



WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

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JOUGI SHIRASHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

She's a witch and a traveler.



The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

She earned the title of “witch,” the highest rank for a mage, at a young age. As a child, she read the book *The Adventures of Niche* and was inspired to go on a journey of her own.

THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA CHARACTERS

ANNA
An expert working in a country known as the Paradise for the Dead. She researches ghouls.



ELISE
A beastkin girl living in a snowy country. She is subject to persecution until Elaina helps her.



DIVINE CAT
A mysterious creature (?) that Elaina encounters in a country that reveres cats. She is quite long-lived and is able to speak to humans.



ROSAMIA
Attendant to Princess Chocolat and an exceptional knight. She is searching for the runaway princess.



CHOCOLAT
Princess of Windmill City. She fled from a political marriage and is being pursued by a scary person.



"Meooooow."

**"Give us
back the
Divine
Cat!"**

**"Bring
her back
alive!"**



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Illustration
AZURE

2


YEN
NEW YORK

Copyright

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PROLOGUE

A spring shower washed over the verdant plains.

Falling from the sky as softly as a whisper, the raindrops dampened the flowers that filled the meadow, as well as the boughs of a solitary tree that stood atop a gently sloping hill.

“...Oh wow, it’s really coming down, huh?”

Under that tree stood a young witch, gazing vacantly up at the ash-gray sky.

Her long, smooth hair was the same color as the clouds, and she wore a black robe, a pointy black hat, and a star-shaped brooch—proof that she was a witch.

Beside her, a broom leaned against the tree, and a large suitcase was just beneath it. This young lady was a witch and a traveler.

“...What do I do?”

And she was also lost.

Should I keep going? Or should I just stay put and wait it out?

As a witch, it wouldn’t have been impossible for her to fly her broom and magically keep the rain off her at the same time, if she felt like it.

“.....”

However, as she stood there watching the rain fall, any motivation to solve her problem with magic fizzled away. Far in the distance, the witch could see a thin sunbeam pierce through the clouds, parting them like curtains. The gloomy terrain became brighter with the sun’s rays. The raindrops caught the light, shimmering as they fell from on high.

A sun shower.

“...I think I’ll relax here for a while.”

This young witch had her eyes and heart stolen away by the beautiful scenery stretching out before her. Just who could she be?

That’s right. She’s me.



CHAPTER 1

A Country for Mages

Sunlight cascaded through a break in the clouds and poured down onto the meadow. In the bright light, the flowers swaying in the gentle breeze shook off the droplets clinging to their petals.

As I flew into the patch of sunlight, my body was enveloped in warmth.

Ah, that feels so nice! I thought for a moment, before passing under the clouds again. I wished the sunlight would follow me, but that sunny patch was already out of reach.

The rain had stopped a while ago, but the air was still damp and chilly. The clouds had completely obscured the sun, and it looked like the frigid downpour would start up again.

“.....”

I hated rain. It made everything soggy, it put a damper on my mood, and—more than anything—it forced me to stop traveling for a while. It was the worst. But I did love to splash around in puddles when it finally stopped. Rain was awful in the moment, but the period afterward was another story entirely. I loved it. What a strange, troubling feeling.

But when you feel the rain coming, you have to hurry, right? I urged my broom onward, picking up the pace a little.

Before long, my destination came into view.

It didn’t take long for a border guard to appear after I dismounted my broom in front of the gate. Strangely, this guard was not dressed as a soldier but was clad in a pointy hat and robe.

“Welcome, welcome. Are you a witch?”

Isn’t it obvious?

“Yes. I’m a traveling one.”

“Ah, is that so? You’re young for a witch.” He nodded in admiration, then continued, “Pardon me, but may I have your name?”

“Elaina.”

“Lady Elaina. I see. Pardon me, but do you have a significant other?”

“Excuse me?”

That one caught me off guard.

Did he just make a pass at me?

However, there seemed to be some other reason for the question.

The guard shook his head slightly. “Sorry for the confusion. I can assure you I have no ulterior motives. It’s just that, if you happened to be in a relationship with someone who ranked below a mage, you would almost certainly find our land less than hospitable.”

“...?”

“That said, are you currently seeing anyone?”

I’m not totally satisfied with that explanation, but I guess I’ll understand once I’m inside. Probably.

“...Um, nope. Can’t say I am.”

The guard nodded. “I see—Well then, please come in.”

He stepped back from the gate.

And then the massive steel portal rumbled open, shaking the ground mightily.

“Welcome to the Country for Mages.”

I stepped forward as the gate guard bowed very deeply and welcomed me in.



I passed through the gate and found myself on the city’s main street. Private residences and shops of all shapes and sizes were lined up in rows along the road.

The city was overflowing with mages. They were walking around in pairs or groups or going about their business alone. Turning my gaze toward the line of shops, I saw many mages carrying on with their totally ordinary lives.

