone is barely keeping it from falling out of the sky.”

Within the next several days, the castle would return to the ground once more.

But the question was what Cleanore should do when she returned. That was what she was worried about.

“Are you scared to see your little sister?” I asked.

Cleanore had been living inside this castle in the sky for fifteen years. She had no way of knowing what had become of the outside world.

That was why she said, “I’m scared of being rejected.”

She cast her eyes downward, and I felt as if I had seen her image before.

It felt just like looking in a mirror.

I didn’t need to think back very far.

She looked like I had when I was awaiting my big sister’s return to our hometown—before we started our travels. Like me, back when I was hopelessly burdened with regret.

“.....”

So I took one step toward her.

My shadow stretched across the room, which was bathed in bluish-white light.

Into the hand of the girl who was wracked with guilt over her failure to help her suffering little sister, who had been unable to do anything but watch as she

was thrown from the castle, I placed a single small vial.

“...What’s this?”

Staring at the vial, I answered, “It’s a potion that will temporarily restore your magical energy. If you drink it, I think you should be able to escape from here before the castle completely loses function. Run away from here with us....” I said as I set the vial in her hand.

She made a slightly surprised expression. But then she smiled a little.

Perhaps she had realized the real reason we came up to the castle. Maybe she had guessed whom we had spoken to and what she had asked of us.

“Is my sister well?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“You’ll have to see that with your own eyes.”

Surely that would be better.

“...I wonder what I should say when I see her?”

No.

There’s no need to say or do anything for her.

“Your sister will be happy to be with you, just smiling together.”

That’s what little sisters are like.



According to Cleanore...

The castle was losing magical energy. It was in the process of gradually descending, and after a few more days, it would be completely out of power and fall into the ocean.

The powerless castle was sure to sink as soon as it landed in the ocean. And then it would never rise into the sky again.

Because the mages who might get on board were no longer around.

And because there was no need for them to board.

There was a field of flowers in the castle’s courtyard.

The multicolored flowers were in full bloom, swaying in the breeze in a garden high in the sky. Although we were high up in the air above the city, the blossoms swayed under a very gentle, soft breeze.

It was a sight that would probably never be possible to see again once the castle descended.

So I gazed at the slowly swaying flowers.

“This is probably our last look at this view, huh?”

I kept on staring, as if trying to burn the image into my memory.

“Probably.”

Keeping her back turned to me, my big sister walked through the flowers.

She slowly walked back along the path that we had come down when we first landed on the castle and came to a stop at the edge.

A moment later, I jogged up behind her.

“It’s dangerous, big sister.”

I stood by my sister’s side.

In that moment, I realized something.

When we first arrived at the castle, my big sister and I had just been told an extremely weighty story, and that was probably why we hadn’t even taken a second to enjoy the view.

“.....”

When I realized that, I felt terrible regret.

Why on earth hadn’t I looked at this view much earlier?

Many roofs were spread out beneath our eyes. The multicolored roofs sparsely covered the ground’s surface. The city had lost so much over the past fifteen years, but it was still standing proudly in its place.

Waiting, quiet and calm, for the return of the castle that floated in the sky.

Just like a flower field.

“Right now, are you thinking that we ought to have looked at the view earlier?”

“Definitely.”

But my big sister shook her head.

“How about thinking of it this way? The view only got so pretty once we were this close to the city.”

“.....?”

I was slow to catch on.

My sister explained things simply for me.

“We often think after the fact that we should have acted a certain way or made better choices. But if we realize that we arrived at this present moment because of past actions we’ve been regretting, then those actions don’t seem all that bad, right?”

“.....”

The fact that the view was so beautiful I wanted to burn it into my memory was surely because we were seeing it for the first time just like this.

That was what my sister seemed to be saying.

She was trying to soothe my past regrets by telling me to enjoy this now, rather than lament missing it earlier.

“...Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The breeze blew.

My long hair fluttered, and behind my back, the field of flowers rustled.

Surrounded by such beauty, I was thinking that I wished moments like this could continue on forever.

This was a really, really wonderful place.

“It wasn’t such a boring city after all, was it?” said my sister, still smiling next to me.

Her smiling face was there by my side, lovely enough to make me forget my deep regrets.



CHAPTER 6

On the Road: The Story of the Lonely Book

Two witches arrived at a seaside town.

One witch had ash-gray hair and lapis-blue eyes. She was wearing a black triangular hat and a black robe. On her breast was a star-shaped brooch that certified she was a witch, and yet her outfit was very, very simple, typical of someone on a long journey.

The girl was a witch, and she was a traveler, and also she was very, very beautiful.

“Huh? Did you just call yourself beautiful? Really?”

.....

If I were to compare her beauty to something, it would be a single flower that blooms on a mountain in winter. A flower that, though surrounded by a harsh environment, breaks through the snow and peeks its face out of the earth, indomitable and, above all, breathtakingly beautiful.

“Why are you going on and on about your beauty? Are you drunk? I mean it. You’re totally wasted, aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

.....

The other witch had long black hair. She, too, was dressed in a black robe and black pointy hat, and of course she wore an identical star-shaped brooch.

Her name was Fran.

She was a lazy, good-for-nothing slacker. She may not have looked like it, but she had a job as a teacher in some city somewhere, and she was on her way back there.

She claimed that she had come to this seaside port town to embark on an ocean voyage that would take her back to her job.

“Oh, you didn’t include any mention of beauty in your description of me, did you? That makes me a little sad.”

I only had three days left to spend with my teacher. It was sad to think about, but the time of our parting would inevitably arrive. So I thought we ought to enjoy the little time we had together. Even if we just spent it getting food in a café.

“Oh, that makes me so happy! What nice things you’re writing, Elaina.”

.....

By the way—

Let's see—

This woman, just whose teacher might she be?

That's right, she's mine.

“.....”

I said nothing.

“.....”

I was silent. A very, very heavy silence.

We said nothing for a while, staring at each other across the café table.

I suppose I must now explain what on earth happened. Please bear with me, even when it sounds unbelievable.

We had only arrived at the city gates just a short time earlier. Less than an hour.

This city, which was to be the last stop on my journey with Miss Fran, was named Trocolio by the Sea. It was a fairly large port city.

The city itself was more cute than beautiful. The houses that we passed were all vividly painted, as if the colors from many flowers had been splashed right onto them. They were a little bit dazzling, basking in the sunlight that poured down on them.

“Elaina, do you know the reason why the houses in this town are so colorful?” Miss Fran tilted her head quizzically as she walked beside me.

I could see the ocean in the distance, where we were headed. The boats returning to port slid noiselessly across the water’s surface, bobbing along as if they weighed nothing.

“Isn’t it so that the boats don’t get lost or something?” I replied immediately.

“.....” Miss Fran was silent. “No.” She puffed out her cheeks a little.

I’m guessing from what I just saw that I answered correctly? Could I be wrong?

“All right then, what’s the answer?”

“It’s because they had too much paint.”

“.....”

I think I must have narrowed my eyes considerably when she said that. I’m sure I stared at my teacher with clammy suspicion.

Seeing my expression, Miss Fran quickly offered an explanation. “No, it’s true! I heard about it from someone who lives here, so I know I’m not mistaken. They used up all their leftover paint by covering their walls with it.” She spoke a little too quickly as she replied.

“So then, what are you trying to say, miss?”

“I guess I want to say that sometimes it looks like there’s a deeper meaning to something when in reality the reason behind it is not all that significant.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Since the houses all have such charming appearances, you’d think there must be some kind of reason why they’re done up like that, right? But actually, there is no reason at all. That’s what I heard from my friend, so it can’t be wrong.”

“I guess it can’t.”

“That’s what I heard from my friend, so it can’t be wrong.”

“...Now you sound kind of suspicious. Aren’t you repeating yourself too much?”

But my teacher, stubbornly nonchalant, asked, “By the way, Elaina, how about a little lunch? I’ve got a restaurant recommendation. My treat!”

“Sounds great.” I nodded enthusiastically. “But it’s rare for you to treat me to a meal. Is there some reason for it?” I asked.

Miss Fran chuckled at my question.

“There’s no deeper meaning behind it. I just want to share a meal together, that’s all,” she told me calmly.

The café we arrived at next was a profoundly bizarre restaurant. That’s the only way I can describe the scene that awaited us inside.

WELCOME. HAVE A SEAT ANYWHERE YOU LIKE.

A signboard was there to greet us.

...*A signboard? Aren’t there any employees?*

As I stood there wondering, the signboard swayed casually left to right.

Huh?

I cast my gaze downward.

Apparently, it wasn’t the case that there were no employees. I just hadn’t been able to see them.

“...Who’s this little one?”

I crouched and looked down. There was a stuffed bear dressed in a uniform. For some reason, this charming doll with its round, cute eyes was waving the sign around adorably.

What is this?

“This is a restaurant where dolls like these bring you your food.”

Miss Fran told me that it was her third time visiting this city. The first time,

she came because she was fleeing with her own teacher. The second time was when she came back for a return trip. And today was the third time.

As one would expect, she seemed to be used to the sight of the dolls. She didn't look at all surprised. Instead, she did as the signboard advised and walked toward an open table.

I chased after her.

"This is an awfully strange city, huh...? So dolls do the jobs instead of humans?"

But as she took her seat, Miss Fran answered, "No, no. This restaurant is the only place that employs dolls. Other restaurants have waitresses working at them like usual."

"Hmm? Is that so?"

I sat down across from Miss Fran. I was in the window seat. I could look out and see the colorful cityscape.

"The dolls that work in this restaurant were made to assist humans. They are stationed all over town and lend a helping hand to anyone in need. There, look over there."

Miss Fran pointed.

She was pointing to a cute little girl doll on the corner that was holding a signboard that read: THE BOOKSTORE IS THIS WAY! IT'S ON THE MAP! and also walking along, leading the way for an old woman.

I see, I see.

"That one's not a stuffed bear."

"Right. The bears are a feature of this restaurant only."

As Miss Fran nodded assertively, a bear came up to the table with another sign that read: MAY I TAKE YOUR ORDER?

"Write what you want to eat on a piece of paper and hand it to the bear," said Miss Fran over her menu. She grabbed one of the slips of paper that had been provided for that purpose, and in her unique handwriting, she scribbled out the name of the most expensive thing the restaurant offered and then handed her paper over to the doll.

Across from her, I ordered a fairly cheap pasta dish and a glass of water.

"My goodness." As I was handing my paper to the bear, Miss Fran put her hand over her mouth and tutted. "You don't have to hold back, you know?"

"It's fine, I wasn't that hungry to begin with."

Allow me to confess something. I had eaten some bread behind Miss Fran's back earlier. So I was still a little full.

“Your diet will be unbalanced, you know? If you don’t eat better meals.”

“You sound like my mother...”

“I don’t mind you putting us in the same category.”

“In that case, I don’t mind letting you treat me to tonight’s meal and tomorrow’s and the next day’s, too.”

“I take back what I just said.”

“Well, my stomach will feel full anyway just from watching you eat so much.”

“Goodness, now you sound just like your mother.”

“Please don’t look at me that way.”

Our food came out before too long, accompanied by signs reading: SORRY FOR THE WAIT! and: SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING!

An ordinary pasta dish and an ordinary appetizer were placed on the table.

The bear that had brought out the dish for Miss Fran immediately turned on its heel and went back to the kitchen.

“.....”

However, for some reason, the bear that had brought out my pasta hopped right up and took a seat beside me.

“Miss, what’s this about?” I asked.

“In this restaurant, they offer a service where the bears will sit next to you after they finish bringing out your meal. That little guy can become like an extension of you, Elaina, and do all sorts of things for you.”

According to Miss Fran, the bears devoted themselves to their patrons after delivering their meals. They could feed you your food, take new orders, or even act as conversation partners.

“It’s very luxurious, oh-hoh-hoh.” She chuckled.

“Well, that doesn’t seem so bad, but...”

I’d at least like to feed myself.

It would have been pretty embarrassing to be fed by a stuffed bear in front of my teacher. I didn’t like the idea of that one bit, so I lifted the bear sitting next to me over my lap and put it by the window.

Nothing major happened after that; the two of us just passed the time chatting. That in itself was very pleasant. I appreciated spending time like that once in a while.

“I’ve still got some time until the day after tomorrow, so what shall we do?” Miss Fran asked either to herself or to me.

Two nights hence, Miss Fran would board a boat to return to Royal

Celestelia.

I knew I wouldn't see her for some time after she left. It wouldn't be a permanent good-bye, but we only had a little time left to be together, for a while.

The question was just how we should use the time we had left. I tried to think of something as we exchanged words that I wanted to write down and keep in my diary.

"Oh, I know." Miss Fran clapped her hands together. "This city is famous for its lanterns, and I heard people will be launching lanterns from the harbor in the evening the day after tomorrow. It's perfect timing, so if you like..."

Well, then!

As you can tell, the whole conversation between us was about silly stuff like that.

But change always comes suddenly, and that day was no exception.

"It seems like people load wishes into their lanterns. This will be my second time attending, but apparently it's a festival where everyone writes down their various wishes and sends them up into the sky—oh?"

Miss Fran paused for a moment and frowned. I wondered what on earth was the matter, and then I saw that the bear I had placed next to me was handing one of the order slips to Miss Fran.

...What?

".....?"

Apparently, it was the first time anything like that had happened to Miss Fran, too, because she looked puzzled as she accepted the paper.

And then—

"....."

She said nothing.

She said nothing, but she was obviously, clearly holding back a smile. She even seemed like she might be on the verge of bursting into laughter.

"Um, Elaina...by any chance, just now, were you thinking about writing in your diary?"

Miss Fran looked at me with a complicated expression.

What?

"Yes, uh...I did...probably think that, but—"

What of it?

"I'm sorry...I didn't explain well enough..."

Miss Fran took a deep breath and then told me, "This bear is animated by magic, okay? It is enchanted to respond to the thoughts of anyone who touches

it.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

"If you touch it while thinking that you would like some water, it will bring you water. If you touch it while thinking that you would like to speak to the girl in the seat next to you, it will go make a pass at her for you. Generally, in that way, while you're inside the restaurant, this bear will try to fulfill your desires."

Miss Fran glanced out across the restaurant. When I looked, there was a bear wearing a cool expression beside a girl sitting in a counter seat. It was holding a signboard that said THIS IS FROM THE CUSTOMER OVER THERE.

I see, I see.

In other words, just by touching them, you can get them to do anything you like?

They'll do anything for you...?

• • • •

Huh?

“So what will happen if I th

"It will write a diary entry."

Straightaway, Miss Farnell held out the slip of paper to him.

That's right, it's me.

“ Wait this is just it’s not right ”

After a long silence, I uttered an awkward dismissal. "...I really wasn't thinking about writing an entry like this at all!"

"Now, now, it's fine, Elaina. You don't have to make excuses. Your teacher knows all about you! Oh-hoh-hoh!" Miss Fran laughed. "And it's lifted the mood a little bit, wouldn't you say?"

No, no, wait, how are you completely misunderstanding this? Seriously, come on, this weird bear doll just did something weird, that's all. I can't believe this!

"Oh, this is so awkward! I wonder if this bear is broken. Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh!" I squeezed the bear's soft, squishy head. I gripped it with considerable force. Its squished face looked extremely ugly, but I wasn't concerned about that. That was the bear's own fault for overstepping its bounds.

“Elaina, I already knew about your feelings, so it’s really all right.”

Miss Fran smiled consolingly. She was looking at me as if she was quite amused.

Then, with one hand covering her mouth, she said, "So...you've been writing

some very unique entries in your diary, haven't you?"

Her eyes were warm.

"No, you've got it wrong. The bear just wrote that all on its own. It's definitely not what I wanted. This has nothing to do with my feelings; please forget it."

"You're speaking rather quickly."

"I'll speak quickly if I want to. Give me a break. This thing must be broken, right? This bear."

I kept on squeezing its head, over and over.

"No, I don't think it is broken... Didn't I just tell you how it works?"

"You mean about my intentions being projected into it?"

Squish, squish, squish, squish.

"That's what I mean. In other words, what's written on this slip of paper is what you really think—"

"You sure it's not broken?"

Squish, squish, smack, smack.

"No, I really don't believe it's broken, but—"

"Yes it is. This one's a dud."

Grind, grind, crush, crush.

"Actually, it rather seems like you're trying to break it now..."

"Well, a bear that does things like this is broken anyway, so there's no point in worrying about it."

Grind, grind, crunch, crunch.

I continued visiting punishment upon the offending bear. But the bear was apparently extremely sturdy, and it was entirely undamaged. Instead of a café employee, it seemed like the bear was better suited for a role as a punching bag.

"Um, Elaina, I think you'd better stop that—," Miss Fran said to me after a while. She was still wearing her smile. I had gone on and on tormenting the bear that had so readily exposed my secret.

Just as Miss Fran spoke up—

"Ahhhhh! What have you done?! You idiot!"

An angry roar that was nearly a shriek rang out from the back of the café. When I turned around to look in surprise, I saw a woman walking rapidly toward us.

Her brown hair formed soft, fluffy waves. The sweet-looking woman with gently drooping eyes, who was dressed in a loose, flowy robe, looked like someone who lived in a forest or something.

Who could she be?

Miss Fran said, “Ah, the manager.”

Apparently, she's the manager.

“Hey, you there, hey, you!” the manager shouted at me. “What the hell do you think you're doing to my little bear?!” Her attitude was terrifying. She slapped her hand down on the tabletop. “Give him here now!” She snatched the bear from my hands. “Really! Are you all right, sweet bear? There, there. There, there. That must have hurt. I'm sure you were scared. Are you okay? Aw.” She hugged the bear and rubbed her cheek against it.

.....

The bear really seemed to hate it.

“Miss Fran, didn't you say that those things project people's intentions?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“So what does that mean? Once the manager touches it, the manager's intentions dwell in the bear, is that right?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“It looks really hateful, though.”

“That it does.”

“Even so, if you really, really think about it, until just now, my intentions were in that bear, isn't that right?”

“If you really, really think about it, I suppose that's right.”

“Does that mean I was hitting myself?”

The manager cooed, “I bet this wittle guy was wondering, ‘What the heck am I doing?’”

“.....”

I'm not interested in self-mutilation, though...

I tried to stay calm. *Seriously, what was I doing?*

“I love you! I wuv you so much my wittle bear! Hee-hee-hee-hee...”

“.....”

“.....”

The manager had lost her cool way worse than I had. Seeing her like that helped me regain my usual composure.

After the manager had spent some time hugging her “wittle bear” or whatever, she returned to her senses. “Oh, Fran. It's been a while. What are you doing?”

“It's been a long time, Wassily.” Miss Fran looked fairly sober, as she usually did. “You seem as energetic as always.”

“Eh-heh-heh...is that how I look? By the way, who’s that girl beside you?”

“This is Elaina. She’s my pupil.”

“Oh, I see, a pupil! Got it! What kind of schooling are you giving her?” asked the manager, otherwise known as Wassily. Her voice remained cheerful, but her expression darkened.

“Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh. I’m sorry, you’ll have to let me fill you in later.”

“Unbelievable! After she did such cruel things to my sweet little bear! I oughtta knock your teeth out!”

It was obvious that anything I might say in this situation would only rile Wassily up more, so I stayed quiet. I sat and contemplated her in silence.

“That hurt, didn’t it, my sweet little bear? There, there, there, there.”

With a sidelong glance at Miss Fran and me sitting there in silent disapproval, the manager continued rubbing her cheek against the bear that was linked to her. “There, there, there, there.”

“.....”

Seems like even self-love should have limits...

“Allow me to reintroduce you two, Elaina. This is Wassily.”

Apparently, the restaurant basically ran itself so long as the bears were around. Wassily sat down in the seat next to me, maybe because she had time to kill, or maybe because she was still angry with me.

“But wow, it’s been a long time! How many years, Fran?”

“It’s been one month.”

“That’s a super-long time!”

“I saw you before we came in here, too. We ran into each other when I was heading in the other direction, didn’t we?”

“You really haven’t changed a bit!”

“You said the same thing when I saw you earlier.”

“It’s been so long since we saw each other, but you’re really the same as always!”

“You haven’t changed, either—you still don’t listen to what other people say.”

Miss Fran and Wassily both chuckled as they cheerfully carried on their conversation, but somehow they didn’t seem to be on the same wavelength, and the atmosphere at the table was very strange.

“How long have you been acquainted with the manager, Miss Fran?” I asked.

“For a very long time,” Miss Fran answered, placing a finger on her lip.

She told me that she had first met Wassily the first time she came to the city—in other words, right after she had left her hometown of Bielawald.

“I’ll never forget it. I was only ten years old back then...” Wassily suddenly launched into reminiscence.

No more than ten minutes had passed since I’d first met her, but it was already painfully obvious that she was quite the free spirit.

“That day was so clear and cool, and a pleasant spring breeze was blowing —”

Her reminiscence was very, very long, and from time to time she would squeeze her doll and say things like “Eh-heh-heh, I wuv my wittle bear!” which I will omit here because there must be limits even to being a free spirit. But in short, if I were to summarize her story...

Miss Fran and her teacher often came to the café while they were staying in the city. The owner of the café had a daughter. Her name was Wassily.

The end.

No really, that’s all there was to it. They just happened to be close in age at the time, so Wassily and Miss Fran became friends.

Wassily told me that since then, they had corresponded occasionally through letters.

“She may not look it, but Wassily here is quite a famous mage, and all the magic dolls in this city are her creations!” Miss Fran explained matter-of-factly.

“That’s right!” Wassily added, puffing up with pride.

“And she also does research into the history of magic. She’s got quite a lot of very old documents, you know. I even borrow her materials for my own research sometimes.”

“Yeah! That’s right! These dolls have a very long history, you know? The study of history is indispensable! Get it?” Wassily suddenly lit up.

I’m going to omit some things again. Wassily spoke with great abandon, telling us all about the history of the dolls. It was obvious that she loved dolls, and her long diatribe only reinforced my impression that she was a very free spirit.

“And also, listen, anyway, I’ve been collecting antique dolls for a long time.”

“.....” Casting a sidelong glance at Wassily, who continued chattering on euphorically, I whispered to Miss Fran, “Um, miss, is she always like this?”

“She hasn’t changed a bit since old times.”

“Uh-huh...I thought that might be the case.”

“Having a conversation with her is basically always like this.”

“Don’t you get tired of it?”

“I don’t really pay attention to what she’s saying, so I’m fine.” Miss Fran sipped her tea elegantly.

“.....”

“And also, listen.”

The afternoon of the first day of our stay in Troolio by the Sea.

At a table by the window in a strange café where dolls carry the food, our group of three sat, not communicating at all, like a little girl talking to her dolls.



By the time Wassily’s long story reached its conclusion, we were ready to leave her café. The sunshine that had been streaming down on the city was already tinged with red.

It was evening.

I could see the ship in the distance. Returning to port with a wake trailing behind it, the boat floated along at a very relaxed pace, looking exhausted from a day’s work.

There was a large group of people gathered at the harbor. I wondered whether the squirming, bustling crowd were all headed for the ship.

“Come to think of it, the festival is the day after tomorrow, isn’t it?” I asked, cocking my head.

Miss Fran nodded in confirmation.

The festival.

“And it’s a lantern festival, you said?”

Earlier, before Wassily showed up, Miss Fran had mentioned the festival. According to her, it was supposed to be a festival where people sent lanterns up into the night sky.

“The dolls that Wassily made have always helped out with the Lantern Festival. This year, it looks like they’re doing it with human power, though.”

I looked again and saw that every person in the group gathered at the port was holding a large lantern in their hands and that the frameworks for festival stalls were being erected.

“They must not have enough mages, I suppose.”

Miss Fran peered out into the distance.

A single white tower stretched up into the red-tinged sky. It was probably the

lighthouse that led the way for ships.

“It’s a little dark, isn’t it?”

I narrowed my eyes and stared at the light at the top of the tower. A faint bluish-white glow spilled out of the windows, which looked like candles giving off their meager illumination.

Miss Fran nodded. “Apparently, the mages are inside that tower, sending out magical energy to all the dolls in the country. The light was a little more radiant when I came here before, though...”

As Miss Fran had said, there were probably not very many mages.

“Is that why they’re using human power?” I asked.

They must have been relying on the dolls for a long time. The group of people setting up for the festival looked like they were getting the job done, but very awkwardly.

Obviously, they weren’t familiar with the task.

“They want to hold the festival badly enough to do it all themselves,” Miss Fran remarked.

“That’s how beautiful our Lantern Festival is, you know,” Wassily replied.

“.....”

In that case, I’m kind of interested.

But it’s the day after tomorrow?

“...Miss Fran, are you going to be here long enough for the festival?”

Miss Fran was leaving the city in two days. That coincided exactly with the scheduled day of the festival. If the festival started after her departure, she would leave the city without getting a chance to enjoy it.

Moreover, I would wind up wandering aimlessly through the festival without anyone to enjoy it with.

That was kind of a lonely thought.

“As far as whether or not I’ll be here, well, I think I can say that I will be.” Miss Fran looked at me and answered with this strange phrasing. “The boat I’m boarding departs tomorrow evening just before the Lantern Festival ends.”

According to Miss Fran, at this time of year, tickets for passenger ships departing from the city were very expensive because they offered a view of the Lantern Festival from the ocean. Miss Fran and her own teacher had previously relied on those tickets to get them out of the region once before. Just like in those days, she was going to set out on her journey while viewing the lanterns from on the water.

“So let’s enjoy the festival together the day after tomorrow.” Miss Fran

smiled.

I don't suppose I have to tell you that I agreed.

That evening...

We stayed at an inn together.

The room was nice, and the cost was fairly reasonable considering we had a sweeping view of the lovely ocean. There were two beds side by side and a table near the window. Otherwise, there was nothing in the room, and the furnishings were extremely simple. There being nothing much in the room was probably the reason for the low cost.

"Which one of us should use the bath first?"

I filled the tub with hot water as soon as we got to our room and then asked my teacher that question.

I said, "You go ahead, Miss Fran," but she answered me in her typical way: "No, no, you go first, Elaina, please."

No, no, I couldn't.

"I'm a little busy reading these sightseeing pamphlets I picked up, so please go ahead."

In Miss Fran's hand, she held some pamphlets she had gotten in the lounge of the inn.

I see, I see.

"What a funny coincidence. I'm also busy reading pamphlets, so you go ahead."

I had the same things in my hand. Both of us were sitting on one of the beds, tightly grasping pamphlets with titles like FULLY ENJOY EVERY NOOK AND CORNER OF TROCOLIO BY THE SEA! written across the covers, asking each other, "Where do you want to go, miss?" and "Where shall we go, Elaina?"

"If you don't get in soon, the water will get cold!" Miss Fran shoved me with her shoulder.

"I ran the water for you, Miss Fran!" I shoved her back.

"But I'm still busy, so..."

"I'm still busy, too, so please go ahead."

"No, no, you first, please."

For some reason, we continued this strange back-and-forth for a while, both of us shoving the other by the shoulder, but neither of us yielded a single inch.

We kept chatting on and on about nothing in particular, suggesting restaurants that looked good or places that looked interesting, without at all

deciding where to go the following day. Eventually, once the bath I had drawn had gone lukewarm, we butted heads once again. “Well, I suppose I’ll go ahead and get in then, miss.” “Ah, would it be all right if I got in first after all?”

Finally, I wound up gazing at the ceiling from the steaming bathtub.

“...I ended up going first, huh?”

In the end, I had my bath first. The hot water drained the tension from my body. With each breath in and out, I felt my nerves unwind, and I let out a relaxed sigh.

“Tomorrow while we’re out sightseeing, why don’t we poke our heads in briefly at the tower, too? I’m curious to see what kind of mages are controlling the dolls.”

I heard Miss Fran’s muffled voice from the other side of the door. After sucking in another breath, I answered loudly, “That’s fine with me!”

Apparently, I was even more tired than I realized. My voice sounded very soft and lazy. It came out almost as a yawn.

Uh-oh, that won’t do.

“...Heh-heh,” Miss Fran laughed from the other side of the door. “Hurry up and get out, okay?”

“.....” I leaned back in the bath and answered, “I’ll do my best.”

I couldn’t see Miss Fran, but somehow, I had the feeling she was looking in my direction.

“I’m really looking forward to the festival the day after tomorrow,” she said.

“I’m looking forward to tomorrow, too,” I replied.

“Did you decide where we’re going?”

“No, not yet.”

I haven’t decided where to go, but I know I want to go someplace fun.

That was how I meant to answer.

But just then, there was a crashing sound, and I felt uneasy about what was happening in the other room. Something felt out of place, as if the atmosphere had changed with the crash.

“Huh?” From behind the door dividing the bathroom from the rest of the room, my teacher uttered a few words. “...What’s this?”

“...?” It was strange. “Miss Fran? What’s the matter?”

But Miss Fran didn’t answer.

“...Miss?”

Before I knew it, I was out of the bath. I would have preferred to relax a little longer, but I sensed something strange on the other side of the door.

After drying myself with a bath towel and wrapping the towel around my body, I opened the bathroom door.

“.....”

A breeze blew through the room. The slightly chilly breeze cooled my warm body. I was sure the window hadn't been open before.

Despite that, the curtain was billowing, and the smell of saltwater hung in the air of the room.

“...Miss Fran?”

My voice sounded lifeless.

The room contained nothing but the two beds, the table, and our bags. Miss Fran, who ought to have been there, was nowhere to be seen.

It was as if she had abruptly disappeared.

“Where...”

...did you go?

I asked no one in particular.

“.....”

Aside from the fact that the window was open, and that Miss Fran was gone, nothing in the room had changed.

There was a book sitting on the table by the window.

It had a cover design that I had never seen before. The cover was black with gold ornamentation, and it had no title or author name.

But somehow, I got the feeling that it had been left there because someone wanted me to read it.

“...What's this?”

It was a massive tome. I couldn't help but be curious about what was written inside. I reached out and placed a hand on the book.

“.....”

Then, as I was about to open it...

...a cold chill ran up my spine. It might have been because the sharp wind chilled my damp body. Or maybe it was because I felt an intense feeling of dread.

Miss Fran had suddenly disappeared in the middle of a conversation, and an unfamiliar book was lying on the table. I couldn't imagine that the two things were unrelated.

Hypothetically speaking—and I didn't have any idea how on earth it could happen, but let's suppose—if the window was suddenly thrown open, the book could have flown in and landed on top of the table. That would be a crazy story,

but let's suppose something like that happened.

Then maybe at that point, Miss Fran walked over to the table. And perhaps she opened the book.

And suppose, as a result of doing so, she disappeared.

Then wouldn't it be obvious that the book was some kind of cursed object beyond my understanding?

"...That's no good."

We had so many plans to make for tomorrow, too.

I don't know what to do if she just up and disappeared on me.

I looked over my shoulder.

I saw the pamphlets that we had been reading side by side abandoned unceremoniously on one of the beds.





I went to Wassily's café as the sun was dawning. Though, thinking about it now, I had no evidence that Wassily actually lived at the café, so there was a distinct possibility that she wouldn't even be there if I visited first thing in the morning.

“...Hello? Wassily here.”

It turned out she was at the café after all.

She was extremely ill-humored in the morning, but unlike the other day when she had showered me with a tempestuous torrent of terrible abuse, even though her eyes were full of loathing, she only let out a single sigh.

“I was getting my precious sleep...”

I knew this was a little too early.

But this is an emergency.

“Wassily.”

I called her name.

Either because she was still waking up or because the person standing in front of her door was me, the witch who had bullied her darling bear, she wrinkled up her brow, and—

“What are you thinking, showing up at a time like—?”

“I have a request.”

I couldn't bring myself to tolerate her abuse again. I didn't have the time for it. “If I remember correctly, you study history, is that right? In that case, do you know about this book?”

I thrust the black book out in front of her sleepy-looking eyes. It wouldn't do to have the pages open in an unexpected accident, so at the moment, I had it bound tightly shut with a belt.

“What is this all of a sudden—?”

She seemed ready to make another complaint, but I cut her off again.

“Miss Fran has disappeared. Do you know anything about this book?”

“.....” Wassily's eyes opened wide. I couldn't tell if it was because she was surprised to hear that Miss Fran had disappeared or because she recognized the book in front of her.

I didn't care which one it was.

“...You'd better come in.”

As long as she could offer even one clue, that would be fine with me.

Thus, I succeeded in entering her café for the second time. I was served coffee. Not the stuff brewed by the dolls, but coffee made by the manager herself.

Immediately after setting my cup down on the table with a *clatter*, she uttered the following line:

“You were right not to open the book.”

I didn’t immediately understand the meaning behind those words. Apparently, my mind was in a daze. I took a sip of the coffee I had been served and felt a flush of heat around my eyes.

“This is *The Lonely Story Book*.”

Wassily sat down in the seat across from me, and she traced her finger across the cover of the book. “No one knows for sure where or when it was made, or by whom, and we also don’t know what is written inside it. There is no one who knows its exact contents.”

Wassily told me that was why it was called *The Lonely Story Book*, but ultimately, that meant...

“So no one has ever read it... Is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s not the case at all. Plenty of people have read it. People here in this city, in fact...mostly mages have read it. Lots of mages, just in these past few months.”

Even Wassily only knew part of the story, but according to her...

The Lonely Story Book was the subject of a strange legend told throughout the region. Rumors about it began to spread after a number of mages in another city vanished.

The mages suddenly disappeared one after another, or at least people thought they had, until they returned about three days later. People asked them where on earth they had gone, but the mages themselves had absolutely no memories of the time they were missing.

But that wasn’t the only strange thing.

Along with their memories, the mages had expended all their magical energy. They had used it all up. They could eventually recharge by spending enough time in the wilderness, but even so, it was a baffling situation.

What on earth was going on?

It took a long time to figure out.

One day, a mage found a black book lying by the side of the road and opened it on the spot out of curiosity. Immediately, that mage disappeared into the book.

A passerby just happened to witness the spectacle.

The passerby was surprised and opened the book, wondering where the mage had gone. Immediately after opening the book, their body was enveloped in light, and when they opened their eyes, they were in a strange new world.

But as soon as they got there...

“You were not summoned.”

An unseen voice spoke those words, and the passerby found themselves back in the city.

There could be no doubt that this book was responsible for the mages disappearing. The people knew it intuitively. They named the book *The Lonely Story Book* and put it under strict safekeeping.

Then after three days, the mage who had found the book beside the road reappeared. Just like the others, she had lost her memory and her magical energy during the time she had been missing.

After that, the black book became known as a dangerous book and was sealed away beneath the city.

However...

“Despite being sealed away, this book apparently disappeared without a trace. Ever since then, from time to time, it appears without warning and disappears again after robbing mages of their memories and knowledge—it has been appearing around the city for the past several months. This book’s got a will of its own.”

According to Wassily, the reason why there weren’t very many mages in the city was because of *The Lonely Story Book*.

One after another, the mages in the city had opened the book and disappeared, only to reappear three days later, stripped of magical energy. Most of the mages were recovering from the ordeal, and as a result, the only person around who could properly use magic was Wassily.

“So you were unharmed?” I asked.

She nodded casually. “Actually, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that I brought the situation back under control, at least for a moment.” Wassily was a pretty cool character in the morning. “It appeared right in front of me once, this book.”

It had happened about a month earlier.

Wassily had already known about *The Lonely Story Book*, so she didn’t open it. She bound it tightly closed and sent it off to another country without cracking the cover.

“My intention was to send it to the United Magic Association and have them

take all the appropriate measures, but..."

But I could guess that her plan had failed from the fact that the book was resting calmly on top of the table at this very moment.

"It seems my outlook was overly optimistic. I never thought it would come back this quickly."

In the end, *The Lonely Story Book* had returned to the city of its own accord.

It had gone straight to Miss Fran.

"....."

But...

"If everything in that story is true, it will be three days before Miss Fran comes back, and when she does, she will have lost most of her magical energy. Is that what you're telling me?"

Wassily nodded.

"That's what it comes down to, yes. As things stand."

"...She was planning to leave the city on a boat tomorrow."

"She was."

"So as things stand, we have a problem."

Though imperfect, Miss Fran did make her living as a teacher. As things stood, needless to say, this would present an obstacle to her career. She wouldn't be able to get back to Royal Celestelia if she was imprisoned inside a book for three days. I was of the opinion that this would be an entirely unfair development.

I wouldn't know what to do if we couldn't get Miss Fran to come back.

Especially since we had already made plans to enjoy some sightseeing.

"Somehow, we've got to bring Miss Fran out from the world of the book."

We also promised to watch the Lantern Festival together tomorrow, after all.

I refuse to be stuck waiting for her for three days.

"How many hours did you spend looking for her?" Wassily asked me suddenly.

"....."

"You searched for her, right? You searched for Fran? How long did you spend looking?" She repeated the same question again.

I had realized immediately that the cause of my teacher's disappearance lay with the book, but just in case, I had also gone looking for her around town.

Let's see, how long was I looking?

"...I don't remember."

"Go take a nap," Wassily responded without delay.

What is she talking about?

“I can’t do that. Not until we figure out a plan to help Miss Fran—”

I took another sip of coffee. The area around my eyes steadily warmed again.

“I’m saying that because I already have a plan. So go rest for a little while, okay?”

As she was speaking, she took the coffee and the book from my hands.

After a short nap.

“Oh, you’re up! It’s been a while, Elaina. Are you doing well?”

“.....”

When I sat up, a messy room met my eyes. Potion bottles were scattered everywhere, and there were scraps of paper underfoot, covered in endless equations. The shelves were lined carefully with dolls—little girls and little boys, as well as the bears that had been running the restaurant.

It looked like the back of the restaurant was Wassily’s private room.

“I’m normally back here doing research. It’s no problem, since I can leave the café to the bears!”

Light streamed in through the window. Apparently, it was still daytime.

“Good morning...”

My body felt light, probably because I had just taken a nap. A big stretch worked any leftover stiffness out of my muscles, which felt kind of pleasant.

“Perfect timing. I just finished getting everything ready,” Wassily said, staring at me.

There was a table right in front of the sofa where I had been napping.

There were four dolls on it.