That said, there also appeared to be a few non-magical people among the crowd. They scurried along the very edges of the road and gave way whenever it looked like they might run into a mage, keeping their heads lowered. They were going to such lengths to humble themselves that it was actually a little uncomfortable.

Every single one had ratty clothing. In this country, there were either

people clad in expensive-looking robes or people with cheap bits of cloth wrapped around them—and nothing in between.

This is weird. Whatever's going on in this country, it's strange.

After proceeding a little farther, I stopped dead in my tracks.

There was something odd up ahead.

“...What is that?”

These were the first words out of my mouth.

A strange box, like nothing I had ever seen before, was moving along a path laid out with iron rods. But what really caught me by surprise were the people seemingly stuffed inside the huge box.

I realized it was some kind of vehicle when the box pulled to a stop in front of me. When the door opened, a flood of people came pouring out. And then the flow reversed, and the box sucked up new passengers.

It appeared to be a means of transport for large quantities of people.

How interesting.

Should I go for a ride?

Yeah, I wanna go for a ride.

Without another thought, I stepped forward. Weaving past bodies as I walked against the flow of foot traffic, I approached the box.

However, despite my best efforts to get on board, I didn't make it—because right before I did, someone stopped me.

“You can't.”

“Gueh,” I said, making a strange sound. Someone had yanked on my robe from behind.

Hey, what's the big idea, you meanie?!

When I turned around, fuming and ready for a fight, there was a witch standing there.

A weird witch, wearing a suspicious smile.

“Can I help you?”

“You're a mage, right? You can't ride in the first car. You're not allowed.” The witch spoke smoothly, ignoring my obvious hostility. “You can ride in that one,” she said, pointing to the car behind the one I had been about to board...or something.

“...But it doesn't look like there's anyone else in there.”

“Yes, it's empty. But there's a reason for that. Just trust me and take this one.”

“So you’re saying it’s fine for *me* to be in this car?”

“Yeah, of course—I’ll explain the reason to you later. So go ahead, get on.”

“...Huh.”

I don’t get it.



After hearing her out, I learned that the weird witch was the inventor of the moving box thing. Apparently, the vehicle was called a “train.”

When I asked what kind of mechanism allowed it to move, she seemed more than happy to go into excruciating detail. It was hard to follow everything she was saying.

I felt my brain drowning in the waves of excessive information. I understood that “the driving force that moves the train is magical energy,” but everything else went completely over my head.

Well, I don’t think it matters much whether I know how the thing works.

“By the way, I’m currently conducting a poll for mages who ride this train for the first time.”

“Oh, is that so?”

I gave a halfhearted response from where I was seated, legs outstretched, on the long, long sofa set up in the train car.

“Miss Traveler, how are you finding the ride so far?”

“It’s quiet.”

An ordinary cityscape streamed past the windows. The fantastical moving box did not actually move particularly quickly. In fact, I think I could have flown faster on my broom. But the trade-off was that the ride from inside the train car was extremely quiet. It was actually pretty nice.

“Isn’t it? This train is my pride and joy, and I developed it so people could go sightseeing around town while gazing at the wonderful scenery and looking at a fun little attraction.”

“Mm.”

“But it isn’t all that popular among mages... When it first debuted, many mages used it, but before I knew it, nobody was riding it anymore.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

It's so slow, after all.

"Actually, you're my first customer of the day. Welcome to my train car."

"First customer...?"

I leaned forward to look out the window, wondering what she was talking about. When I looked in the direction the train was heading, I could clearly see the other car, packed with passengers.

There are that many people riding in that train, yet I'm the first customer?

What is she talking about?

"Oh," said the witch, following my gaze. "The people in that car aren't customers. Don't worry about them."

"Don't worry about them..." Now that you've said that, I'm even more curious. What in the world are they, if not customers?"

To this, she replied simply, "Hmm? They're anima. They're not human, so of course they can't be customers."

"....."

"You're not from around here, so I suppose you don't understand, but—in this country, people who can't use magic aren't considered human. They're basically animals."

"...That's quite the statement."

Treated like animals, just because they can't use magic?

The witch cast her gaze at the front train car. "Look at them. Don't you find them pitiful? They don't have any other way to get around, unlike us mages, so they're eager to ride the train all crammed together. What a funny sight!"

"...I don't really find it funny."

"Oh? But when this train was first completed, it was a real crowd-pleaser. Those anima would ride in the front car, and we would watch them from back here. We would point and laugh at their wretchedness. It was a popular way to let off a little steam at the end of the day."

"The anima, you say..."

Long ago, I read something in a book. If I recall, it was about the slurs that mages made up for other people. It was surprising to find that there was a country where such language was in use.

"But that fad fell out of popularity, as they all do, I suppose. These days, my only customers are people like you—those that come from abroad."

“...Makes sense.”

“Do you think there’s anything I can do to get people to take the train again? I guess I should find a way to bump up the entertainment value, hmm?”