Two of them were girls with ash-gray hair and lapis-blue eyes, dressed in the sort of robes that mages wore. The other two dolls were girls dressed in normal, everyday clothes.

“These are...”

...*what, exactly?*

“These are your alter egos! They’re very well made, if I do say so myself...” Wassily chuckled, looking pleased. Stroking the dolls gently, she continued, “This is only a hypothesis, but I’m convinced that *The Lonely Story Book* was made by a demon.”

“A demon...you say?”

When she said that, a memory from a very long time ago surfaced in my sleepy mind. I recalled a relatively benign demon who would show you

whatever dream you liked and then gave you one thing that you wanted at the end of the dream.

However, if at the end you asked to remain in the dream, she would snatch away your life right then and there.

“I think what happens is that the mages get trapped in the world of the book, and while they’re in there, their magical energy is stolen. Though I have no idea what on earth is happening to them in there for three days—”

“.....”

“But I daresay the demon inside *The Lonely Story Book* is stealing magical energy from the mages. Of that alone I have no doubt,” she told me.

I felt a slight sense of discomfort at her words.

Would a demon really use such a complicated plan just to steal some magical energy? Plus, it doesn’t seem to me like the sort of demon that would invade people’s dreams would also be kind enough to return everyone they feed off of after they’re done...

“Anyone without magic is expelled from the world inside the book where the demon is.”

Wassily’s words pulled my attention back to reality.

“That’s why we need a good plan.”

“...What are you talking about?”

Out of the four dolls on the table, Wassily pointed to the two that were dressed in mage’s outfits.

“The mechanism of the dolls is very simple. They are imbued with magical energy and will spring into action when someone touches them.”

“You already showed me that yesterday.”

I knew the dolls could be animated by the currents of magical energy flowing into them from the lighthouse or the café.

“Two of the four dolls will pretend to be you and Fran. We’ll get them to spend three days in the book’s world posing as sentient humans.”

“In other words, they are our stand-ins?”

Wassily nodded sharply. “Even though they are conscious, they’re still just dolls. Don’t feel guilty about sending them in.”

Then she pointed to the other two dolls, the ones wearing casual clothes.

“We’ll use these two to store both your and Fran’s magical energy. They’re not made to become conscious, so they are just shells that you can fill with magical energy. Once you find Fran inside the book, each of you must pour your magical energy into one of these dolls. Fill them to the limit, until you are no

longer able to cast any spells.”

Once we did that, Miss Fran and I would no longer have anything to steal, because all the magical energy would be out of our bodies.

That means...

“So both of us together will be expelled from the book?”

“Yes, and leave the stand-ins behind.”

Then, after three days, the two dolls that were serving as our stand-ins would return to the outside world, empty of mind and magical energy—

That was the plan Wassily had concocted.

“This was the plan that occurred to me as soon as I heard the rumors that *The Lonely Story Book* had appeared in this city. But the book is really elusive—”

She told me that in the end, she hadn’t had a chance to try it until now.

In other words, we had absolutely no idea whether or not this plan would be successful. It was the best that she had come up with, working off of the evidence she had gathered.

“You in?”

Wassily cocked her head.

I already knew my answer.

“Of course.”

Then I pulled out my wand and channeled magical energy into the two dolls dressed in robes.

There was no need to hesitate. There was a non-zero possibility that this plan might fail, but if that happened, Miss Fran and I would just spend three days together inside the book and wind up with our magical energy stolen, that was all.

It wasn’t as if our lives were at risk.

So surely there was no need to hesitate.

“I’m starting now.”

I showered the robed dolls with bluish-white light, and they rattled and swayed. After I had been conferring magical energy onto them for some time, Wassily said, “Let’s put the girls in casual clothes into a bag or something,” and shoved them into a pouch.

“Huh? They won’t go in...” She crammed them in hard. They didn’t go in. “Come on!” Finally, she forced them into the bag, bending their necks as she shoved them.

“.....”

This lady really loves dolls, doesn’t she? Doesn’t she?

“Okay, take this.”

“S-sure...thanks.”

She handed me the pouch, and I hung it over my shoulder. At about the same moment, my wand ran out of juice. I had already given plenty of magical energy to the dolls.

“All right then, are you ready?”

And then, without a moment’s delay, Wassily picked up the book. She turned it toward me, ready to open it.

I picked up the two robed dolls. The dolls squirmed, as if being held in my arms was making them uncomfortable, and they tried to escape.

Once I touched them, they ought to have been imbued with my will, but apparently, the mini Elainas in my hands were going through something of a late rebellious stage.

“Before you go, is there anything you want to ask me?” Wassily asked, book at the ready.

“.....”

This was utterly inappropriate for the situation, but in that moment, I had regained some degree of tranquility. I had surrendered myself to the optimistic view that I would probably manage somehow. And I was absentmindedly recalling the events of the day before.

I was thinking about walking around town with Miss Fran.

On that subject, the thing I remembered was...

“The walls in this city are all plastered with paint, aren’t they? What’s the reason for that?”

That conversation with my teacher had been the impetus for coming into the café.

It had also been a conversation about how things can look like they have a deeper meaning while actually having no particular meaning behind them at all.

“...You don’t know a simple thing like that?” Wassily frowned at my clueless question.

But she also answered me.

She said simply, “It’s to make the city easy to see from a boat, obviously.”

“Is that so...?”

Just as I thought, the things that seem like they have a deeper meaning to them usually really do contain some significance.

I’ll have to talk about this with Miss Fran when I see her again.

As I was absentmindedly musing on such matters, I was enveloped in light.

●

Where on earth can this be?

When I sat up and looked around, I saw familiar scenery stretching out around me.

Tall buildings stood proudly in rows, with ropes strung between them. The laundry hanging from the ropes fluttered lightly in the warm breeze, and a pleasant aroma filled the air. My gaze drifted, enticed by the sweet smell that was faintly wafting past, and I could see a windowsill decorated with flowers.

It was a familiar scene.

The city of Royal Celestelia was spread out before my eyes.

A little down the way stood a row of buildings with ivy stretching up their walls. I remembered seeing them in that condition, almost as if they were trying to return to nature.

It was one of the sights I had loved a long, long time ago, when I was small.

Some scenery from Bielawald was also mixed into the view.

I was in a mysterious world where sights from two different cities were intricately intertwined.

“Oh, hello. Do you know where this place is? You over there.”

Suddenly, I heard a voice coming from behind me.

When I turned around, there was a girl standing there by herself. She looked to be about fourteen years of age. I recognized the black-haired girl right away.

She was my former self.

Or she appeared to be.

Two small horns protruded from her head, and the long nails growing from her fingertips were painted black. But her face and the clothes she was wearing were the very image of my younger self.

“Do you know where this is?”

The thing that had taken the form of my younger self cocked its head.

“.....”

I exercised my mind for a moment.

First, let's consider the sequence of events leading up to when I arrived here. If I remember correctly, I was waiting for Elaina to finish her bath, and then the window opened all on its own, and as soon as I noticed the breeze blowing in, I saw a book I didn't recognize sitting on top of the table, and I opened it, and then...

“...Is this the inside of a book?”

“Brilliant! So I wonder if you know who I am?”

“Let’s see...?”

My goodness, I haven’t the slightest idea. Who could you be?

Just going by appearances, you look like a demon, but—

“All right, do you know the reason why you are here?”

I have no way of knowing that.

I shook my head.

“All right then, I’ll tell you.”

The girl chuckled and then said, “I summoned you.”

“...Why did you do that?”

“Because I want to play with you,” she told me readily.

She told me her very straightforward reason.

“...Is that all?”

Are you sure I wasn’t summoned to this place for any other reason? Did you just want someone to play with? You prepared a whole dream world like this just so you could invite me in to play?

“It seems like I would have some deeper reason, doesn’t it? But that’s not the case at all. I just want to play with you.”

She smiled.

But I knew the truth.

I knew it was just a ploy to draw me in.

“All right then, let’s play. What shall we do? What do you want to play?”

She approached me quickly and whispered into my ear.

Just like a demon would.

“How about we play such a fun game that you forget about painful old reality?”



All humans have certain qualities that they themselves are not even aware of. And they all hold desires that they are not conscious of.

That was true also for Miss Fran, who created a world inside a book that blended the two cities Royal Celestelia and Bielawald.

And of course, it was true for me, too.

“This seems to be a world reproduced from Miss Fran’s memories... I see, isn’t this interesting? Heh-heh-heh.” I let a bold laugh slip out.

I did.

“Apparently, she really treasures her two hometowns, I can see that *neow*,” I said again, adding a strange inflection to the end of my final word.

.....

“All we have to do is locate Mistress Fran in here, isn’t that right, Mistress Elaina?”

These were the words of someone with my outward appearance but who was definitely not me.

Without replying to *their words*, I surveyed our surroundings.

In this strange world that combined parts of two familiar but different cities, there were three mages with ashen hair. And there was one human with light pink hair.

“Hee-hee... Hide and seek, huh? I see, how interesting.”

The one wearing a bold, sneering grin on her face was a version of me who looked just like me except she was wearing glasses and for some reason was dressed in the uniform for Latorita State University. She had a vaguely intelligent air about her. I decided to keep it simple and call her Brainy Elaina.

“Leave it to me. I’m sure I can locate our beloved teacher, *meow!*”

Next to her was another version of me, with cat ears and a maid outfit. She had a naturally flirtatious attitude and spoke in a cutesy voice. I decided to keep it simple and call her Flirty Elaina.

“Mistress Elaina, are you sure that your consciousness has actually been projected into these two?”

The one glaring coldly at the two strange versions of me also looked very much like me but was not me on the inside. She was someone who had been traveling with me for a long time. She was my broom.

.....

I was silent.

There were a number of factors that caused us to end up in such a condition. Would you be so kind as to listen to how it happened?

Once I entered the world of the book, a thought came to me suddenly.

“We are using the dolls as stand-ins, but they’re not actually in human form. Won’t we be discovered?”

I could just imagine the demon who was somewhere in the book world brushing us aside and saying something like “*Huh? There’s no way a doll like this can serve as a replacement for a mage. Are you dumb?*” There was a serious hole in Wassily’s plan. I’d only realized it after we’d entered the book world. I must have been a little rattled.

Well now, what to do?

“Ah, okay, how about I use a spell to turn the dolls into people?”

Immediately, I had had a genius flash of inspiration. I’d acted as soon as it came to me. I had lined the two dolls up on the ground and put my broom there as well while I was at it, and cast a spell.

A spell to turn them into humans.

And as for what happened after that—

“Heh-heh-heh. Apparently, you require my help, Elaina.” A version of me in glasses who didn’t seem very clever appeared, wearing an awfully self-satisfied expression.

“I’ll find Miss Fran, *meow!*” A version of me wearing a skimpy maid outfit appeared, casually flicking a pair of cat ears growing from her head and a long tail growing from her backside.

“Mistress Elaina. You haven’t summoned me at all recently. What is it all of a sudden? I may be your devoted servant, but I am not a common tool.” A girl who resembled me pouted as she said this somewhat puzzling line. She was my broom, and she was a little offended because she hadn’t had any appearances in a while.

I was immediately annoyed by the fact that my doubles’ physical features were a little off, but for the time being, I pretended not to notice and made my request to them.

“Excuse me. Do you think I could ask you all for your help?”

I needed their help in order to search for Miss Fran, who was somewhere in the book world, and rescue her. It would take me much too long on my own, so I figured I could use the assistance of the other Elainas.

But neither the two substitute Elainas nor the broom seemed all that interested.

“Before we start searching for Miss Fran, you, the Elaina over there, tell me, what do you think of me?” Brainy Elaina asked, shoving her glasses up her nose with her finger. “Don’t I look smart?”

“.....”

What are you talking about?

“No, you just seem like you might have bad eyesight...”

“That Elaina in the school uniform and glasses, with an intelligent air about her, who could she be?”

“No idea.”

“That’s right, it’s me.”

“You’re badly mistaken if you think that you can turn yourself into an intellectual by putting on glasses,” I spit.

But Brainy Elaina snorted at me. “Heh-heh...is that the envy of the poorly educated?” she said nonsensically.

If I’m poorly educated, then that means you’re poorly educated, too, you understand that?

“Hey, Elaina...hey, Flat Elaina...”

Someone was tugging vigorously at my robe. It was Flirty Elaina. The version of me dressed as a cat-eared maid had her back hunched over like a cat and was looking up at me.

Could “Flat Elaina” possibly be referring to me?

She had been calling me Flat Elaina for a while, and I had no idea why.

But Flirty Elaina didn’t seem bothered. She asked me, “What should I do? Find Miss Fran and flirt with her as soon as possible? Would that help?”

“No, once you find her, give her the doll and explain the situation to her. That’s what I need.”

“And I should flirt with her after that?”

“Don’t flirt with her at all.”

“Not at all?”

“No.”

“Then, am I allowed to flirt with anyone other than Miss Fran?”

“Who is here other than Miss Fran?”

“Like, you?”

“No.”

“All right, how about the broom?”

“No.”

“Aw...”

“...Why do you want to flirt with someone so badly?”

Actually, when you talk about flirting, what are you planning to do? Is that some kind of slang?

“I long for the warmth of human touch...”

“What are you saying, Elaina?”

Didn’t you originate from me, the traveler?

“Listen, Flat Elaina. Rabbits can die from loneliness, did you know that?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a cat?”

There were all sorts of retorts I would have liked to make, but at the moment, I was stuck on the fact that during the past few minutes of our conversation, any

trace of the *meows* at the end of Flirty Elaina's sentences had completely vanished.

What's the deal with that? Is your characterization that inconsistent? Should I change your name to Inconsistent Characterization Elaina?

"So why in the world was I summoned?" my broom asked me with a sigh. Finally, one of them launched a decent question my way.

I let out a sigh of my own.

"I just figured it would be good to have more manpower."

"I see. So then, what will you do once you find your teacher?"

"Give her this."

I handed her one of the dolls from the pouch, the one in street clothes who was modeled after me. "According to Wassily, if we fill these dolls to the limit with our magical energy, we will be like regular humans without any magic. And if that happens, we ought to be able to get out of the book—probably."

"Hmm."

My broom accepted the doll from me and stuck it into her pocket. Its head was large, so she forcefully bent the neck to get it in. "Huh? It doesn't wanna go in...mmph!"

Poor Plainclothes Elaina...

"By the way, Mistress Elaina." My broom tilted her head questioningly while stroking her bulging pocket that had the doll wedged into it.

"What is it?"

"I'm very sorry if I've misunderstood something, but are you perchance intending to send one of the other Elainas with each of us?"

My goodness, what are you saying?

"Let me ask you, do you think those two have any chance of finding Miss Fran on their own?"

I glanced over at the other two.

Brainy Elaina and Flirty Elaina weren't listening to a word of our conversation. Instead, they were flirting with each other.

"Those cat ears are really nice..."

"And your glasses are so cool..."

"Not a chance." My broom ruthlessly discarded the possibility.

"Exactly." It made my heart ache a little to say so, since I was talking about myself. "I think it would probably be difficult for those two alone to cope, whether they run into Miss Fran or the demon."

Regardless of which person they happened to meet, without either me or my

broom there, I had no doubt that the situation would turn ugly. After all, even though we were using them as stand-ins, they were just dolls that had little bits of my consciousness stuffed into them, so they weren't likely to be able to grasp difficult concepts.

Getting my broom out had been the right call.

“.....”

But the broom in question didn't meet my eye. She stood there frowning in silence, making a face like she was pondering something difficult.

So I tilted my head and asked, “Hmm? What's the matter?”

At my question, she finally looked up with a start and replied, “Ah, nothing...just, there's something that's bothering me a little.”

“What is it?”

“.....” My broom was silent for a while longer, but finally she uttered in a quiet voice, “Don't you think it's unusual?”

“...Think what's unusual?”

Even though I turned the question back on her, I had noticed it, too. My broom, who had kept me company for a long time, had the same misgivings I did.

“Don't you think she's being very quiet for a demon? If a group of outsiders like us suddenly barged into the book world, shouldn't the demon notice right away and appear before us? And yet she's nowhere to be seen. We're making a big ruckus, but there's no sign that she's noticed us. It's too quiet.”

“.....”

“I'm sure there are any number of ways she could catch us in a trap or block us with some sort of obstruction. Besides, I got to listen in on the whole conversation, and if all the mages so far have returned alive and quickly been able to recover their magic after some time has passed, then—if the only thing stolen from them was just three days and their memories of that time plus their magical energy, then...”

“It seems way too easy, right?”

I had also been thinking that something was amiss.

The demon I had met before had not taken such a gentle approach. Demons were creatures that mercilessly snatched away your life if you made the wrong choice.

Nevertheless, the book had not killed anyone. At least, not so far as I had heard.

“I think she probably has some sort of ulterior motive, Mistress Elaina. Let's

proceed with caution as we move ahead,” said my broom.

“...You’re right.” I nodded.

Though I was already planning to do that.

After that, we split up into two groups and started walking through the world inside the book.

“Ahhh! Cat-Eared Elaina! Farewell!”

I pulled Brainy Elaina away.

“I won’t forget about you, Cool Glasses Elaina!”

My broom dragged Flirty Elaina away.

Without a clue about what awaited us down the road, we began our journey through the world inside the book.



“I know, Fran, let’s play hide-and-seek!”

The demonic version of me clapped her hands and smiled.

I wonder just how many hours have passed in here? There’s no daytime or nighttime; the sky is just an indistinguishable pale color.

The concept of time was tenuous at best in the book world.

Strangely enough, the demonic version of me seemed to spend all her time in this world in idle amusement. She never did anything openly evil or even untrustworthy.

I asked her several times to let me out of the book, but each time I did, she just answered, “All right, when you win against me, I’ll let you out.”

The city stretched out around us as far as I could see, and it didn’t seem like I’d be able to find a way out on my own.

In the end, there was nothing I could do but keep playing, for as long as time would permit.

The first things we played after my arrival were board games. We amused ourselves with games like chess and cards, the ordinary sort of games where you sit facing each other and only move your hands.

It wasn’t that it was boring, but I couldn’t understand why the demon was doing it.

“How fun this is, how very fun!”

She clapped her hands together with a smile. The demon before me seemed to be earnestly enjoying the games.

And she was quite skilled.

She confidently declared that she would release me if I won a game. But she never lost, no matter what game we were playing.

Each time I lost a game, the demon prompted me, “Now, as a penalty, tell me one of your stories?”

So every round, I told her a story.

“Once upon a time, in a town called Bielawald, there lived a little girl...”

For instance, I told her the tale of my life up until I left my former hometown.

“Not too long ago, I was living in the forest with a certain girl...”

Or I told her the tale of the year Elaina and I had spent training.

“Just recently, I was traveling with a pupil of mine...”

Or I told her the story leading up to my arrival there.

I told the demon those kinds of stories.

With each new story, she put her hands together and smiled.

“How fun this is! How very, very fun!”

This girl living inside a book sure seems to love pestering people for their stories.

“What kind of story should I get you to tell me next?”

Actually, she seems like she's happy just to talk to another person.

Each time she won a game, she proposed a new game with a grin on her face.

“.....”

And then, after an untold number of hours had passed, she made another proposal.

“Let's play hide-and-seek.”

The time limit was one hour.

After she had explained the very simple rules to me—that she would count to one hundred, and while she was counting, I would hide somewhere in the city, and then if she found me, I would lose—I took off walking through the city.

The city was made of my memories.

I casually opened the door on a random house, and there was the reading room I regularly used in Royal Celestelia. When I opened the door to a different house, there was Elaina's home.

I also found the house where the two of us had spent a year together.

The city was overflowing with pleasant memories.

“.....”

After very careful consideration, I realized that time seemed rather fluid in that place, and also, that I did not have a watch on me. I had no idea how long I'd been there.

Wasn't it possible that the demonic version of me was capable of stretching out the hours for as long as she liked?

Maybe it didn't matter how many games we played because I had already lost.

"...She caught me, huh?"

I let out a sigh, standing in the middle of the city.

It seemed like the demonic Fran was going to get me to tell her my stories no matter what.



Apparently, Brainy Elaina, equipped with her glasses, was the type of person to seize the lead over things.

"Are you listening? From this point forward, I will lead the way. You follow along behind me," she told me, shoving her glasses up her nose. She moved through the city, jumping dexterously from one hiding place to the next. She looked just like a ninja from the East.

"If you're going to play hide-and-seek, I have no intention of playing along."

I, on the other hand, was walking through town normally. I had no intention of hiding, because I couldn't look for Miss Fran while hiding myself.

Or maybe it was because I was simply captivated by the familiar scenery.

Suddenly, Brainy Elaina turned to face me. "By the way, Flat Elaina..."

"...What is it?"

Are we settled on that name for good? I don't think I have a particularly flat demeanor, but...

"Heh-heh-heh." With a smile, the other girl pushed her glasses up forcefully. "What do you think of these glasses?"

"....."

The girl before me was hopeless. Her question was so inconsequential, yet her expression was so smug.

"Please, leave the question of the glasses aside for the time being and focus on searching for Miss Fran."

"Of course, that's what I've been doing this whole time! You're very rude, Flat Elaina."

"...Am I really?" I glared at her.

But Brainy Elaina wasn't fazed. "Aren't you?" she replied. "I wouldn't lie, not with these glasses on."

Oh my, not lying isn't very like me, is it?

"Now then, is there anything that we've deduced about this city?"

Brainy Elaina cocked her head adorably. "About the city, you ask? Like the fact that all the places clogging up Miss Fran's memories have blended together to create this extremely chaotic cityscape?"

Very clever. That's right.

"So then, is there any apparent regularity to it?"

".....?"

Brainy Elaina cocked her head again, wearing a peevish expression.

She didn't seem to understand.

"Look over there." I pointed.

Beneath the pale sky, ahead of us on the road, stood a single large building. It looked very, very old, like it might crumble at any moment.

It was the Great Library of Bielawald.

"Is that significant?"

"It looks familiar."

".....?" Brainy Elaina screwed up her face as she stared at the Great Library.

By any chance, are those glasses just for show?

"Flat Elaina," said Brainy Elaina after a moment or two, "it's no surprise that the building looks familiar, right? I mean, that's the place where we looked at the stars with Miss Fran, isn't it?"

"It sure is."

After all, I'm not surprised that I remember some of the things in this world as well.

But with the Great Library in the center of town and buildings that were in Bielawald mixed in everywhere—

"I think this city was probably created by starting with Bielawald, then mixing in buildings from other places," I said.

I think I can say that.

"...Huh." But Brainy Elaina was still making a troubled face. "Does that mean something?"

"Just come take a look over here."

I pointed to one of the houses nearby. It was the house where I had spent my training period with Miss Fran. For some reason, there were several of these houses around town—the one I was pointing at was the fourth we'd encountered so far.

"Hmm?"

At my prompting, Brainy Elaina peeked into the window.

“What can you see?” I asked.

“...I see a beautiful girl.”

“.....”

“That’s right, it’s me.”

I snatched the glasses off her face.

“Ahh! What are you doing, Flat Elaina?! I can’t see! Dark times are coming!”

Brainy Elaina raved melodramatically.

Should I revoke your pretentious nickname along with your glasses?

Holding her glasses up to the pale sky, I addressed Formerly Brainy Elaina (*ha-ha*), who was jumping up and down, yelling, “Give them back!”

“Look carefully. Focus your eyes and look carefully at every nook and corner of the buildings in this city.”

And then I urged her toward the window again.

Through the window of my childhood home, we could see a living room that we remembered very fondly.

“.....”

Doing as she was told, Formerly Brainy Elaina focused on what she saw.

In front of her eyes was the figure of a person.

“And this makes it complete, I believe...?”

There was a girl with ash-gray hair sitting at the desk, mixing potions.

“Oh, Elaina...are you sure you haven’t mixed this one wrong?”

Standing behind her was a witch with black hair, tilting her head questioningly as she spread a sheet of paper out with both hands.

“What did I get wrong?”

“Here, this part,” the black-haired witch answered, pointing to the paper.

It was one of my idle exchanges with Miss Fran, when I had been her student. Through that window was a scene from a perfectly ordinary day that the two of us had spent together.

“This is what I’m talking about,” I said, letting Formerly Brainy Elaina put her glasses back on. “The city includes more than just architecture that we have an emotional attachment to.”

The Bielawald we visited—that dead, deserted city—repeatedly played scenes from the past like a revolving lantern.

And if this city made up of Miss Fran’s memories had been constructed with Bielawald at its core—

Wouldn’t that mean that everywhere throughout this city, her memories were

being reproduced?

“.....”

In other words, to put it simply—

The real Miss Fran wasn't the only one here. There were lots of copies of her that we definitely wouldn't be able to touch or talk to.

“By the way, Flat Elaina, there's something I just now realized...” Brainy Elaina pushed her glasses up roughly.

“...What's that?”

“Hunting for Miss Fran is, like, really hard, isn't it?”

“‘Really hard’ is putting it lightly. This is an extremely complex situation.”



I, a simple broom, and Mistress Flirty Elaina found ourselves met with an extremely complex situation.

“Are you ready, everyone? Today, we are going to practice riding our brooms.”

“My goodness, well done. You're quite talented.”

“What's that? The bread at this store sells for three coppers per piece? Even though it tastes like this?”

“Huh? There are mages who use their magic to swindle people? What scoundrels!”

The closer we got to the heart of the city, the more strange sights we began to see.

Exactly when did Mistress Elaina's teacher, Mistress Fran, split into multiple people? Figures that look like Mistress Fran are appearing and disappearing all over the place. Just like bubbles on a liquid's surface.

“This is terrible, Miss Broom! There are so many Miss Frans!”

We were supposed to be searching the city for Mistress Fran. But since Mistress Fran was apparently everywhere we looked, Mistress Flirty Elaina kept charging into house after house, flicking her tail behind her as she gamboled through town in a riot of excitement and confusion. She looked just like a playful cat.

“Miss Fraaan!”

She flung open the door to a house and barged right in. Inside, Miss Fran chuckled and said, “My goodness...” as she lay a blanket around the shoulders of Mistress Elaina, who had apparently fallen asleep while studying.

“Miss Fran! Where on earth have you been?! We’ve been looking all over for you!”

By the way, this was the fifteenth time in total that Mistress Flirty Elaina had said that line. I was already sick of it.

“Heh-heh-heh...” Mistress Fran vanished in a puff of smoke.

The illusions in this city apparently disappeared after only a moment or two.

“Oh...whaaa—? Miss Fran disappeared again...”

Mistress Flirty Elaina’s shoulders dropped dejectedly.

I wish you would get used to this already...

“Mistress Elaina. It seems this house was another bust.” I addressed her from behind. “Let’s check the next house.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Mistress Flirty Elaina nodded, then headed off sadly toward another house.

So Mistress Flirty Elaina and I walked around town, searching all the while.

“...I can’t see an end to this at all.”

She was getting disheartened.

No matter how long we searched, we only found illusions. It was enough to make me doubt whether the real Mistress Fran was actually even in the city.

“Miss Broom, you seem down. Are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?”

Mistress Flirty Elaina, who had energy to spare, picked up on my sighing and reacted by running around me in circles, asking if I was all right. At very close range.

“...I’m fine, so would you mind backing up a little?”

“Huh? Why?”

“.....”

“...?”

She looked dumb, and said dumb things, and did dumb things, but somehow or other, the person with me was, in form at least, undoubtedly my mistress, Elaina.

Naturally, it was difficult for me to respond with her staring at me from point-blank range, and on top of how close she was, she was wearing the sort of brazen smile that normal Elaina never showed me.

It goes without saying that I had no idea how to handle her.

“Ah, Mistress Elaina, I wonder if the real Mistress Fran might be in that house over there?”

So I pointed to one of the houses standing nearby. Inside it, an image of Mistress Fran, still in her teens, was learning how to make potions from a

woman who closely resembled Mistress Elaina. I heard the woman say, “Hey, isn’t that one mixed wrong?”

“It’s Miss Fran from when she was young! Awesome!”

Mistress Flirty Elaina, who was strikingly dim, was also extremely easily redirected, and she barged into the house without a moment’s hesitation.

“.....”

They say that given enough tries, even a poor marksman will eventually hit the target.

I wonder how many more tries it will take before we come across the real Mistress Fran—?

In a world where the very concept of time was ambiguous, it seemed like our overwhelming task might just continue forever.

However...

“...What on earth is going on?”

Just then, something happened.

As I was sighing to myself, a girl appeared in front of me.

She was dressed in a black robe and had sleek black hair.

“Who’re you?” The girl wore an expression of open bewilderment, and though she somewhat resembled Mistress Fran in her younger days, she was definitely different in appearance.

“...I should ask you the same question,” I replied.

In front of me was someone who looked like Mistress Fran, only with horns growing out of her black hair and a tail with a tip shaped like an arrowhead.

The girl narrowed her eyes suggestively, as if she was hiding some deeper meaning, but then answered readily, as if there was nothing strange going on at all.

“I’m a demon. So who are you two?”



I was in the middle of playing hide-and-seek with Demonic Fran.

“.....”

As I walked around, I was brought to a halt many times by indescribable nostalgia. Everywhere I looked, all I saw were scenes from my past.

“Fran, sweetie, what are you reading?”

A voice came from inside one of the houses along the street. It was an orphanage.

When I peeked in through the window, a young woman was crouched in front of a little girl, smiling.

The girl was me when I was younger.

“...It’s nothing, never mind.”

“My, my...you don’t like me anymore?”

The woman who had worked at the orphanage was a very kind person. Maybe it was because she had been a foreigner in a land bound by tradition. She alone had seemed to see things differently than the rest of the people in the city.

Unfortunately, in the vision I was seeing at the moment, I was too immature to open my heart even to a woman like that. It was only much later that I had come to place my trust in the woman from the orphanage. But we had sadly parted ways immediately afterward.

I would never be able to see her again, but...

Even so, memories of my time with her were carefully stored away inside of me. Her life may have been over, but those memories alone lived on.

“...What fond memories.”

I wonder, if she had lived, and if I had been able to see her after I’d grown up, whatever might I have talked to her about?

In the middle of playing a childish game, I immersed myself in sentimentality and thought about such things.

“Where shall I hide?”

My main concern was getting away from Demonic Fran. We were in the middle of playing a game, so I had to find a place to hide myself where I wouldn’t be found, but...

“...By the look of things, I get the sense that there’s no need to hide.”

The place was brimming with visions as far as the eye could see. Walking around town, I saw visions of myself from different periods in my life, as well as Elaina, and Sheila, and my teacher.

Since I was surrounded by my memories, I didn’t think I needed to go out of my way to hide myself.

That’s what I was thinking.

“Good grief. I don’t know what to do. This is the most complicated thing ever.”

I saw a pair of people walking toward me from the other side of the road.

One of them was a witch with ash-gray hair and lapis-blue eyes. It was Elaina.

And walking beside her was someone in a school uniform, with ash-gray hair

and lapis-blue eyes. It was also Elaina.

They were both Elaina.

What's this?

I remember Elaina wearing that robe, but I don't have any memory of Elaina in a school uniform. Now, just who could that girl be? Is she Elaina, too? This is all incredibly complicated, since there are Elainas all over the place already.

"No matter where we go, we only find fake Miss Frans. There's no end to them!"

The Elaina in a robe puffed out her cheeks in exasperation, mercilessly yet nimbly striking my phantoms with her wand as she walked along, snuffing them out. She was waving her wand hard enough that it looked like it would hurt if it hit someone. She must have understood that she was dealing with illusions, because she didn't hold back at all.

"Where in the world can Miss Fran be?"

She swished her wand around, continuing to erase the phantoms.

She didn't even look my way; she just kept waving her wand.

She must have thought all the Frans were phantoms or fakes.

"I want to hurry up and find her and get out of here, but—"

Fwap. As she was speaking, her wand slapped my cheek.

"Huh?" Elaina looked at me.

"....."

"....."

Her eyes met mine.

"....."

After a fairly long silence, Elaina touched my cheek. She stroked it once or twice. Then she was still again.

"....."

"Elaina?" I called the name of the girl in front of me. "Elaina, what are you doing in a place like this?" I asked.

Stroking my cheek again, Elaina answered, "Well, um...I came to rescue you." She spoke rather quickly and averted her eyes. She seemed a little embarrassed.

"You're sure you didn't come to strike me with your wand...?"

In that city full of phantoms, the warmth of the hand against my stinging cheek told me without a doubt that this was the real Elaina.



“I never expected our reunion to be so violent...”

Miss Fran walked along beside me, rubbing her slightly red cheek.

We had walked on and on through the city full of apparitions, only to suddenly find the woman herself hiding in plain sight. I had really been at a loss for how to react after I struck an image of Miss Fran who was standing stock-still in a daze and she turned out to be the real one, but the important thing was, we had her in our custody.

“We’ve accomplished our goal, so let’s hurry up and escape from this place,” said the Elaina in a school uniform, pushing her glasses up her nose.

“Elaina. Who is this Elaina, by the way?”

I haven’t explained anything to Miss Fran yet, have I?

“She’s Brainy Elaina.”

“Brainy Elaina? What does that mean...?”

“She’s a version of me who seems more intellectual because she has glasses on.”

“.....” Miss Fran gave me a terribly reproachful look. “You are greatly mistaken if you think people get smarter by putting on glasses.”

“I agree with you there.”

But I already named the Elaina with glasses Brainy, so there’s no helping it, is there?

According to my teacher, there was a demonic Miss Fran hiding somewhere in the city, and the two of them were right in the middle of playing a game. It was difficult to understand what on earth she was talking about, but since the very world inside the book was like a cluster of incomprehensible nonsense anyway, I didn’t think too hard about it and just nodded along for the time being.

We can think about the difficult stuff after we get out of this world.

“Before we do anything else, we’ve got to collect Miss Broom. Let’s go to the city center.”

“Miss Broom?”

Oh my, I haven’t explained her to Miss Fran yet, have I?

“My broom is helping us search for you, Miss Fran. I cast a spell on her to turn her into human form, and she looks a little bit like me.”

“My goodness. Well, I will have to say hello to her—” Miss Fran chuckled.

In that case, I’d better undo the spell quickly before my broom says something embarrassing.

When we split into two groups, I had headed for the outskirts of the city, while Miss Broom had proceeded straight ahead toward the city center.

Assuming she had headed for the Great Library, we would probably happen upon her sooner or later.

“...We have to be careful not to encounter the demon on the way,” said Miss Fran.

“You’re right.”

Demons are natural tricksters, after all. We have no way of telling what she might do to us.

So we must try our best not to encounter her...

“If we run into the demon, I’ll lose the game.”

“Huh?”

What are you talking about, Miss Fran?

“Well, right now I’m kind of playing hide-and-seek with the demon, you know? If she finds me, I’ll get a penalty!”

“...A penalty?”

“Yes.”

“And what on earth might that be?”

What kind of penalty could there be for a game suggested by a demon? Are we talking about something like sacrificing your soul or having your magic powers taken away?

In that case, we must take care that the demon and Miss Fran do not encounter each other.

Considering such matters, I followed Brainy Elaina toward the Great Library. We turned a corner.

“.....”

As soon as she turned the corner, Brainy Elaina stopped dead in her tracks. “Ah...we’re in trouble now.” The way she pushed her glasses up made her seem even more intelligent.

“.....”

Miss Fran and I, on the other hand, fell silent behind her.

I could see Miss Broom’s back not far from the front of the Great Library. I wish I could have called out to her just then and that we could have set about escaping from the book world, but—

Right in front of Miss Broom was a young girl.

She had horns growing out of her black hair, and a tail, but her appearance was the spitting image of a fourteen-year-old Miss Fran.

Or maybe something else was standing there, something that had borrowed Miss Fran’s form.

“I’m a demon!” She smiled.

Standing opposite Miss Broom, she stared at us as she narrowed her eyes and smiled at us, the intruders into her world.

“And who might you all be?” she asked.

We couldn’t launch a surprise attack, and neither could we leave the stand-ins hidden somewhere and make our escape. We had simply stepped right in front of the demon.

In other words, we had haplessly ruined Miss Fran’s shot at winning her game of hide-and-seek.

“By the way, Miss Fran, what is the penalty for when you lose the game?” I asked quietly.

Miss Fran answered, “I have to tell her a story from my memories.”

“.....”

“I have to tell her a story from my memories.”

“Sorry, I heard you the first time.”

“I was expecting you to respond then.”

“It didn’t make any sense. I was at a loss for words.”



“I usually welcome visitors, but there are a few too many of you. What did you come here for?”

Without breaking her beaming smile, Demonic Miss Fran (Age Fourteen) stared at us. Following her gaze, Miss Broom turned around and called my name. “Oh, Mistress Elaina.”

“Elaina, is that your broom?”

“Miss Fran, is that Demonic Miss Fran? She’s very young. She’s more of a Little Franny than a proper Miss Fran.”

“I’ll thank you never to call me Franny again...”

But calling her Demonic Miss Fran (Age Fourteen) sounded awfully threatening, and it’s very long and complicated to boot, so I decided to keep it simple and call her Little Devil Franny.

“My goodness, Fran. You invited friends?”

It must have been immediately apparent from the robe I was wearing that I was a witch. Demonic Miss Fran (Age Fourteen)—now Little Devil Franny—stared at me with delight.

“I welcome as many playmates as possible.”

She clapped her hands, going on and on about how happy she was. She was acting like an innocent child.

But unfortunately...

“I have no intention of becoming your friend.”

Not to mention I don't have the spare time to amuse myself playing games with you.

“We just came to get Miss Fran out of here. Release us, please.”

“Huh? No way!”

But she didn't seem the least bit inclined to discuss the matter with us.

With a snap of her fingers, countless spears appeared floating in the air around her. Apparently, she did not require a wand in order to use magic. I figured it was because the world inside the book was her own creation.

“Once you enter this world, you can't leave for three days, until your magical energy is all used up, and I have no intention of setting you free.”

Then Little Devil Franny said to me, “How about you spend that time having lots of fun? Be friends with me, won't you?”

What are you talking about?

“If you want someone to pretend to be your friend, how about playing with a doll or something?”

I pulled out my wand and stared at Little Devil Franny.