“What if you got rid of that factor altogether?”

“Then I guess there wouldn’t be any reason to keep the train running.”

“.....”

“So? Got any ideas?”

“Nope.”

“That’s an awfully indifferent answer.”

“Well, I’m awfully indifferent about it.”

“Don’t say that. I need some fresh ideas. If things remain as they are, this train is headed straight for the junkyard.”

“Ideas, huh...?”

Nothing came to mind.

“Don’t you have anything? Even your feedback on the ride would be fine.”

“...Ah, that I can do.”

“Well?”

I had already decided on my review.

I turned my gaze from the dull, unchanging scenery to the witch with the shallow smile—and I gave her my honest feedback.

“It’s unpleasant.”

But she didn’t seem at all bothered by it.

“I see... Unpleasant, huh?” she pondered.



Starting from the next day, the city was assaulted by a torrential downpour. Unable to leave during in the middle of a storm, I holed up in my hotel room for a while.

My, my, even in a cheap room, you can get by if you have to.

There was nothing to do, though, and the days I wasted sitting around in the muggy weather were even more boring than I expected. Eventually, I began to worry that I would start sprouting moss.

When the rain showed no sign of stopping even after several days, I decided to leave despite the poor weather.

As I trudged down the road leading to the city gates, holding an umbrella against the unrelenting storm, a train passed by me at a leisurely pace.

Moving only slightly faster than I was walking, it then came to a sharp stop just ahead.

“Hmm...”

The door opened, and a sea of people came rushing out.

“Oh, if it isn’t the witch from before. Hello. Nice weather, huh?”

It was the witch who had invented the train in the first place.

“You call this nice weather?”

“I do. I mean, my train’s seeing a lot of use. If this isn’t nice weather, what is?”

“Somehow, I don’t think we see eye to eye.” I left it at that. “But it looks like business really is booming. I guess most of the customers who weren’t riding before came back.”

Peering past the witch, I saw a train car crowded with mages. Those getting off and those getting on were all the same—only mages.

The girl followed my line of sight and nodded vigorously.

“Yep! It’s all thanks to you that so many mages have come back!”

“Me?”

Um, did I do something?

I gave her my honest opinion...but there’s really no reason for her to be thanking me. What on earth is she going on about?

As I was questioning myself under my umbrella, she spoke up. “Like you said, once I got rid of the aspect you found unpleasant, the customers came back!” She stepped to the side. “See? Look, I removed the car for anima and made the train exclusively for mages.”

She smiled.

“.....”

A train full of mages stood before me. The frontmost car, and all other cars, were teeming with mages and no one else.

“You were right; the thought of having those anima ride in the same train cars as mages is extremely unpleasant. I’ll admit it was a bit of an oversight

on my part. Honestly, what was I thinking? Such a ridiculous idea. Thank you, Miss Witch.”

“.....”

“My train is finally popular again. Now, from the comfort of the train, we can all point and laugh at the wretched anima as they walk around in the rain. It really is a great way to relax at the end of the day.”

“...Is...that so...?”

The mages disembarking from the train put up their umbrellas and dispersed along the road. They passed shabby-looking people huddling under scraps of cloth and others running by, bent over and holding parcels close to their stomachs to keep them from getting wet. The mages chuckled scornfully at them before disappearing into the city.

“How about you, Miss Witch? Don’t you want to ride around and watch the pitiful anima from inside a comfy train car?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have the stomach for such spiteful pastimes.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. But if your tastes don’t agree with it, then I guess that’s that.”

I shook my head again. Letting out a long sigh, I stared up at the rain, that hated rain, and said, “My conscience doesn’t agree.”

Not with this country, nor with you.



CHAPTER 2

How to Use Weapons Peacefully

“What? Huh... You want me to make your spears and shields superstrong...?”

“That’s right! If you don’t, those bastards from the village to the east are gonna kill us all!”

All the men of the village were kneeling before me, looking up with desperation in their eyes.

Next to them were a bunch of dull-looking spears, really nothing more than knives stuck onto wooden sticks, and pot lids that seemed better suited to keeping food warm, haphazardly piled up like garbage.

Make these superstrong? Right...

“Um, that’s a bit of a tall order...”

“We’re begging you! We’ve gotten word that that awful bunch from the village to the east entreated a witch and got her to make their weapons superstrong! There’s no way we can fight them like this!”

I didn’t really understand the situation. Apparently, this village in the west didn’t get along very well with their neighbors to the east. Recently, things had gotten so bad that the people had begun asking themselves, “Well, why don’t we settle this with force?”

But as far as what they had on hand for weapons... There wasn’t much. So they had gotten it in their heads that asking a witch to enchant their weapons was the way to go.

It was just bad luck on my part that I encountered them when I did.

Which brought us to the present.

“Hmm... Well, it’s not impossible, you know? To make weapons stronger.”