“Now, I'm terribly sorry, but we only came here to get Miss Fran, so could we ask you to wrap up your game now?”

Miss Fran stepped over to stand by my side. Miss Broom and Brainy Elaina stood at the ready behind the demon. Miss Fran readied her own wand to protect the two of them.

My broom poked her face out from behind her. “Ah, nice to meet you, Mistress Fran. Thank you for always looking after Mistress Elaina.”

Don't you feel the tension in the air here...?

“Oh, you're so polite,” said Miss Fran. “I should thank you for looking after her all the time as well. I am Elaina's teacher, Fran.”

“My mistress really seems to miss your company... She is always telling me about you, Mistress Fran.”

“My goodness. Is that so? I'm so embarrassed.”

The two of them chuckled and lost themselves in small talk for a while.

I said, don't you feel the tension...?

“Hey, you two...” Stepping in between the two of them, who were not taking the situation seriously at all, was Brainy Elaina. “What do you think of my

glasses, by the way?"

Is that the only thing you have to say...?

Everyone was acting extremely relaxed, considering we were standing in front of the mastermind behind the book world. It even seemed like Little Devil Franny was ready to join their conversation and start laughing along and making small talk.

But the girl facing us was not me, and she was not Miss Fran, either.

A single spear whooshed through the air between us and stuck in the ground.

It cut right through the casual atmosphere.

"You're awfully relaxed, starting up a conversation at a time like this."

The devil in front of us seemed a little offended.

"If you want to get out of here so badly, go ahead and defeat me!"

Then she snapped her fingers again.

The cluster of spears hanging in the air around her began to move.

If I were to compare them to something, the spears were like rain.

A shower of spears whirling through the air over our heads poured down from the sky, aiming straight for us. As far as I could see from looking up at them, there didn't seem to be anywhere to run.

But if you put up your umbrella when the rain falls, you'll have no problem.

"Okay!"

Miss Fran and I both raised our wands overhead and spread our magical energy out like umbrellas, me protecting Brainy Elaina and her protecting Miss Broom. It was easy enough to protect ourselves from the throng of spears, which fell surprisingly slowly.

As we deflected them, the spears stuck into the ground one after another. The ground was riddled with small holes everywhere.

"Miss Broom." I extended a hand to my broom, who was sharing an umbrella with Miss Fran. "Come back over here, please."

"Huh? Are you jealous, Mistress Elaina?"

"....."

No, that's...not it at all...

"My, my."

Miss Fran looked back and forth between me and my broom and chuckled softly.

No...that's really not...how I meant it...

"When the battle starts, I want you to function as my broom. You can't use

magic, can you?”

“Oh, is that what you meant? Okay, got it.”

After waving good-bye to Miss Fran, my broom came back to my side.

Miss Fran waved after her. “See you later!”

By the way...

“By the way, where did Flirty Elaina get off to?”

I don't see her anywhere.

“She's probably throwing herself against the phantoms of Miss Fran in the houses or something.”

“She does whatever she likes, huh...?”

“Well, she is a cat...”

“.....”

I would have liked to have more people on our side, but...I guess there's no helping it.

“Well then, let's do our best with three people and a broom.”

Miss Broom nodded at my words, then immediately reverted into the ordinary broom that always traveled with me.

We've got me and Miss Fran and the Elaina wearing glasses here, so I guess we'll figure something out.

“Elaina, what do we do from here? As you can see, you and I are both occupied with protection.”

Since Miss Fran and I were using our wands to hold up our protective umbrellas, we were unable to launch any attacks.

But that was no problem.

I'm repeating myself here, but we have me, Miss Fran, and the Elaina wearing glasses.

“Now's your time to shine, Brainy Elaina!”

I called out to Brainy Elaina, who had been watching things unfold from behind Miss Fran's back. The intention behind my words was to ask her to fire off some spells at once.

However—

“Oh, sorry. Combat is kind of outside my area of expertise, so...”

“.....”

She declined.

“I can't actually even use magic.”

“.....”

She wasn't truly able to fight. I remembered that she was actually just a doll.

“You two do your best. I’ll provide moral support.” My eggheaded doppelgänger clapped a hand down on my shoulder.

“What does ‘moral support’ mean, specifically?”

“I’ll cheer you on in a shrill voice.”

“No thanks...”

In the end, the only thing that was clear was that I wouldn’t be able to do anything while I was holding up the protective umbrella.

“So what will you do, Elaina? Will you come over here?” Miss Fran posed this one question.

The spears were still pouring down on us, and across the way, Little Devil Franny was gloating, “How about it? Give up?”

But I knew surrendering at that point would sully my good name as a witch.

And I hadn’t run out of tricks up my sleeve. I had any number of means left for dealing with a demon.

.....

I guess there’s no helping it.

“...I’ll have to apologize to Miss Broom later.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?”

“This.”

I charged up my broom with magical energy and let it fly.

My broom plunged through the storm of spears and landed a direct hit on Little Devil Franny’s head. It was almost like the attack was charged with the anger Miss Broom felt at being hurled through a rain of spears.

Although I guess I’m the one who did the throwing...

“Ow!” Little Devil Franny’s scream was extremely simple.

She staggered, and the shower of spears stopped.

We didn’t miss our chance. Miss Fran and I pointed our wands at her and unleashed a barrage of spells.

Miss Fran levitated the debris that had spilled out everywhere and sent it flying straight at Little Devil Franny.

She looked unruffled as she moved to evade the attack, but as she was dodging, I conjured an iceberg and dropped it on her head. She looked a little surprised by that.

She responded by flicking her fingers, sending sparks flying my way.

I extinguished her meager flames instantly by expelling a puff of wind. In the moment it took me to do so, Miss Fran closed the distance between herself and the demon and blasted her with water from point-blank range. The demon

wriggled around in panic, and the droplets she sent hurtling through the air gouged holes in the roofs of nearby buildings. I nimbly waved my wand and attacked the demon's back with wet tiles that had broken off the roofs.

Miss Fran reversed the damage to the roofs immediately afterward. Little Devil Franny still had fragments of broken roof tile stuck to her, and she was pulled along for the ride, her robe binding her into a repaired roof.

"Do you think that's all it takes to catch me?"

But she laughed fearlessly. She flung off her robe and jumped down toward us.

"Okay!"

But my broom landed another direct hit to her head.

"Ow!"

She let out another extremely simple scream and immediately fell to the ground.

After that, she confronted us again and again, but—

To make a long story short, it was basically a one-sided fight, and she lost badly.

Whenever she showed the slightest indication of being about to cast a spell, I would make ivy grow around her and restrain her, and while she was restrained, Miss Fran would torment her with magic. Even when she got lucky and wriggled her way out of my ivy, Miss Fran would fasten her to a roof, or a wall, and I would take a turn beating her up again.

It was less of a battle and more of a one-sided trampling by us.

Finally, the demon, who hadn't managed a single successful counterattack, fell to the ground, tears in her eyes.

"...Waaah..."

"....."

"....."

Miss Fran and I looked at each other.

What on earth is going on here?

Even considering that we were both witches and that we were fighting against a single opponent, this situation seemed a little off.

Miss Fran tilted her head questioningly.

"Isn't she a little too weak for a demon?"

Her brief comment got directly and purely to the point. The demon cried some more.

But it was the truth. If the world inside a book had been built by a demon,

and if the girl in front of us was the demon who had stolen magical energy from a lot of witches, then she should have been able to manage a fiercer attack.

What on earth am I to make of a demon who loses so handily against two witches...?

“You’re so mean... You didn’t have to hurt me so badly, did you...?”

She fell to her knees and began to sob.

“I’m starting to feel kind of sorry for her...,” I whispered into Miss Fran’s ear.

It was at that point that I finally realized we had gone too far.

“But we couldn’t go easy against a demon, either...,” Miss Fran replied quietly.

Well, sure, you’re right, but we certainly didn’t mean to bully her.

“Um...are you all right?”

So I walked over to her and tapped her on the shoulder. I did consider that this might be a clever trap set by the demon, but she really didn’t seem to be able to make a move against us.

“Waah...sniffle.”

A face red from crying looked up at me.

Miss Fran is...crying...

“Elaina, that’s not me, you know?” said a cold voice from off to the side. When I turned to look, there was Miss Fran, wearing a very, very cold expression. Apparently, I had been making a sour face just then.

In addition, Miss Fran asked the demon, “We’ve reached the point of victory and defeat, so won’t you please let us out of here, demon?”

But Little Devil Franny just hung her head sadly. Not only did she not grant our request, she didn’t speak a word.

She just kept on sobbing like a normal little girl.

“...What should we do?”

It goes without saying that I was bewildered by this unexpected turn of events. Miss Fran just rubbed the girl’s back and apologized, “We’re sorry. We overdid it, didn’t we?”

At this rate, I don’t suppose we’re getting out of here until she stops crying, are we? I don’t guess she’s going to tell us anything.

I was having such thoughts as I stood before Little Devil Franny, who was still crying and seemed like she might go on doing so forever.

However...

The moment came to an end in an unexpected way.

“Miss Fraaaaaaaaan!”

Someone with my voice came flying out of the door of a nearby house, leaped straight for Little Devil Franny, and threw her arms around her.

She had probably been searching for Miss Fran the whole time, looking here and there and inside the houses. The copy of me who was dressed as a cat-eared maid, clad in that perplexing getup, rubbed her cheek against Franny's and beamed. "I missed you so much, eh-heh-heh!" she gushed in a voice quite different from my own.

Miss Fran recoiled.

"Elaina, who's this?"

I'd better explain.

"This is Flirty Elaina."

"What's a Flirty Elaina?"

"As you can see..."

Miss Fran recoiled again.

At that point, I remembered something.

I remembered that both Flirty Elaina and Brainy Elaina were originally dolls.

They were dolls that Wassily had made, and just like the dolls in her café, if anyone were to touch them—like me, for example—they would shift to begin channeling that person's desires.

So then, I wonder what will happen when Little Devil Franny touches the doll?

Immediately after rubbing her cheek against the demonic version of Miss Fran, Flirty Elaina's form began to change.

"....."

She didn't sprout horns from her head, and she didn't grow a tail. In fact, she didn't even remain in human form.

A single book fell to the ground.

Even though its shape was definitely not human, the book could speak. The sound of sobbing could be heard coming from inside it.

"I'm sad... So sad."

Even with no face to be seen, it was clear that the book was crying.

Then, as it sobbed, the book said, "Why did everyone disappear?"

She didn't seem to know who she was.



The book told me a story. It was the story of a lonely book suffering from

abandonment.

The book had been born long ago, in a far-off land.

The book contained a completely ordinary, perfectly typical travel log. It was composed of a number of different short stories. Most of the available pages were unused.

Someone had wandered the world as a traveler and recorded the memories of their journey in a diary for the people of their hometown to read when they returned. All the people in the small village, both children and adults, loved the stories in the book.

But that was long ago.

The adults grew old and passed away, and the children grew up. The very existence of the book was completely forgotten. The book was put inside the village storehouse for a long time.

Eventually, even the young person who had penned the book grew up and passed away.

Still tucked away in the storehouse, the book was abandoned by time.

Ages passed, and the village was built up into a city. The diary that had been tucked away in the storehouse had probably been a rare and precious object in the era when the only people around were villagers who knew nothing of the outside world. But after many years had gone by, such travel logs were no longer rare commodities. The book's existence was completely forgotten.

It only had the memory of being read by lots of people to keep it company. The book stayed in storage for a long time, eagerly waiting to be read by someone new.

And yet no one came to open the book.

So it started tricking people into reading it.

The book started appearing in front of people so that they would open it and be forced to read it.

Perhaps because it had been left to sit for many years, the book had accumulated magical energy—it had a mind of its own and had gained the ability to move freely.

It sounded similar to what had happened long ago when I first met my broom.

The book began appearing in front of people using magic.

As long as she could borrow magical energy from the mages, the book could do anything she wanted inside her imaginary world.

It was even possible for her to create a whole city.

In order to keep people from leaving her again, she decided she would capture the mages inside an incredible world that she made using their stolen magical energy.

The Lonely Story Book—more than anything else, feared loneliness.

From the bottom of her heart, she wished she would never be alone again.

That was why she had decided to capture mages inside an imaginary world created from their own stolen magic.

But once a mage's magical energy was used up, the book could no longer maintain the phantom world. Whenever the mages realized that the wonderful world she had created with magic was all made-up, they always began searching for a way to escape. All of them acted the same way.

So the book erased the mages' memories of being in her world before she expelled them.

She feared that if word got out that the book contained an imaginary world, nobody would ever read her again.

So the book repeated the same actions over and over.

Afraid of being alone, she tricked people and invited them into the imaginary world.

But her plan failed over and over.

To date, not a single person had stayed in her world.

Because it was a make-believe world.

“I’m sad, so sad.”

The book sitting before my eyes looked like it was crying.

Or maybe it only looked that way, since Little Devil Franny, who had sunk to the ground beside the book, was still shedding tears.

“It seems like I’m considered a demon in the outside world, but that’s not true.”

The horns growing from her head disappeared, and her tail vanished.

There before us was a young Miss Fran, just fourteen years old—looking like she had before she left Bielawald.

“I’m just an ordinary book. A common book that could be found anywhere. Nobody remembers me.”

Tormented by isolation, she had wished for so long to be with someone. That was why she lured mages into her world.

But she hadn’t been able to hold on to anyone, and the only thing she could do about it was cry alone.

I had encountered objects with minds of their own during a previous part of

my journey. But there had been a whole crowd of conscious objects back then. They had certainly not been alone. So their situation had been completely different from that of the crying girl before my eyes.

She couldn't meet new people, and she didn't have any other objects to keep her company. She had been really, genuinely lonely.

When the book's story was completely over...

"So that's what was going on here."

Wearing her cheerful smile as always, Miss Fran nodded and kneeled down beside her younger self.

"That must have been difficult. You must have been so sad," Miss Fran said as she placed a hand on the head of her younger self. As she stroked the girl's soft hair, she admonished her, "But you can't behave like this, can you? No one's going to want to be with you this way."

Suddenly, at that moment, I turned my gaze away.

I could hear Miss Fran's voice coming from inside one of the houses along the road as well. I could see her there through the window of a house that looked exactly like my childhood home. A house we had come across many times since arriving in the imaginary city.

A version of Miss Fran that was younger than she was now, but a little older than she was when she left Bielawald, was kneeling there in front of a young girl.

The real Miss Fran was also kneeling, and she continued speaking to her fourteen-year-old self.

"I know you're feeling sad right now. It probably seems like this pain is going to last forever. It's very sad, isn't it, when happy days are long gone?"

But...

"...Memories are to be treasured. They're not supposed to be frozen in place. I want you to become the kind of book that can record happy stories once again, whenever you happen to meet someone. Being a book that everyone forgot is just too sad," said Miss Fran before embracing her fourteen-year-old self.

A voice came from inside the house.

"What might your name be?" asked the witch with black hair.

Standing before her in a daze was a little girl with ash-gray hair.

The little girl tilted her head like she didn't know who the witch in front of her was, but she looked up and absently muttered her own name.

She said just one word.

"Elaina."

“...Is that so? Your name is Elaina, is it?”

The black-haired witch smiled. Then she embraced the little girl and told her, “My name is Fran. The Stardust Witch, Fran.”

Her words were comforting and familiar.

Then, in Miss Fran’s arms...

The girl wrinkled her brow just a little bit, as if something had tickled her, but then narrowed her eyes in an expression of peace.



“Let’s make a promise.”

Inside the book, Miss Fran addressed the girl.

She spoke to her tenderly.

“Instead of burying your loneliness, I want you to promise me something.”

Then the book girl returned us to our original world.

She sent us out of the book without stealing our memories. I had the sense that we had stayed in the book for a very long time, but...it probably just felt that way since the world inside the book was a place with no day or night. Contrary to my expectations, not that much time seemed to have passed in the real world.

“...Oh, that was fast.”

When we returned, it was evening. Wassily was getting one of her bear dolls to feed her dinner in her room. She was in the middle of amusing herself with a nonsensical game in which she opened her mouth and said, “Ahh,” but just before she could take a bite, the bear yanked the food away, and she yelled, “Oh, come on! You’re so mean, little bear! But I wuv that about you!”

To put it simply, a brief, puzzled silence passed between us.

“.....”

I can only imagine that Miss Fran and I were looking at her with very cold eyes.

“.....”

Wassily, on the other hand, blushed extremely red and said, “No, this isn’t what it looks like...” But, well, I had been able to tell from the first moment I met her that she had an extremely odd personality, so the fact that she was using a bear to do something strange didn’t surprise me at all.

Though I did recoil somewhat.

“...Ahem!”

Upon our return, Wassily straightened up and cleared her throat once.

Even though it was too late, she tried to look like a respectable adult.

“Good job making it out. You were so quick; I’m really surprised.”

“I’m surprised at your ridiculous behavior,” Miss Fran answered without a moment’s hesitation.

Wassily’s eyes filled with tears.

Then Miss Fran and I explained to her roughly what had taken place inside the book and told her, in summary, that the book did not belong to a demon or anything like that. And so on and so forth.

After hearing our brief explanation, she nodded with a composed expression on her face, as if she hadn’t been acting ridiculous until just moments earlier. “I see... If you like, shall I take custody of the book? It sounds like it is dangerous after all.”

She held out her hand.

Originally, the book had disappeared while in transit to the United Magic Association. Sending it there seemed appropriate for an object that was deemed dangerous.

But Miss Fran smiled and rejected Wassily’s suggestion. “No, no.”

“Please don’t ever pull people into the imaginary world again.”

Miss Fran had exchanged promises with an immature book that was learning how to forget its loneliness.

As long as she didn’t break her promise, the book would not suck anyone else into her imaginary world.

So there shouldn’t be any danger.

The fact that she was no longer going to pull people into it meant, in short, that the book could now be opened without issue.

So Miss Fran opened the book.

There were lots of pages that had never been used.

There was plenty of blank space left for writing stories.

So Miss Fran had a way to help the book forget her loneliness.

“I’ve decided to make this book into my diary.”



On the third evening of our stay in the city.

Lots of lanterns had already begun ascending into the sky from the harbor.

The small lights, carrying people's wishes, were drifting ever upward.

It was like the whole world was enveloped in their light.

"It's so pretty," Miss Fran murmured as she walked toward her ship.

Surrounded by countless lights, she looked as if she was walking through a field of stardust.

"....."

I was standing still, gazing at my teacher's back.

That was where my travels with Miss Fran would come to an end. I knew I probably would not see her anymore for a while. All things must come to an end, and our journey was no exception.

I understood that perfectly well, but I had stopped in my tracks.

I wondered whether I should call out and say something to my teacher as she walked toward the distant, dazzling lights. But I hesitated, because I had a feeling I might pitch a fit like a little child if I let my guard down, and beg her not to go, or tell her I wanted to stay together just a little bit longer.

So I just stood there, perfectly still.

Suddenly, a memory crossed my mind.

"Partings don't always have to be sad things."

Inside the world of the book.

While comforting a girl living in sorrow.

Gently, reassuringly.

"Don't ever stand still. Don't ever shut yourself off."

Miss Fran had smiled at her like she always did.

"Because we say farewell so that we can have new encounters."