“We don’t want them ‘stronger’! We want you to make them the strongest!” shouted the man who appeared to be their leader.

Agreeing with him, the several dozen men crowded around nodded and snorted violently. They reeked of sweat.

“It’s just as simple to make your weapons the strongest—but there’s one

problem.”

“What is it?”

“Can you pay for it? I don’t mind making weapons for you, but it’ll cost quite a lot of money.”

“I heard that the witch who went to the other village made their weapons for free! So we also—”

“Shall we pretend this conversation never happened?”

“.....”

“What’ll it be?”

“...E-exactly how much will it cost?”

“.....”

I silently put up my index finger.

“Wow! Only one copper! How reasonable!”

“I will enchant your weapons for one gold piece.”

“You’ll do all of them for one gold piece! Certainly a very reasonable price!”

“One gold piece per weapon.”

“Hey, that’s not reasonable at all...”

“I told you it would be expensive, didn’t I...?”

Looking over the pile of trash they wanted me to enchant, I expected I could make about eighty gold pieces.

...Well, would you look at that. The pile of garbage is suddenly glittering like gold. Oh-ho-ho.

Of course, if this was the best weaponry the villagers had been able to scrape together, they probably weren’t particularly wealthy. I could see despair spreading across the faces of the men kneeling around me.

“C-can’t you give us a discount, Madam Witch...?”

“No, I’m afraid I can’t make it any cheaper than that.”

“...Oh, I know! In that case, let us pay you later, please! We’ll get you to make our weapons superstrong, and then we’ll plunder money from the village to the east! How about that?!?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I require full payment for all weapon enchantments in advance.”

“...Why?”

“It affects my motivation.”

“But there’s no way we can pay you right now...” Hanging his head, the

man who seemed to be their leader said, “Could you accept something else in lieu of money?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“Really?! All right, you guys! Bring it here!”

“Okay!” The men who seemed to be his lackeys scattered and disappeared from view.

I waited.

And then they returned with the “something” in hand.

They ceremoniously presented me with a load of vegetables, so many that one person couldn’t possibly hold them all. There were so many that it was easy to imagine a person living off of them for an entire month.

“These vegetables were grown by all the residents of this village! Please accept them as payment!”

“...Um, I don’t know what I would even do with this many veggies.” There was no way I’d be able to finish them all before they started to rot.

“Please accept them!”

“.....” I let out a long sigh. “Let’s pretend this conversation never happened. If you can’t pay me with money and can only offer this, then I feel no obligation to enchant your weapons for you,” I said flatly.

“Just a moment, Madam Witch.” Cutting in from the side was the wife of the man who seemed to be the leader. Glaring coldly at the men, who were sunk in despair, the woman spoke. “We have prepared a special banquet for you. Won’t you kindly accept that as your payment this time?”

“Hmm.”

“When did she—? Ohhh, I knew I could count on my wife!” The apparent leader looked overjoyed.

“.....” After shooting another harsh glare at him, she smiled at me. “What do you say, Madam Witch?”

I replied, “Depends on how it is.”

Intending only to inspect the offerings, I made my way toward the village’s assembly hall, led by the village leader’s wife. The exterior of the building was old and worn down. Enough to make me apprehensive about going inside.

But the woman leading me was not about to let me run away. “Please go

in,” she said, half forcing me as she pulled me inside.

“.....”

Now, what do you suppose the interior looked like?

The answer was: an incredibly lavish banquet hall. Freshly harvested fruits and vegetables lined the tables. Fragrant scents filled the building. It seemed preparation wasn’t quite complete, as many wives could be seen scurrying around the hall.

To make the run-down building look just a little bit nicer, the interior walls had been covered with curtains. The curtains, which were all made of from various designs and materials, looked like they’d each come from a different household, and I was touched by all their efforts, as pitiful as they were.

But there was one problem.

None of the pots had lids, so if we didn’t hurry and scarf the dishes down, the food they had worked so hard to prepare would get cold. Actually, it was already getting cold by the time I arrived. *Seriously?*

The situation required haste.

“Let’s enchant these weapons of yours at once.”

I returned to the group and promptly set about my work.

Ignoring the men as they jumped up and down with joy, I pulled out my wand and sprinkled magic over the mountain of junky weapons.

The result was immediate. A gentle, sparkling light engulfed the weapons and changed their shapes. When the light had completely disappeared, they were made anew.

“Th...this is amazing, Madam Witch!”

The men were overcome with emotion upon seeing their transfigured weapons.

The “spears” that had been nothing more than knives stuck to wooden sticks were reborn into long spears with beautiful spikes in the shape of icicles on the ends. The simple pot lids had changed into brutal-looking shields that appeared like they would be enough to crush an enemy on their own.

Yes, the mountain of trash had become a mountain of treasure. It was only natural that they were moved.

“By the way, you can probably tell from holding them, but they’re much lighter and stronger than they appear. However, they do have one weakness

—”

“Yahoo! With these, we’re sure to win! Yeaahhh!”

Ah, they’re not listening at all.

“Um...”

“Men! We’re going to strike at those bastards in the east village right away! Come with me!”

They all took up arms.

“Um...”

“Everyone, grab a weapon! Make the most of Madam Witch’s generosity!”

They headed for the gate.

“.....”

“Miss Witch! Thank you so much! We’ll be back after our certain victory!”

After bowing to me, they sprinted off toward the village to the east.

“.....”

I had been left alone in that place.

This was an unexpected development.

“Hmm...”

I had hoped they would at least conduct themselves a little more carefully when handling the superstrong spears and shields.

Running off like that, they were sure to use them poorly. *Maybe I should go stop them.*

I hesitated.

“Madam Witch, we’ve finished preparing the banquet hall.”

“Ah, I’ll be right there.”

Oh well.

I suppose everything will go as expected if I just leave it alone for now.



“Madam Witch. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for your help. At last, our village will finally know peace.”

“Don’t mention it.” I shook my head as I continued piling food onto my plate. “It was nothing, really.”

All I had done was tweak the weapons a bit.

I didn't need any thanks.

"By the way, here is your real reward." The village leader's wife handed me a package.

"Thank you."

"There are ten gold pieces in there. Your combined fee from us and *them*."

I peeked into the package. There were ten glittering gold coins inside.

Oh-ho-ho!

I removed my pointy hat and bowed. "Thank you very much."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. Tranquility will finally return to our two villages."

"Indeed."

"Now then, please, eat up."

"That's right—we probably don't have much time."

That's why I really wanted to explain everything to them before they left.

Well, that's all right.

I took my knife and fork and dug into my food.

The men returned not long after that—it was just after I had left the assembly hall, riding on my broom with a full stomach.

The men came back, clearly in a different mood than when they had left the village.

There were twice as many men as before, but none were holding the spears and shields I had made for them. They looked up at me, swinging my legs atop my broom, and yelled their grievances.

"What is the meaning of this, Madam Witch?!"

"The spears and shields all broke the first time we used them!?"

"What a joke! You're a fraud!"

"Give us back our money!"

"Give us back our knives and pot lids!"

"And our sticks!"

"What was that? Explain yourself!"

My, my.

"As you requested, I enchanted your weapons to be superstrong. Were

you dissatisfied?"

"If we weren't, we wouldn't be making this much of a fuss! Just as we were about to fight, we saw that the other villagers were using the exact same weapons!" shouted the leader of the western village.

"You tricked us, didn't you, Witch?! The weapons looked good, but they were incredibly frail! The moment that spear and shield collided, they shattered into pieces!" The leader of the other village raised his voice.

My, that is unfortunate.

"Well, you know the strongest materials can be the most brittle, right? Isn't that how it goes with precious jewels?" I said. "Of course a superstrong spear is going to shatter if it collides with a superstrong shield. The same is true in the opposite scenario. They're both superstrong, after all."

I was teasing them, and the leader of this village said, "But, Miss Witch, you never told us that our weapons needed to be handled with care, did you?!"

"I didn't get the chance. You ran off without listening to me."

Originally, the plan had been to lead the two villages into a decisive battle after explaining that their weapons were all very brittle. But they had run off without a second thought, so I had been put in the awkward position of having to rush through my meal. *How about you take responsibility for that?*

"Which means, Miss Witch, that you were the witch who made superstrong weapons for the eastern village, right?"

"Hmm? I thought I told you that."

Of course, the day before, I had used the same trick to transform a similar pile of garbage into weapons for the opposing village in the east.

Well, it is what it is.

"At this point in time, I consider my business here concluded. I've received sufficient payment, after all. Now, if you don't mind, I'll be on my way."

I slowly proceeded forward on my broom.

Their angry words grew even more abusive, and some people even tried to pelt me with stones. None hit me, though.

"Okay, I'm off."

In truth, the job I had been hired to do wasn't simply the morally questionable task of enchanting weaponry. At the same time, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that that was just one step in accomplishing my true

objective.

My actual task had been to get those weapons away from the men of our two feuding villages.

So I had used a little magic to take away their weapons. And by making myself a mutual enemy to both villages, I seemed to have improved the relationship between them, killing two birds with one stone. And all it had cost them was all their knives and pot lids.

But if you thought of them as sacrifices toward ending the conflict peacefully, it was a cheap price to pay.

Complaints were still hurled at me from the gradually receding crowd.

The people who had hired me from the two villages were standing beside the banquet hall, waving at me, just barely visible behind the throng of angry men.



CHAPTER 3

A Runaway Princess, Pursued by Whom?

A forest of fallen autumn leaves. The leaves, dyed a vivid scarlet, danced down to the forest floor gently, painting the road between two countries a bright red.

A lone girl walked down the path that had been transformed into a red carpet.