They were words she had said in order to comfort the book, who had only been trying to cure her loneliness in an inappropriate way, but—

They were words she had said in the middle of extracting a promise from the book never to pull mages inside again, but...

They certainly did resonate with me as well, as I stood there watching her.

Her kind words gave me a push on the back.

Toward the dazzling stardust.

"....."

I knew I would probably get scolded by my teacher for stopping in the middle of the street.

So step by step, I walked on so that she would not leave me behind.

I picked up my pace a little bit and chased after Miss Fran, holding my pounding chest.

Then I stretched out a hand toward her robe.

I yanked on her sleeve, and before she could even turn around to face me, I said, "We've got to say good-bye soon, haven't we?"

After all that hesitation, the best I could do were these simple words.

"....."

A pair of gentle eyes looked back at me.

"Yes, that's right." Simple words came from Miss Fran's mouth. "We will have to say good-bye soon."

I took a deep breath, and then, acting calm, I said, "What should we use as our parting words? There are all sorts of things we could say, like 'good-bye' or 'take care.'"

But none of them are exactly fitting, are they?

I don't feel like an overly sentimental parting really suits us, but just saying an ordinary "so long" and waving good-bye also feels wrong.

And waving tearfully from the shore would be absurd.

Asking her not to go was out of the question.

I'm sure there's a different way for us to say good-bye.

I wonder if Miss Fran remembers it...

"Surely our parting words are already decided upon." Miss Fran chuckled.

I should have known she'd remember.

Of course she did.

Because she'd talked to the little girl inside the world of the book and told her...

"Memories are things to be treasured. They're not supposed to be frozen in place."

And so then my teacher told them.

The words that had first come to my mind. The words I wanted to hear her say.

She said...

"Farewell, until we meet again."



CHAPTER 7

On the Road: Inside the Lighthouse

Let's turn back the hands of the clock, just a little.

“...Miss?”

It was just after Miss Fran had gotten herself trapped in the book.

No matter where I looked in the room, my teacher, who had disappeared while I was in the bath, was nowhere to be found. Well, since she was actually stuck inside the book, I obviously wasn't going to find her anywhere, but at the time, I didn't have that information, so I looked around everywhere for her.

“Miss?” I looked in her bed.

“Miss Fran?” I looked under her bed.

“Miss Fraaan?” I looked in the crevices of the bookshelf.

“Where aaare you?” And I looked in the desk.

“.....”

Honestly, the room's furnishings were very simple, so partway through my search, I started checking places where no human could possibly fit, but at the time, I had lost my cool, so I can't be blamed for acting strangely.

“...Achoo!”

Eventually, after I sneezed once in the breeze blowing in through the open window, I realized that I had been wandering around the room wearing nothing but a bath towel.

And the fact that Miss Fran was nowhere in the room really sank in.

Where on earth could she have gone?

The black book sitting beside the window was obviously quite suspicious, but I changed into my robe, got on my broom, and flew outdoors, where the curtain of night had fallen.

I didn't have any conclusive evidence.

But more than anything, the black book gave me very bad vibes, so I decided not to open it recklessly.

And it was still possible that the black book had been tossed into our room and then Miss Fran had flown off somewhere.

So I flew through the night sky.

The wind chilled my warm body.

Clouds parted to reveal a sea of stars, and if I looked down, the lights of the

city looked like they were floating. Millions of little lights flickered everywhere in the darkness.

The night was studded with brilliance that would have been captivating at any other time.

I flew around town, searching for Miss Fran amid the twinkling of stardust.
I was starting to panic.

I looked everywhere, but I had no idea what had happened or why my teacher had disappeared.

I wandered through the darkened city. From time to time, I alighted on a rooftop to have a look around or left the main avenues to walk around the back alleys. It was during one such exploration that I met her again.

“...Elaina?”

While I was walking down a gloomy back alley, a voice called my name.
A fondly remembered voice.

When I turned around, there was a fondly remembered face.

Black hair, a black robe, and a black pointy hat. Upon her breast, a star-shaped brooch and a moon-shaped brooch.

I knew her.

“...Saya?”

One of my few friends was standing there.



I arrived in the city three days ago.

“In this city, we’ve been using dolls to help people.”

According to the dolls’ manufacturer, Wassily, the city had had a major mage shortage lately. Actually, the mages were losing their powers one after another, and because of that, the city wanted to borrow mages from the United Magic Association in order to operate the dolls.

Wassily told me that all I needed to do was apply magical energy to the lighthouse on the outskirts of town. I worried about whether I was fit for the role without any experience.

“...Understood.”

I accepted the job.

Normally, it would take several mages to shoulder the duty of supplying the necessary magical energy, but I was the only mage anywhere nearby with any time to spare, so, at least until the Lantern Festival, I would apparently have to

work alone—there was no helping it.

Miss Sheila was out on a job to collect and dispose of some mysterious, dangerous book, and of all the mages at the United Magic Association, I was the only one who had the time to drift aimlessly from place to place.

Starting the following day, I shut myself up in the lighthouse.

Inside the towering lighthouse was a single huge sphere of burning bluish-white light, hovering in midair.

Apparently, the sphere of energy in the lighthouse served two purposes.

The first, totally normal purpose was as a light to show the location of the city.

And the second purpose was as a mass of magical energy to power the dolls all over the city.

According to Wassily, my main job was to continually pour magical energy into the sphere without stopping so that it would never die out. In addition to that, I was also to handle the collection of dolls that ran out of magical energy and collapsed in the city, on top of some intelligence gathering around town, as well as other various duties. But since my chief task was just to burn magical energy, I figured it wasn't going to be extremely hard labor.

Though it did sound like I would be working long hours.

"Well, there's work to be done! Better do my best."

Inside the lighthouse, I studied a map of the city. Then I read the latest news and checked out the many upcoming events. I also noted the cafés and restaurants that were popular with tourists.

I did all of this for the sake of the bluish-white ball that was suspended inside the lighthouse—and by extension, for the sake of the dolls walking around everywhere throughout town.

Along with using my magical energy, the dolls would also, apparently, express my memories and thought patterns. In other words, the dolls would turn into my alter egos.

To put it simply, if I wasn't familiar with the city, the dolls wouldn't be able to lend a helping hand to those in trouble.

"...Hmmmm."

I devoted myself to reading as many documents as I could get my hands on for as long as time permitted.

I did this on the first day and the day after that.

And then the next evening.

"...I'm exhausted."

I was dragging my heavy body back toward the inn where I was staying. My job didn't allow for any breaks, from morning until evening. The day's exhaustion clung to me the whole time I was walking.

I've got to keep doing this for who knows how many days, but...I wonder if I have it in me...

Honestly speaking, I was almost at my limit after just three days.

However...

I mustn't complain.

This is nothing to gripe about, is it? I know someone who never so much as frowned, who clung to her convictions even as she suffered through much worse than this.

Compared to her suffering, this is nothing.

Just then...

“.....”

I saw her.

Ash-gray hair and lapis-blue eyes. I saw a lone witch with a star-shaped brooch on her breast walking through town.

A fondly remembered face was there before me.

“Elaina?”

She turned around at the sound of my voice.

There she was, the same as always.



“I see...so you were commissioned for a job?”

Apparently, Saya had been staying in this city for the past few days.

When I ran into her for the first time in a long time, she pointed toward the outskirts of town and said, “I’ve been working nonstop, from morning till night, shut away in that lighthouse.”

The night was pitch-black.

“...Where?”

It's dark as far as I can see.

“The light’s gone out already, but it’s basically somewhere around there.”

“That’s not very specific.”

“So basically, I’ve been holed up in there, passing the time reading all sorts of books and stuff.”

“That’s not very specific.”

“So that’s pretty much what I’ve been up to!”

“Vague from start to finish...”

That was a very flimsy job description...

“So what are you doing out here late at night, Elaina?” Saya tilted her head and looked my way as she walked along beside me. She didn’t seem to have changed a bit.

“.....” I hesitated a little, but answered, “...Actually, right now I’m searching for my teacher.”

I explained to Saya that Miss Fran would be leaving the region the day after next, at the same time as the Lantern Festival. But despite her plans, she had suddenly disappeared.

“Mm-hmm.” Saya nodded and knit her brows. “That is a difficult situation...” After which she offered, “Shall I search with you?”

No, no.

“I’m fine, thanks. You must be tired.”

You were just telling me about how you’ve been shut inside the lighthouse all day, from morning to night. I couldn’t possibly involve you in this when you’re in such an exhausted condition, Saya.

Even I have a conscience.

“Go get a good night’s sleep. You’ve got work tomorrow, too, after all. I’ll be fine searching for her on my own.” I waved my hand in front of my face and declined her offer.

However, she was not satisfied with my response. “Not a chance! Elaina, I’ve taken up the job of helping people here in this city, you know? If someone is in trouble, I mustn’t fail to extend them a helping hand.”

“.....”

It was at that point that I realized I had made an error in telling her about my circumstances.

“And to that end, I will help you, Elaina!”

Saya boldly threw out her chest.

“...No, but—”

“I won’t take no for an answer now that I’ve said I’ll team up with you! And we are teaming up, even if you say you don’t want to! Resign yourself to it and prepare to be teamed up with by me!”

“Teamed up with by me’? What a strange way to put that...”

At this point, I doubt she’s going to give up on assisting me.

Saya said, “Luckily for us, I’m currently controlling all the dolls in town, so

something as simple as finding someone ought to be a walk in the park!"

As she said this, she started walking, pulling me along somewhat forcefully by the hand.

Her hand was cool to the touch.

"Let's strike while the iron is hot!" Walking ahead of me, Saya had her triangular hat pulled down low on her head just like me as she headed for the darkened lighthouse.

I looked absently up at the sky as I followed along behind her.

Come to think of it, the day I first met Saya, we also spent that night searching for something under a starry sky, just like this one.

As soon as we arrived at the lighthouse, Saya waved her wand with a grunt and lit the light.

The sphere that I could see far above our heads gave off a bluish-white light when it was turned on. It cast shadows around the inside of the lighthouse.

Perhaps because the light was meant to spill outside, the slight glow that reached us was dim and gloomy.

Viewed from afar, I'm sure that the light was beautiful, dazzling, and shining. But looking up from directly below, the light in the lighthouse was only bright enough to barely see from one end of the room to the other.

"...Whoa."

I hadn't realized until just then, but the interior of the lighthouse was apparently being used to store an immense number of dolls. As the light hit them, the army of dolls stood up of their own free will and began walking.

Wassily's handmade dolls featured a rich variety of designs. Some had pale complexions, while others were darker. Some had blue hair, others had red. Some had green eyes, others had yellow. Some wore fashionable clothes, while others were dressed simply.

There was not a single duplicate among them.

Those dolls started marching in perfect order, walking toward the outside of the lighthouse.

The sight of them might have been adorable if viewed during the afternoon or in the morning. But it was the middle of the night.

"It's kind of spooky, isn't it? This spectacle."

Saya seemed to be used to it. She chuckled. "For now, they should be on their way to search for Fran throughout the city in our stead. Let's wait here for a little while, shall we?"

"I suppose so..."

I looked around the interior of the lighthouse, illuminated in bluish white.

It was a very plain space, undecorated and cold. Dozens of travel guide magazines were piled up in a corner of the room. Saya must have drilled the contents of the travel guides into her head over and over again while she was confined in the lighthouse. Even looking at them from a distance, I could clearly see signs that they had been thoroughly read.

“.....”

My eyes came to a rest right in front of the magazines.

There was a single doll.

“They left this one behind.”

“Huh? Oh, so they did.”

The doll was crouched down, trembling violently. It didn’t look like it was having trouble moving. Neither did it look injured.

It just didn’t seem to have the willpower to move.

The way it was acting, it almost looked like it was...

“...Crying? Maybe?”

“Hmm? Huh...? I wonder why?”

Staring at the doll in puzzlement, Saya tilted her head. She looked like she didn’t have the slightest idea why that one doll might be crying.

Then she placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about one doll being out of order! But it’s fine! Dozens more of them should be searching the city for Fran as we speak! Leave it to them!”

She sounded extremely optimistic.

“.....”

But I let her words go in one ear and out the other.

Apologies to Saya, but at the moment, I was thinking about something else. I looked up at the bluish-white sphere loading above our heads. “So all you have to do to control the dolls is to supply magical energy to that thing?”

Saya followed my gaze and nodded.

“Yeah, that’s about it.”

“I see.”

Interesting, very interesting.

I nodded as well as I took out my wand.

“Well then, allow me to help, too.” I fired off magical energy from the tip of my wand. The energy emitted from my wand blended with the light that Saya was producing and flowed up into the sphere.

“...Elaina?”

She stared at me, as if to ask, “*What are you doing?*”

“Now listen, I can’t expect you alone to do all the work.”

“This is my job, so it’s only natural for me to overwork myself, heh-heh!”

For some reason, she puffed up her chest proudly.

“That might be what you’re supposed to do when there’s no one by your side.”

Maybe you’re expected to push yourself when you’re desperate and you have no one to depend on.

“But right now, you have me.”

“.....”

“And anyway, isn’t it natural for me to help out, when I’m the reason why you’re working overtime in the first place?”

“.....”

For a second time, she answered me with silence.

Saya stared at me and me alone in the meager light. And then she said, “... Elaina, you’re being pretty nice to me today, huh? You’re not an imposter, by any chance, are you?”

What are you saying, all solemnly?

“I’m always nice.”

“Oh...?”

“What’s with that iffy response?”

How rude.

“Whenever you see me, Elaina, you’re always more, like...you frown, and you glare at me, and you tell me to shut up whenever I do anything. I feel like that’s the kind of person you’ve always been...”

“That’s because your usual behavior is kind of, well, you know.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Basically, you throw your arms around me whenever you get the chance, and you’re always calmly telling me that you like me, or you’re in love with me, or asking me to marry you.”

“I don’t remember doing any of that.”

“You’re not an imposter, by any chance, are you?”

I frowned. Saya, on the other hand, snickered and smiled slightly in the darkness as she answered, “I’m the same me I always am.”

I did not even ask what she considered to be “the same as always.”

Because I’d met Saya countless times before. There’s nothing I didn’t know

about her—well, I wouldn't go that far, but I didn't need to go out of my way to ask.

Not about what kind of person she usually was.

"Ah, come to think of it, Elaina, have you already done your sightseeing in this city? If you like, how about I show you around?"

No matter when we met, or where I saw her, for some reason, there had always been a dialogue between us.

That evening was no exception.

"I'm grateful for the offer, but...aren't you tired? Will you be all right?"

"Don't worry. It's part of my job."

"...Overdoing it comes with the territory?"

"No, no." She shook her head quickly and said, "I simply want a chance to talk with you, Elaina."

"...I see."

Well then, I'll take you up on it—I nodded at her and then got her to tell me about the tourist attractions in the city.

I can use this later when I'm looking around with Miss Fran. Though I don't know if she's going to come back.

"This place is a café run by a mage named Wassily. The food is so-so, but it's definitely a unique business, where stuffed bears serve the customers."

Then Saya told me about all sorts of different things. Opening up the sticky-note-covered sightseeing guides, which she must have read over and over again, she told me things like "This place is supposed to be delicious!" and "This restaurant is supposedly famous for its seafood dishes!"

I was pretty sure she had been inside the lighthouse the whole time, so she had probably never been to any of those restaurants, not even once. And yet she talked to me about the city with incredible enthusiasm.

"If you go, I want to hear what you think of it, okay?"

She added comments like that.

So I answered her simply, "If I remember, I'll report back."

Saya continued dispensing her modest sightseeing advice. Steadily burning our magical energy, we waited for the dolls to locate Miss Fran, even though I didn't actually think it was going to happen. Saya did her best to ensure that we didn't get bored.

"And, um...the restaurants in this area are recommended..."

But sure enough, she couldn't fight off the fatigue.

Eventually, she flopped her head over onto my shoulder and fell fast asleep.

Her finger trailed across the page of an open brochure. Her hand lost the strength to grip her wand, and it clattered to the floor. Her consciousness was no longer with me, and I heard nothing but quiet sleeping breaths at my side.

I chuckled as I stealthily stroked her hair.

“So you were overdoing it after all, huh?”

I knew you were.

After that, I kept on supplying magical energy to the lighthouse on my own. After Saya’s voice stopped echoing through the interior of the lighthouse, the space was dominated by nothing but lonely, empty, disheartening solitude.

There was nothing to do, and the time passed slowly.

“...This is so boring.”

When I looked up, I saw the single light of the lighthouse.

As before, it was dark and cloudy.



Now then, I don’t believe I need to go over what happened after that again.

I visited Wassily’s shop, and after a little nap, I went to save Miss Fran.

It was evening when we got back.

My original plan had been to spend the day sightseeing with Miss Fran, and maybe take some time for myself, but before I knew it, the majority of the day was over.

The cityscape looked dreary in the slanting sunlight.

“It’s this late already, huh...?”

My sigh was swallowed by the silence of the city.

I was feeling disappointed that I had lost so much precious time, but a different line of thought must have crossed Miss Fran’s mind.

“I’m sorry, it’s my fault.”

She frowned and bobbed her head in a little bow in my direction.

No, no.

“I didn’t mean to direct that at you, Miss Fran.”

“But even so, I was the reason we were inside the book until so late in the day, so isn’t it only natural that I should apologize to you?”

“I don’t think you’re really to blame for it, though...”

I’m not particularly sorry about entering the world of the book.

Because inside the book, I was able to see my teacher’s memories.

Even if we didn’t make it back here until twilight, I really didn’t have a bad

time.

As I paused, Miss Fran took one step after another into the slanting sunlight. I chased after her receding shadow, and she muttered a few words.

“I think most people would feel remorseful and blame themselves if something they did made things go awry or if their actions caused trouble for others, don’t you?”

“.....”

“Only the most rigid person would insist from start to finish that they weren’t to blame and that the outcome had nothing to do with them, despite evidence to the contrary.”

Either that, or someone who’s overly narcissistic.

I had a feeling that I more or less understood what she was trying to say.

But I didn’t really know how to deal with it.

“...And what do you think a person should do at such a time?”

And so I asked directly.

What should someone actually do when their wishes don’t come true, and they’re headed for a heartbreak ending?

Miss Fran came to a stop in the shadows.

And then...

“I would tell them to stay by someone’s side. Because if someone is alone for a long time, they’re bound to keep getting themselves into trouble, right?” Miss Fran turned around. “And, well, that’s why I’m still such a happy person!”

She was wearing her usual smile.

And, well, at that point—

Maybe she suddenly felt embarrassed now that we were having a slightly serious conversation. Or perhaps she wasn’t sure how to react after making direct eye contact with me.

She quickly shifted her eyes elsewhere.

“By the way, Elaina, how about a little dinner? I’ve got a restaurant recommendation. My treat!” she suggested hastily.

My, my...

By the way, I think I’ve heard that line before.

Specifically, sometime yesterday.

So...

“Sounds great.” I nodded enthusiastically. “But it’s rare for you to treat me to a meal. Is there some reason for it?” I asked.

Miss Fran chuckled at my question.

“There’s no deeper meaning behind it. I just want to eat together, that’s all,” she told me calmly.