She wore a black robe and a pointy black hat. It was cold out, so her slim legs were clad in black tights.

The girl with the obviously witchy appearance was indeed a witch—and a traveler.

“...*Sigh*. ”

She stopped and raised her head to bear witness to a clear-blue sky. Standing idly with eyes that hid melancholy thoughts, she was beautiful by anyone’s standards. If a person was to happen by, they would no doubt swoon, bewitched by her loveliness. Man or woman, it mattered not. All would inevitably fall captive to her charms. She was positively dangerous.

This young woman kept her deadly beauty all to herself.

All would wonder about her identity.

That’s right. She’s me.

“.....”

Um, I was obviously joking.



Ordinarily, when I moved from country to country, I flew on my broom, as one would expect of a witch, but this time was different.

I had decided that it would be a waste to zip by on my broom and miss the incredible scenery that accompanied this road.

The cold weather didn’t help, either.

“.....”

Plus, to get from the land I had just visited—Waterwheel City, if I

remember correctly—to the neighboring country, I just had to proceed down this road, and I would arrive before too long.

The outline of my next destination should come into view any minute now.

If memory serves, my next stop is—

“...Oh?”

My thoughts had been interrupted. Before I realized it, I had frozen in place.

I could see a figure coming toward me.

It was a man with a horse. He was proceeding calmly down the center of the road, horse in tow.

He noticed me staring and smiled. He had blond hair and blue eyes, a kind-looking young man dressed in clothes that seemed very expensive.

If he had just been an ordinary handsome man, I don’t think I would have stopped in my tracks just to stare at him. I would have simply taken a look and maybe greeted him as we crossed paths: *Oh, hello. Nice weather, isn’t it?* —*Well, okay, that’s not a particularly appealing greeting.*

But the man who stopped his horse in front of me was apparently one of *those* people.

What I mean by that is he was obviously—

“A prince?”

With his gentle smile still in place, he nodded. “Oh, do you know me?”

“It just so happens that I saw that crest on your chest in Waterwheel City.”

“I see—Hmm. As you have surmised, I am the prince of Waterwheel City. My name is Robert. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Madam Witch.”

He let go of the horse’s reins and extended a hand.

He wants a handshake. Okay.

I gripped his hand, gave a quick “How do you do?” and let go.

“So if we’re crossing paths here, you must be on your way from Waterwheel City to Windmill City; is that right?”

“I am, indeed.” I nodded.

This trade road was the only one connecting the two cities. Yesterday I had stayed in Waterwheel City. I was now on my way to Windmill City.

“And what did you think of my country?”

“It was full of waterwheels.”

“.....”

“.....”

“...Huh? Was...that your only takeaway?”

“Well, yeah.”

Nothing in particular had happened that was worth talking about.

“I s-see... That’s all, huh...?”

Half ignoring the disheartened prince, I replied, “By the way, Prince Robert, are you on your way back from Windmill City?”

“Hmm? Ah...well, not quite.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m searching for my fiancée.”

Mm-hmm.

“Well, I’m very flattered, but I’m afraid it’s impossible for me to marry, being a traveler and all.”

“What are you talking about...?” Prince Robert was obviously exasperated. “My fiancée has disappeared!”

“Disappeared...?”

You sure she didn’t run away?

Prince Robert nodded. “The truth is, we were planning to get married soon. But the girl I’m marrying is the princess of Windmill City. In order to hold the ceremony in Waterwheel City, I’ve got to take her there.”

“Mm-hmm.”

So you’re marrying the princess of the neighboring country? Impressive.

“However, there seems to be a faction over there who doesn’t think highly of her marrying me, and this morning, moments before I arrived at Windmill City, they had already forced her to marry some other guy.”

“.....”

His handsome face was twisted in grief. “She was crying. I suppose she was distressed over a marriage with a partner she did not love. And so I tossed aside my role as prince and stole her away.”

“Huh...?”

Oh, geez. What a romantic turn of events.

“When we left Windmill City, I put her in a sleigh that was hitched to my horse and ran off for Waterwheel City.”

“A sleigh?”

Like she’s a piece of luggage?

“But halfway down the road, when I turned to look back, she wasn’t there

anymore. Even though I was certain she had been sitting in the sleigh eating a croissant when we left Windmill City together.”

“You don’t think she fell out, do you?”

“Ah... That’s why I’m searching for her.”

“I see.”

Was she abducted? Was there an accident? Or did she run away? Which was it? As far as I could tell from listening to the prince, it seemed rather likely that there had been some accident, and he had carelessly left her—sleigh and all—somewhere on the road.

It was hard to say at the present stage.

“The princess of Windmill City—she’s a beautiful girl with wavy golden hair and flaming red eyes... Is there any chance you’ve seen her?”

“I’ve been walking the whole way down this road from Waterwheel City, and you’re the first person I’ve passed, Prince.”