.....

The person I was the day before would have blithely accepted with a “Yay! Can’t wait!” as soon as she said those words, but—

“If you’re going to treat me, I have one condition.”

I came abreast of my teacher and fixed my eyes on her.

Since I had spent the previous night reading endless sightseeing guides in the lighthouse until daybreak, I had a certain degree of knowledge about popular restaurants around the city.

And so...

“Actually, there happens to be a delicious restaurant just nearby. If you don’t mind, would you treat me to a meal there?”

“.....” Miss Fran seemed to guess something from my expression.
“Um, it’s not...an expensive restaurant, is it?”

“Oh-hoh-hoh...”

“Elaina...”

“Wouldn’t you agree that when someone has done something bad, it’s important that they offer a concrete demonstration of remorse?”

“Can I rescind my offer?”

“Not a chance.”

Then I grabbed my teacher’s hand and started walking.

Far ahead of us was the single light of the lighthouse.

It was shining very brightly and proudly.



After dinner, I headed for the lighthouse alone, and of course I found Saya there.

Inside the gloomy lighthouse, she was sitting on the floor.

As soon as she saw me, Saya immediately straightened up and raised her head, calling my name with a complicated mixture of joy and confusion on her face. “Elaina!”

She pressed her hands against the floor. “I’m sorry about last night! I fell asleep before I knew it...and I was in the middle of a job, too...”

It’s not something you need to be so worried about, though...

It was late at night, and you were working yourself to exhaustion for my sake.

“Don’t worry about it, please.”

I walked over to her, kneeled down, and placed a hand on her shoulder. It was a skinny, somewhat fragile shoulder.

No different than when we first met.

“Besides, I’m the one who should apologize. I left you alone while you were sleeping and went back to my room, after all. So please don’t worry about it,” I said.

Saya stared at my hand, and after a brief silence, she turned her face toward me.

Finally, in a serious voice, she told me, “...You really are being kind, Elaina.”

What are you talking about?

“I’m always kind!”

“Ehhh...?”

Sure enough, Saya had an exaggerated grimace on her face.

So I took my wand in my hand and poked her repeatedly in the cheek. “What is it? You want to say something, don’t you?”

Saya made an angry noise and narrowed her eyes.

“Though I doubt any outsider would think you were a very kind person, at least not if they saw this situation...”

“How rude.”

“By the way, what are your plans for today?”

“I came to help you with your job.”

“But poking people in the cheek isn’t part of my duties?”

“Oh, this is just for my own entertainment.”

“You’ve got very strange taste in entertainment...”

“Oh-hoh-hoh!”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

Saya puffed up her cheeks. I immediately poked them with my wand and deflated them. A rush of breath escaped from her mouth.

Of course, I hadn’t gone there to do things like that.

“I’m just having fun since I’m already here. Actually, I came today to talk to you for a little bit.”

“You came to talk to me?”

“Can I sit next to you?”

“If you don’t mind sitting on the dirty floor.”

Instead of answering, I took a seat beside her and held out my wand.

“The light of the lighthouse was very pretty when seen from afar.”

“But when you view it from directly beneath, it’s not all that pretty, is it?”

“I don’t dislike a view like this, though.”

The way you see things is altered by distance, so sometimes something that looks beautiful when you gaze at it from far away turns out to be filthy when you approach and view it up close—it’s a warning you’ll hear many times over if you travel.

“What a joy it is to be near something that so many people love but which they cannot see for themselves,” I said.

Then I held up my wand and let out some magical energy. Just like the day before, the dazzling glow at the tip of my wand blended with the magical energy that Saya was giving off and dissolved into the big light.

She just gazed at the sight.

“Elaina...”

Then she addressed me, almost in a whisper. “Really, I’m okay working this job by myself. Even without your help, I can fulfill my duties on my own.”

I did not turn to look at her.

I just watched the light rising up to the ceiling as I answered, “Last night, I tried to stay up all night, too, but this is really hard work, isn’t it?”

“But I can do it on my own.”

Oh my, so stubborn.

“You don’t want help?”

“.....”

There was no answer.

Well then, allow me to change the question.

“Is there a reason you have to do it alone?”

“.....”

As before, there was no answer.

Taking your silence as confirmation—

“There is a reason, isn’t there?

Then I turned to face her.

Her face was illuminated by the rising blue light, but her expression was very, very gloomy and dull.

Just like the lighthouse light when viewed from directly below.

Though she sparkled beautifully and proudly when admired from a distance, looking up at her from directly below, she was very, very forlorn.

But I knew that already.

“Is it because you’re sorry for not being able to help Monica?”

I had known that long before I arrived.



“Emadestrin, a Town Where People Live.”

Once, when I ran into Sheila in Ballad, the City of Silence, she suddenly said, “Come with me,” and took me outside, where she started telling me the following story.

“It’s a really strange place, you know. Their culture takes an extreme view against human death. They never invoke the death penalty even for their most atrocious villains, and even though that awful disease runs rampant, the city does everything it can to preserve life. The whole place is extremely sensitive about human death.”

The reason Saya had gone to visit that city was because a series of murders had taken place there.

In other words, she had been dispatched by the United Magic Association in order to resolve the incident.

As for the reason Sheila went out of her way to get me alone and tell me all of this—

“...Is she dealing with a tough conflict?”

That’s what I thought. But Sheila shook her head slowly.

“No. The incident has already been resolved. They caught the culprit and sentenced her to exile.”

“Exile, you say?”

“It means she was killed outside the city.”

“...Ah.”

Because it’s a place where killing inside the city itself is forbidden. I see, their cultural prohibition against death only applies inside their borders, huh?

“The incident was resolved successfully, and Saya came back safely.”

And then...

Sheila sighed deeply and told me, “But she’s been kind of depressed ever since she came back—apparently, she had a friend in Emadestrin. A girl about her age who she spent a lot of time with when they were new recruits to the United Magic Association.”

Apparently, the girl’s name was Monica.

Quite a lot of time had elapsed since their training, so it wasn’t until after Saya got there to investigate the incidents that she learned Monica was still

working in her hometown.

“So what happened to that friend of hers?”

I could deduce from the way the story was going that something had undoubtedly happened to this Monica.

Maybe she had gotten caught up in the murders. Or maybe she and Saya had had a falling out.

But the words Sheila spoke next were far removed from my shallow conjectures.

She said...

“They sentenced her to exile.” She answered bluntly.

“.....”

So that means—

Saya’s friend had been killing people for half a year or more, and she got caught and ended up being exiled.

There was no other way to interpret it.

“I imagine that unbearable memory cast a shadow over Saya’s heart.” Sheila gazed up at the sky, as if her eyes were following the line of her rising smoke.

Eventually, she pulled a book from her breast pocket. Written on the cover of the battered book in neat handwriting was simply the name *Monica*.

That looks like a diary.

“You’re headed for Trocolio by the Sea after this, right?” Sheila asked as she shoved Monica’s diary toward me. “Would you mind giving this to Saya?”

“...What’s written in it?”

“Read it and you’ll see.”

“.....”

I felt like I was being admonished to read between the lines, and after a brief silence, I opened the diary.

Written there in neat, fine handwriting were many memories belonging to Monica, whom I had never even met. The pages were filled with her memories of meeting her friend again, and the times right after she joined the United Magic Association, and then a detailed record of what happened after she returned to her hometown.

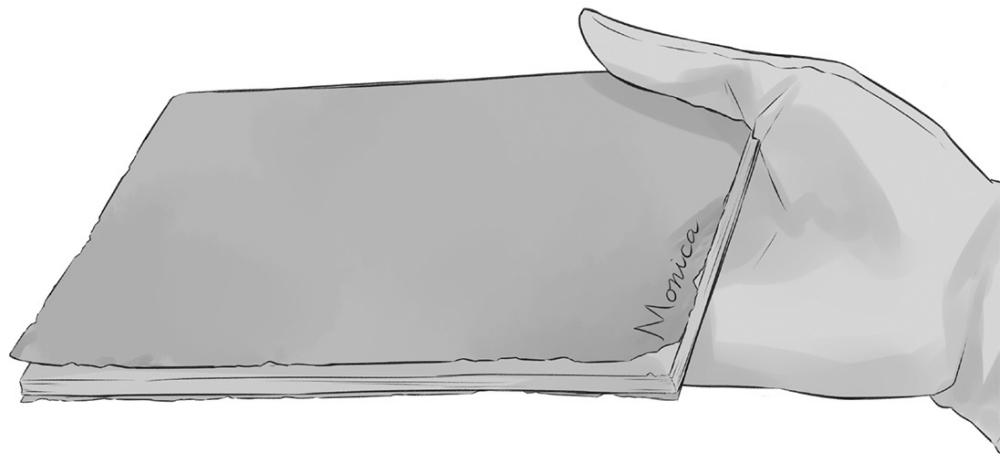
And it also contained a very gloomy, painful story that made me want to look away.

So after skimming it over, I quickly closed the book.

“Don’t you think you ought to be the one to give Saya something like this?”

“I can’t go to Trocolio by the Sea. I’ve still got work to do.”

I felt as if Sheila's expression was much more stern than usual. It didn't seem like she had become separated from Saya by choice.



“It’s such a pain how your duties multiply as you age.”

Even if she wanted to be with Saya, that probably wasn’t an option for her. Sheila had many duties to perform.

The duties of an adult who worked for the United Magic Association. The duties of an instructor to educate her students. All of that, plus her duty to Saya as her mentor.

Undoubtedly, she felt a great pressure to choose between her many responsibilities.

She had to make a difficult choice.

So I also chose.

I made a difficult choice.



I held the battered notebook in my hands.

It was obvious that Saya could guess the whole story just by tracing the girl’s name that was written on the cover.

She was smiling.

A weary smile.

“...That was mean. You knew, but you kept quiet about it?”

I felt her deep, heavy sigh on the back of my hand.

“I was looking for the right time to talk to you about it. I was busy searching for Miss Fran yesterday, so—”

“...Did you find her?”

“Yes. Thanks to your help.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“.....”

“I couldn’t do anything. I just fell asleep.”

Then, just a few seconds later, while I was searching for the right words to answer her, Saya looked at me with her usual cheerful expression, through the bluish-white stream of light.

“You heard about me from Sheila, didn’t you? She told you I was depressed. But I’m fine! I’m completely recovered already. I’m able to work now, no problem. Look, I’m operating all the dolls in the city, no problem!”

“.....”

“So, Elaina, please don’t worry about me. I can make it on my own.”

“.....”

“Elaina, did you know this? Apparently, the mages who lived in this city used to take turns doing this job. But I can do it alone. I’m not the old Saya anymore. I can take care of a job like this, even by myself.”

“.....”

“I’m all right. There’s nothing, nothing at all you need to worry about. So...”

“.....”

“So please don’t make that face when you look at me.”

I have no idea what kind of face I was making.

I was sure that I was listening earnestly to what she was saying. I was sure that I was looking straight at her, without turning my eyes away.

But Saya turned her face away from me.

Her expression was sorrowful.

“Saya.”

I reached out toward her.

Her shoulders shook. She stiffened.

I didn’t let that stop me. I touched her shoulder. Her quietly trembling shoulder was as slender as always.

“It wasn’t your fault that Monica died.”

“.....”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“.....”

I knew it probably didn’t make any impression to hear me say something like that. And yet I kept on talking.

“Please let me see your smiling face.”

I kept right on talking to her.

“Let me see the Saya I know.”

Please go back to being your usual self.

I spoke to her over and over again. But no matter how much I said, she never answered me once. Her words remained stuck in the back of her throat, and all that made it out were faint sighs.

She had been keeping her painful feelings locked away for so long.

I was at a loss.

She didn’t respond to me, no matter what I did.

Something about the way she had built up layers of armor until she was about to collapse reminded me somehow of my past self.

“...Saya.”

So I embraced her.

“...Please stop.”

I squeezed the girl in my arms tightly.

I could feel her trying with all her might to reject my embrace. But I didn't let her go. Every time she struggled, I hugged her tighter and tighter.

“Stop being so nice to me...!”

She grasped my robe tightly. A slight pain wound its way around my arm. Even so, I didn't let her go.

I had a feeling that if I let her go now, I would never see her again.

She kept on struggling in my arms. When her head pressed against my chest, the triangular hat that I had once given her tumbled off and fell on the floor.

From under a curtain of swaying black hair, Saya whispered in a trembling voice, “Things can't stay the way they are. I can't stay the way I am. Everyone leaves me because I still can't do anything on my own. They just leave me behind. I have to become stronger. If I stay like I am, everyone will always, always go off and leave me—”

I remembered when we first met.

She had been left behind by her younger sister, her heart broken by loneliness. She had probably felt like she had been abandoned.

After begging me to teach her magic, she had taken the witch apprentice exams on her own and had passed. I had thought she was independent after that.

She had joined the United Magic Association and made friends. She hadn't been alone anymore.

And then, the other day, she had been reunited with a friend.

That friend had stood up alone to oppose the laws of her city, and it had cost her life.

Maybe when that happened, Saya had felt a familiar feeling.

Maybe she had felt like she was all alone again.

“Why is it like this...? Why does everyone leave me behind and go off somewhere...?”

Her voice came out weakly, so weakly. All the force I had put into my embrace was long gone, and the only remaining feeling was pain.

The always cheerful Saya. The girl I knew was always smiling, even when she was doing something a little foolish. Even when she was begrudgingly completing a job, she smiled through it all.

But actually, she had probably always been afraid of being alone.

She had probably always been fighting those feelings.

“It's painful to become separated from people we love, I know.”

I knew the feeling so well it hurt.

But—

“Saya.”

I relaxed my arms and let her go. The face of the girl who had been gripping my robe with trembling hands was wet with tears.

Her pretty face was all crumpled up.

So I placed my hand on her cheek—

“You are not alone,” I told her as I wiped her tears. “I’ll always be with you.”

I’m here now, and I always will be.



I know everything.

The diary began with that sentence. If that had been written by some random person, it would have come off as extremely arrogant, but this Monica girl really did seem to know everything there was to know.

I am able to read people’s minds. I can read what they’re thinking and how they feel as they go about their lives, everything.

All her life, Monica had been able to understand the minds of others better than anyone else. But at the same time, she had been hiding a great feeling of loneliness. It seemed that since she could tell what people were feeling, she had trouble getting close to anyone.

Even people who can’t read minds understand that when you get to know someone, you also begin to see that they are not perfect.

So we choose. On an unconscious level, we sort people into those we want to get close to and those whom we do not.

But for Monica, it only took a single glance to read what was inside someone’s mind, so she could never allow anyone to get close to her. Observing people from afar or seeing them close up didn’t change a thing for her.

Monica didn’t make any friends until she was a teenager, after she had lived with loneliness for many years.

Today, I made a friend. Her name is Saya. She’s kind, and good, and doesn’t lie. She’s wonderful.

Monica really seemed to treasure Saya, the girl she met at the United Magic Association. In her diary, the entries written for the days after she joined the Association all feature Saya.

I had lunch with Saya today in a neighborhood café.

It sounds like her teacher is very strict. She's always tired.

She was really happy when I treated her to a parfait. She's a simple-minded girl.

Today, we went to the library together.

She was only reading children's books, so I handed her a book on philosophy.

She told me she couldn't read something so difficult.

We walked home together today.

It's so fun to chat about nothing in particular.

We walked home together today again.

Today, we—

Of course, Monica knew that Saya also harbored feelings of loneliness behind her naive smile.

Monica must have continued to think fondly of Saya even after she returned to her home city. Her diary was filled with entries about work and nothing else, but even so, she sometimes mentioned Saya.

Then one day, the content of the diary completely changed.

No one is interested in saving this city. No one is interested in doing the right thing. So I have no choice but to act.

That entry was six months old.

Monica couldn't stand the enormous contradiction consuming her city, so she began killing the people stricken by the plague with her own hands. Even knowing that she was committing the worst possible offense, she continued ending the lives of sick people.

It must have taken a lot of conviction.

Monica obviously realized that the actions she had chosen were by no means something to be praised. Even so, she was unable to avert her eyes from the suffering people.

Because she understood others better than anyone else.

I'm sure she wouldn't have wanted her best friend to see her like that.

Saya has been dispatched from the Association.

But then Saya had appeared. Monica hadn't wanted to see her precisely because she cared about her so much, yet there she was.

She had suffered terrible anguish over it.

Why did you have to come here?

Monica had been planning to sacrifice her own life to save her city. She had been planning to throw her life away. But then her best friend had shown up, and

her resolution had wavered.

However, by then, she was already at the point of no return.

I'm sorry.

She knew Saya would be deeply hurt if she found out about Monica's actions. At the same time, she was confident that if Saya was the one investigating, she was sure to arrive at the truth.

There was only one alternative left to Monica.

She wrote her feelings in her final diary entry, addressed to Saya.

Written clearly there on the page were the feelings that Monica, who knew everything everyone else was thinking, had always kept concealed in her own heart.

Once we got Miss Fran back from inside the book...

After we finished eating, I asked Miss Fran to read the diary. After reading to the very end, all the way through to Monica's feelings, she said, "What a kind person she was."

That was all she mumbled, and then she closed the book.

"....."

I had been puzzling over what to do ever since Sheila entrusted me with the diary and since I learned Saya's story. I had been struggling with the question of whether it was all right for me to have accepted the diary and what I should do with it.

I wasn't sure how I should go about handing over the diary.

I didn't have any idea what I could do for Saya.

I just don't know.

I had never lost someone important before.

"You're struggling with this, aren't you?" Miss Fran said to me matter-of-factly as she sipped her after-meal tea. She seemed to see right through me.

"You can tell?"

It felt like she was looking straight through into my mind.

"I can tell. I'm your teacher, after all."

"....."

I cast my eyes downward. A moment of silence descended on us. Miss Fran set her teacup down close at hand with a *clink*. Steam rose from the cup as the liquid sloshed, and the fragrance whirled up into the air.

"There's just one thing you can do for her," Miss Fran said. She sounded extremely calm to me in my distress.

Sounding as she always did, my teacher said to me...
“Go be with her,” she said with a gentle smile.

Inside the lighthouse, where magical energy was streaming from our two wands.

Right in front of me, Saya was hiding her face and crying.

She must have felt very lonely. She must have felt like she had been left behind. Surely she would need more time to come to terms with Monica’s death.

But there was something I didn’t want Saya to forget.

Something I had told her long ago when we first met.

I decided to tell her one more time.

“You are not alone.”

I picked up her triangular hat off the dirty floor, dusted it off, and held it in both hands. The hat felt natural in my grip.

This is the hat that I gave to her once.

So it’s not mine.

I guess I’d better put it back where it belongs.

“Did you forget?”

I placed the hat on her head.

“*Go be with her.*”

Miss Fran’s words echoed in my mind.

“Haven’t I always been right here by your side, ever since we first met?”

“*Just like when you snuggled up beside her as she cried years ago.*”

“*Just like when you gave her her own triangular hat.*”

“I have always been with you, and I always will be.”

Make sure never to forget that.

I simply told her that, and nothing else.

In order to say that to her, I had followed the light of the lighthouse.

She probably didn’t want me to see her weepy face. She tightly grasped the brim of the hat I had placed on her and hung her head.

I continued to snuggle up beside the forlorn, frail girl.

After that, we spent the rest of the night together.

Saya finished crying, and as the light from our wands streamed upward, we told each other stories of what had happened while we were apart.

I told her about the strange people I had encountered on my travels, and Saya told me about her assignments. She also told me about Monica. We exchanged a

steady stream of all sorts of stories there inside the lighthouse.

We could have talked forever.

It felt like the night would never end.

We didn't leave the lighthouse until the sun had already begun to rise. But strangely, I didn't feel tired.

I felt like we hadn't talked nearly enough yet.

Admiring the view of the lighthouse with the morning sun behind it, Saya turned to face me.

"You are nice, Elaina. I knew it."

Oh? What are you talking about?

"I've always been nice!"

How rude!

I puffed out my cheeks dramatically.

Saya said, "You're right."

She nodded. "I knew that."

She smiled.

She smiled, like always.

"I've always known that."



It was the evening of the third day of our stay in Trocolio by the Sea.

As we headed toward the port, we saw all sorts of vendor stalls standing side by side, and there were lanterns everywhere. Everyone, from children to adults and even the elderly, was holding a lit lantern carefully in their hands.



Lanterns were already floating softly skyward here and there.

The whole place was brimming with wishes.

“You don’t need to be at work?” Miss Fran asked Saya abruptly.

Saya, who normally would be performing her job inside the lighthouse operating the dolls, was there with us.

There beside me.

“I’m taking time off for the festival.”

As she answered, Saya gazed at the lighthouse towering in the distance. The delicate bluish-white light was visible from the harbor, however faintly.

“...Did someone take over the job for you?”

Miss Fran gazed at that light quizzically.

“Well, something like that.” I nodded.

Though it would be misleading to say someone.

“We found stand-ins to do the work for a few hours.”

“.....?”

Miss Fran tilted her head, looking slightly puzzled, and then opened her mouth as if she had just remembered something. “Oh, come to think of it, Elaina, did you return all the dolls that borrowed traits from you while we were inside the book, like you were supposed to? I saw Wassily earlier, and she was complaining that she never got the dolls in the casual clothes back.”

“I’ll go give them back after the festival is over, so don’t worry.”

“.....?”

Miss Fran looked puzzled again.

I averted my eyes.

Something had happened the night before.

While Saya and I had been talking, a thought had come to mind. I remembered that some of the dolls Wassily made were incapable of consciousness and were just vessels that could store magical energy—like the dolls in casual clothes we had borrowed when we went into the book.

I figured that maybe, if we handled these dolls right, they could take the place of a person in the lighthouse.

So we’d spent the night testing it out.

And now we were seeing the result.

The lighthouse was still shining.

Of course, there was a limit to the amount of magical energy that could be stored in a doll, so we couldn’t get them to fill in for us on the job for a whole day. But for just a few hours, they could handle the work instead of us.

So I said to Saya, “For now, let’s enjoy the festival.”

It would be too sad for someone to spend the night of the long-awaited festival inside the lighthouse, gazing up at that light all alone.

Throughout the festival grounds, the townspeople were handing out lanterns.

Following the example of others, we also each accepted a lantern.

Three faint little lights.

Lined up by the harbor.

“The purpose of this city’s Lantern Festival is to put your feelings for the people you can no longer see into the lanterns and send them up into the sky,” Miss Fran told us while gazing at the small light she was holding in her hands.

According to Miss Fran...

“The Lantern Festival was first held in this city in ancient times. Apparently, it started a custom in which the townspeople entrust their feelings for those who have passed away and for loved ones whom they have become separated from to the lanterns and launch them into the heavens every year around this time.”

At first, the custom was started by just one person in the city.

But people were mesmerized by the beauty of the lanterns being pulled up into the sky.

Over time, more and more people began entrusting their feelings to the lanterns, and the event became so popular that sightseers went out of their way to visit the city during this time, and many lanterns full of feelings were sent up to the sky.

Something started by just one individual gradually transformed into a spectacle that holds great meaning for many people.

An enthralling spectacle held in this city.

I asked, “Who are you going to send your feelings to, Saya?”

I knew she heard what I said, but she was silent.

“.....”

In her silence, she stared at the warm, gentle lights.

She stared at the lanterns, which were still beautiful even when viewed from afar, or concealed between someone’s hands.

And then, finally.

“I’m not sending a lantern.”

She shook her head slowly.

“The person who matters most to me is always by my side, so...so I don’t have any need to send out my feelings.”

If we were going to follow the traditions of the city, we would use our lanterns to carry our feelings to loved ones who were far away.

But we had never been apart.

Not yet.

Not ever.

That's what I had said to her.

To my beloved Saya— began the final entry in Monica's diary.

Monica must have assumed that at some point, her diary would make its way into Saya's hands. Because even though she couldn't see the future, she knew everything.

She must have been able to predict something as obvious as that.

I'm sure the truth will find its way to you soon. In fact, you may have already realized it.

Written at the end of the diary was the truth about all of her actions and her feelings toward Saya.

I always loved you. You're a terrible liar, and you're always smiling. You're wonderful, and I loved you. You were dazzling. I wished time and time again that I could be like you.

I could tell that she had been crying while she wrote it.

The letters were smeared.

The way things are going, it doesn't seem I have much time left. I will have to leave you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for making you sad.

The final words that Monica had written in her diary.

For some reason, I found them quite lovely.

But please don't forget...

Most likely, that was because they were exactly the same as the words I had spoken earlier.

...Don't forget that I am always by your side.

Wearing a familiar pointy hat on her head, Saya whispered, "I won't forget."

She whispered it almost as if she was making a vow to herself.

"I'll never forget."

The diary with the name of someone important to her written on it was tucked away near her heart.

The person who thought so much of her would be with her forever.

Her little light was still shining beside Saya's heart.

Shining proudly, close to her dear friend.



CHAPTER 8

On the Road: Fire Rising in a Dark Sky

In the dark, distant night sky, I could see small lights rising in ones and twos.

It looked just like the stars were being sucked up into the night sky, and my big sister and I spent some time just marveling at the spectacle.

“It’s beautiful...,” my sister whispered.

All I could do was nod.

From our position, we had a full view of the scene, which was lovely enough to make us forget we were high up in the sky.

Looking down, the city was spread out under our eyes. The flying castle, which was in the middle of slowly, slowly sinking down to the ground, afforded us this very beautiful sight as it made its final descent.

The Lantern Festival.

I had heard rumors about it. Supposedly, at that time each year, the people in the neighboring city held a festival where they launched lanterns up into the sky.

My big sister and I wanted to participate in the festival, but in the end, we didn’t make it there in time. Just before we arrived at Troolio by the Sea, when it was just a stone’s throw away, we had taken on the job in Orotorinne.

If possible, I would have liked to participate in the festival, but we’ve got work to do, so there’s no helping it—I and my sister both had more or less given up on it.

“We managed to find some premium seats, huh?” I said to my sister, who was standing beside me.

In exchange for missing the festival.

In exchange for taking on that job.

The very, very beautiful sight dissolved into the stardust-scattered sky.

“So we did.” My big sister nodded. Then she mumbled sadly, “But we’ll never be able to see it from here again, will we?”

The castle was slowly returning to earth. Once it sank all the way to the ground, it would probably never rise into the air again.

This would likely be the last time such a sight appeared before our eyes.

It was a beautiful once-in-a-lifetime view.

We would never get the chance to see it again.

“.....”

I've heard that in the tradition of the Lantern Festival, people place their feelings for distant loved ones into lanterns and then launch them into the sky.

They entrust their feelings for others under the same sky to the lanterns and send them off.

But right now, we're up in the sky.

From up here, who on earth would 'distant loved ones' refer to?

Long ago, while I was waiting in our home city for my big sister's return, I always felt regretful.

I regretted not being able to trust in my sister, and I regretted the part I played in my sister's exile—I regretted my own foolishness the whole time.

There was no need to think too hard about just who my special person might be.

"...Big sister?"

I stretched out my hand toward my sister.

When my fingers brushed against her warm hand, she chuckled and smiled awkwardly and squeezed my hand back. "...What is it?"

My hand was enveloped in warmth.

"Nothing at all."

Gazing at the distant sky to avert my eyes, I made a wish.

Don't ever let this hand leave mine again.



Immediately after the boat that Fran had boarded departed the country, I smelled a familiar stench.

It was bad enough to make me unconsciously grimace, and no matter how many times I smelled it, every time I felt like poison was being deposited onto my body. It really, really stank; it was awful, and yet it was a nostalgic smell.

I knew perfectly well whom the owner of that stench was.

"Elaina."

"Hmm? Yes?"

Elaina had been gazing absentmindedly after the ship, but when she turned toward me, she grimaced slightly.

Maybe her nose was as keen as mine, or maybe she remembered the owner of the stench just like I did—she immediately looked around and then said out loud, "That stinks!"

Even though I couldn't see her, I knew that if I followed the smell, I would

find her location soon enough.

“So I’ve... kinda... gotta go.”

“Sure.” Elaina nodded at my words. “Take care.”

She smiled at me.

In her hands, she was still holding her lantern with care.

There was only one person in the whole city who would be smoking in the middle of all this hustle and bustle, and after walking a short distance, I was able to quickly locate the culprit.

“.....”

When she made eye contact with me, she frowned awkwardly and let out a smoky sigh.

“... You noticed me?”

The Midnight Witch, Sheila, was standing there.

“I know you by your stench.”

She may have thought I wouldn’t notice her, but I could see the clouds of smoke billowing up from her hiding place from the other side of the crowd, and actually, I could see her pointy hat as well, plus we even made eye contact.

But more than anything, I could smell her stench the whole time.

There was no way I wouldn’t have noticed her.

“How did your job go?” I asked.

Sheila said, “...The job was to seal up packages for transportation, but apparently there was a mix-up and the packages disappeared.”

That was the only answer she gave me.

She didn’t go so far as to tell me what she was doing in this city.

Maybe the packages that were in transit had originated from Troolio, and she had to come to search for the cause of their disappearance. Or maybe she had simply accepted her next assignment and come to where the job was.

But at that point, none of it really mattered.

I was overjoyed that she had come here to meet me face-to-face.

I had heard everything from Elaina.

I knew that Sheila had gone personally to Emadestrin, a Town Where People Live, and recovered Monica’s diary for me, and I knew she had entrusted it to Elaina.

I had heard everything.

Including the fact that she had been worried about me all along.

“...Sorry.”

Sheila looked up at the lights that were visible in the dark sky.

She looked like she was turning her face away, like she was just feeling embarrassed.

So, still holding one small light in my hand, I gave her my best smile and tugged at her hand.

“How about we watch the Lantern Festival from somewhere a little brighter?”



The little lights got sucked up among the stardust in the night sky.

From the deck of the calmly rocking ship, I watched as the lantern lights grew smaller and smaller, fading into the faintest of glimmers.

Eventually, they would disappear from sight.

So I stretched out my hand.

Toward a sky brimming with memories.

“What are you doing, Fran?”

The very first time I made that particular ocean voyage, my teacher had tilted her head quizzically at me as I reached my hand out toward the sky.

“How pretty!” she said, and I was certain that she didn’t understand what I was doing.

To me, the spectacle in the sky looked like something entirely different.

It was a beautiful sky, filled with the memories of lots of different people.

So I answered her, “I’m trying not to forget someone I adore.”

I stood on tiptoe, stretching toward a sky I could never reach.

“So we meet again.”

I heard the name of my teacher’s daughter, saw what she looked like, gave her a hug, and understood everything.

I understood who it was that had saved me all those years ago. I understood what kind of girl she was going to grow up to be.

My fate was intertwined with hers.

So I extended a hand to the girl.

“.....?”

She was young enough that it still took all her effort just to stand up on two

legs. She gazed at my hand wonderingly and then looked up at me.

She had ash-gray hair and clear, lapis-blue eyes.

The girl's name was Elaina.

She extended her own hand slowly and gently gripped mine.

Her hand was so soft and small.

"Time to say good-bye already, huh?"

Back at the harbor, I extended my hand, and Elaina took it.

Her hand still seemed small and unsteady.

But compared to back then—

"...You've really grown, haven't you?"

That was the only heartfelt impression I was able to offer, and I barely managed to speak the words before getting overwhelmed by other feelings that were welling up out of me.

Elaina smiled shyly.

"I probably have, yeah. But—," she continued, "I've got a lot more growing to do."

Then she slowly released my hand.

The cool night air stole her unforgettable warmth from my fingertips. A sense of loss spread over my hand. Immediately after that, a warm feeling leaped into my chest.

"Let's meet again someday."



I said those words and threw my arms around Miss Fran.

I'm overcome with emotion. What on earth am I doing? This isn't like me.

I thought I could hear a voice of reason whispering inside me, but on this one occasion, I surrendered to my desires and wrapped both my arms enthusiastically around my teacher's back.

I was willing to bet Miss Fran was probably a little surprised by my actions.

"My goodness..." I heard her voice above my head. But since I currently had my face buried in my teacher's chest, I had no idea what kind of expression she was wearing.

But I didn't need to see it, either.

I knew that if I looked at her face, I would probably feel another wave of loneliness.

“Elaina...”

Finally, Miss Fran put her arms around me and said slowly, “Did you get a little bit taller?”

“Ah, sorry, I’m standing on my tiptoes.”

“.....”

“I’ve got to do this if I want to be just the right size to give you a hug, so...”

I had no other choice.

If I didn’t force myself up onto my toes, with our present difference in height, the hug wouldn’t feel perfect. A little effort is necessary in order to create the right kind of mood.

Miss Fran gently patted me on the back.

“But still, you’ve really grown, compared to long ago.”

“.....”

Have I, now?

“I’m sure I have, yes.”

But of course, I didn’t intend to let this be our last hug.

Miss Fran squeezed me gently with both arms.

Then she whispered into my ear.

“Let’s meet again someday.”

As it departed for distant shores, the boat swayed gently, gliding across the water’s surface.

I was sure I was staring at it the whole time, and yet before I knew it, the shape of the boat had transformed into a small, faint thing. Surely it would soon be obscured by the darkness, and I would lose sight of it.

I felt like there was still a warmth lingering in my chest.

Although maybe it was the flame in the lantern I was still holding that was making me feel warm.

Undoubtedly, I would lose sight of the boat Miss Fran was on in a moment.

I wondered whether she could see the city’s lights from where she was.

I wondered whether she could see the spot where I was standing.

I wished that somehow my light would reach far and wide.

“Farewell.”

Then I released the small lantern from my hands.

“Until we meet again.”

The light I had been holding in my hands whirled softly through the air, joining with all the other ascending lanterns. I wondered whether Miss Fran was looking for my light.

Alone on the harbor, a single girl released her lantern up into the sky.

With ash-gray hair and lapis-blue eyes, the girl, dressed in a black robe and triangular hat, was a witch and a traveler.

As she wandered from place to place, this girl experienced many meetings and partings.

It had always been that way, and would always be so, as she continued her travels.

Who could that girl be, who stretched out her hand toward a dark sky glittering with the lights of so many memories, trying to burn the image into her mind so that she never forgot the many meetings and partings?

It goes without saying, doesn't it?

That's right, it's me.



Afterword

Hello! I only have three pages this time, so I'm going to get straight into my comments on each chapter!

- Chapter 1 On the Road: A Story in a Book

I treated this chapter like a prologue to Volume 10. I thought it might be interesting to have Elaina talk to you from inside a book, so I wanted to give it a try. I'm glad I was able to bring the idea to fruition.

- Chapter 2 The Tale of a Mermaid Who Was in Love with Love

I feel like most tales about mermaids are tragic love stories, but in this book, I wrote a comedy instead. I wonder if the day will ever come when Keith learns to handle himself around women...?

- Chapter 3 The Land of Letters Never Forgets

A story about Elaina and Miss Fran, and about Miss Fran and her own teacher... That's all!

- Chapter 4 Witch Trial

When I came up with the idea for this chapter's plot, I was really torn on whether or not I should actually write it, but my head editor told me to go for it, so I ended up writing it. It's probably my least original work to date.

- Chapter 5 Mages in the Sky

A story about Amnesia and her sister, and also two mage sisters. I had been thinking about writing a story about a castle in the sky for a long time, but I was hesitant because I worried it would turn out to be a very long chapter. However, it seemed like it would fit well with an eye toward this volume's epilogue, so I finally made it a reality in Volume 10.

- Chapter 6 On the Road: The Story of the Lonely Book

This chapter is divided into two parts. I was happy that I got Brainy Elaina to make an appearance. The image of Miss Fran admonishing *The Lonely Story Book* at the end of this chapter acts as an introduction to the next chapter.

- Chapter 7 On the Road: Inside the Lighthouse

Human beings grow and change, and no relationship stays the same forever, but even though we know this, I think that we feel a sense of loneliness when

our personal relationships change. The e-book kicked off with Saya's story, and she's reached critical junctures twice, in Volumes 3 and 5, and I wanted the same to happen in this volume. Volume 10 of the *Wandering Witch* series, the series which began with Elaina placing a hat on Saya's head, ends with her placing a hat on her head again. Elaina's travels with Miss Fran and Saya's miserable days also come to an end here.

- Chapter 8 On the Road: Fire Rising in a Dark Sky

The Lantern Festival is based on the practice of releasing *khom loi*. For this book, I made it into a custom of taking your feelings for distant loved ones, putting them in lanterns, and launching them. We saw Amnesia and her sister watching the lanterns from high in the sky and Saya pulling her teacher along to a bright place without launching a lantern. We saw Miss Fran gazing at the lanterns from the sea. We saw Elaina reaching out toward the lanterns from land. Though every one of them was watching the same spectacle, I'm sure they all had different wishes for the lanterns.

That concludes my comments for each chapter. Nice to see you again. I'm Jougi Shiraishi. Mainly because I made the last chapter too long, I have very few pages for my afterword at this time, so I'll try to summarize my thoughts concisely. This being the tenth volume since the start of the series, I've been thinking for a while that I wanted to make it a kind of pause in the story. And so I thought I would bring it to a close at the end with Saya's story. Based on the length of the final section, it would have been a perfect ending to the whole series, but this series is going to keep going after this, so I hope you will cheer me on! By the way, I may as well announce that from the next volume on, we are returning to Elaina's usual solo travels.

Regarding the attached drama CD, I guess I've said this several times on Twitter already, but when I attended the recording for the first CD, I was so nervous that I bit my lower lip so hard, I thought I might chew it right off. But at the recording for the second CD, I couldn't help but enjoy myself, listening in the back, and I was all smiles the whole time. Personally, I liked Chapter 4 the best. Thank you again to everyone who was involved in producing the drama CD, especially the cast!

Now then, the acknowledgments.

To M, the head editor: I'm...so sorry for making you wait until the last minute this time. It was just one thing after another, and in the end, I gave you the longest manuscript I've ever written...

To Azure: Thank you for your always-adorable illustrations. I especially like the drawing of Elaina on the cover for the drama CD... Looking forward to continuing working with you.

To all my readers: I'm sorry that my afterword is so short this time. It would make me very happy if you would continue to watch over Elaina's journeys going forward. See you later!

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JOUGI SHIRAI SHI

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