I told him the truth.

He furrowed his brow just a little, looking dejected. “...Is that so?”

However, I was getting the feeling that the situation was much more complicated. I was almost certain there was something deeper behind the marriage of this prince to the princess of the neighboring territory.

A political marriage to connect the two families, for example.

“Where did you first meet the princess?”

I asked him a roundabout question.

“Hmm? I met her at the commemorative party celebrating ten years since the end of the war. It was love at first sight.”

“Mm-hmm, the end of the war, you say? So Waterwheel City and Windmill City were once at war? I see.”

So it’s a political marriage, then?

“I mean, it happened more than ten years ago. Neither city was able to stomach having their clone next door, so they went to war.”

“Even though they’re so similar?”

“Because they’re so similar. Wouldn’t you feel uneasy if there was someone just like you always by your side? From those trivial origins grew a terrible feud and, finally, a war... The road we’re on now was the site of some of the fiercest battles. At one point, it was soaked with the blood of soldiers, and there were some who called it ‘the trail of gore.’”

“...That’s a very tasteless moniker.”

I glanced down at the road that was dyed bright red. But it wasn't red with blood, just fallen autumn leaves.

It was beautiful.

"It took quite a long time for both cities to approve it, but we finally achieved peace. If she and I are married, our two countries will have something deeper than a treaty."

"Does the princess consent to this union?"

"Of course. If she didn't, we wouldn't be engaged!"

"...Hmm."

Is that so?

I had been certain that Prince Robert had forced the marriage and that the unwilling princess had run away—but I guess I was wrong.

I nodded. "If I run into her somewhere, I'll tell her about you."

He looked up. "Ah, please do. And when you do, please tell her to come to Waterwheel City. We've got to hold the wedding ceremony—" Then Prince Robert changed course. "Oh yes, by the way, if you find her, I will reward you with ten gold pieces."

Now we're talking.

"I see. I'll give it my best effort."

"Please do."

"You can count on me."

I wasn't blinded by greed. I simply wanted to help the prince. Honest.

.....

But the rich certainly aren't afraid to play dirty, huh? I guess their financial assets are their strongest weapon, so they can have anything they want as long as they pay the right price.

Such were my thoughts as I watched Prince Robert recede into the distance.



After parting ways with Prince Robert, I walked on for a little while before catching sight of another person.

Feeling it would be impolite to stare, I kept my eyes to the side and glanced repeatedly at the person coming toward me.

“.....”

It was a beautiful young woman.

But I knew right away it wasn’t the princess of Windmill City—she was far too tall.

Her hair hung straight down, a fiery shade of red. She was not wearing a dress fit for a princess, but rather a suit of sinister red armor. And most unsettling of all, she had a sword strapped to her hip.

A red-haired woman in red armor walking down a red road.

That’s the kind of woman that crossed paths with me.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

“You...,” she started.

Her sharp voice pierced me from behind.

I stopped and turned around. “...What?”

“You were just staring at me, weren’t you? What do you want?”

“Oh, it’s nothing—you just caught my eye, is all.”

“I caught your eye, huh? What about me?”

I lowered my gaze a bit and looked at her armor. “Are you seriously saying that if someone in that dangerous-looking getup was just ambling down the road, you wouldn’t look twice?”

“I’d mind my own business.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“.....”

“...Did something happen?” I asked transparently.

I already knew what her answer would be.

She had come from the direction of Windmill City. From the fact that she was clad in armor, it was hard to imagine that she might be any sort of wandering traveler.

Also, her armor led me to believe she was a person in charge of protecting something.

To put it simply—

“The truth is: The princess of my homeland has gone missing.”

That’s what I thought.

“Gone missing? My, how awful.”

“Do you know anything? She’s a beautiful girl with wavy golden hair.”

“Nope, nothing.”

I haven’t seen a girl like that... But she seems to be causing quite a stir.

At this rate, I wouldn't have a second to sit down and rest once I arrived in Windmill City. There was a big possibility that the whole country would be in the midst of a panic.

The woman scowled. "...Is that so? Well, if you happen to find the princess, please bring her to Windmill City."

Oh, that's the opposite side of where Prince Robert wants her to go.

.....

I nodded enthusiastically. "All right. I'll try my best—By the way, what is your name?"

"Rosamia."

"Well, Miss Rosamia, I'll be sure to bring her back to you. If I find her."

"Please do."

"Okay."

Maybe.



My stomach was growling.

It must almost be lunchtime.

“.....”

For some reason, whenever I was hungry, I became extremely sensitive to smells. Even in the chilly, crisp winter air, I could always pick out the smell of food.

Like, *Ah, something smells delicious*—or something like that.

“.....”

When the aroma of food tickled my nose, I halted in my tracks.

That scent. That delicious aroma.

What could it be—? Ah, it's bread. The smell of bread. The unique, slightly sweet, mellow scent wafted through the air.

"There's no one in front of me or behind me...which means..."

Following the scent, I veered off the road, stepping into a thicket. There was no doubt bread in this direction.

The grass rustled and swayed as I advanced, and the scent grew even stronger.

And then...

“Mnf...!”

In the middle of the thicket. At the base of a tree. Sitting there with a croissant in her mouth, looking up at me in surprise, was a girl.

A basket containing a heap of croissants balanced atop her knees. She was dressed in an expensive-looking, pure-white wedding dress and had wavy golden hair. Her bright-red lips had stopped moving when she noticed me.

...Could it be?

Drawn in by the delicious smell, I had unexpectedly encountered another person.

“Princess, I presume? Of Windmill City?”

“.....!”

Her shoulders jolted up in surprise, and the girl chomped down the remainder of the croissant that she held.

So that's more important than responding to me. I see.

The girl chewed for a moment, then finally she swallowed and glared at me. “Who are you? You should introduce yourself before asking someone else for their name. How rude.”

I don't remember asking your name, though. I was just confirming.

“...The Ashen Witch, Elaina. I'm a traveler.”

“That's better. Elaina... That's a nice name. My name is Chocolat. It's as you say. I am the princess of Windmill City.”

“What's a princess doing in a place like this?”

“Isn't it obvious? I'm having lunch.”

“Well, could I have one of those croissants?”

“Oh, go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

Hidden away in the shade of the trees, I munched on croissants with Princess Chocolat as I tried to piece together her story.

For the time being, I kept it a secret that I had encountered her fiancé, Prince Robert. I was still convinced that theirs was a political marriage, after all. I'm not saying I doubted him, but I decided this was the best course of action if I wanted to find out what was really going on between them.

The first step is to ask an easy question.

“Do you plan to return to your country?”

“I’m being pursued by a scary person. Even if I wanted to go back, I can’t.”

“...A scary person?”

“Yes. A scary person who will destroy my happiness.”

Hmm. That lines up with Prince Robert’s story—which means...

“Would that be the person who was trying to force you into a marriage?”

“Yes, that’s the person... You know about my situation?”

“Yes, sort of—I’ve heard bits and pieces.”

“...From whom?”

I could tell that Princess Chocolat had her guard up. It made sense: She had wanted to get married to the prince from the neighboring country, but there was someone from her own city trying to stop her. To borrow her words, there was a scary person who would destroy her happiness—and as long as that person was around, she had to be careful.

If they were from the same city, that meant that there was a possibility that her enemy was not operating alone.

Well, that complicates things. Let’s revise our earlier assumptions.

“Don’t worry. I heard it from your sweetheart.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.”

As she tried to calm herself down, the princess took another huge bite of her croissant. I followed suit, shoving a mouthful of bread into my mouth.

All right, let’s continue with this line of questioning.

“So don’t you want to go be with your lover?”

“But the scary person will probably hanging around nearby, right? I’m just going to wait here.”

“You’re just going to wait here and eat croissants?”

“Yes.”

“But the smell will give you away.”

“I doubt there’s another creature in the entire world with your inane ability to sniff out croissants. You’re practically a croissant fiend.”

“That’s not true!”

How rude.

“Oh *really*? Here, have a whiff.” Princess Chocolat waved her croissant under my nose.

I devoured it immediately.

“Delicious.”

“...Why did you eat mine?”

“The grass is always greener on the other side.”

“We’re literally sitting on the same grass.”

“All the more reason for me to eat it.”

We were fighting like two very similar neighboring territories.

I wolfed down the remainder of my own croissant and stood up. “Okay, enough messing around. Let’s get going, shall we?”

Princess Chocolat looked up at me. “...Go where?” Her eyes were filled with apprehension. “Didn’t you hear a word I said? I intend to wait right here for my sweetheart. I don’t want to run into that scary person.”

“But if you just stay here, sooner or later this walking nightmare will probably find you.”

“.....”

She was silent, and I spoke again. “I’ve been appointed by your sweetheart to find you and bring you back, Princess.” I held out a hand. “As thanks for the croissants, allow me to escort you.”



Prince Robert and Rosamia.

What they had in common was the girl walking beside me now—they were both searching for Princess Chocolat.

If I had to guess, I’d say one of those two probably has something to do with the scary person Princess Chocolat keeps mentioning. After all, they each wanted to whisk her away to a different country.

Which means that if I choose the wrong one, I might be handing Princess Chocolat over to a bad crowd. Which one should I believe? Well, I’m sure if I stick with the princess, the answer will become obvious eventually.

“...Huh? We’re headed for Waterwheel City?”

“Yes. Your sweetheart is waiting there for you.”

After a long brainstorming session, I decided we were to head toward where Prince Robert was waiting. The prince had been the more believable of the two. There was no telling what Rosamia had been told by whoever had ordered her to search for the princess. It was possible that she was working for the scary person who was trying to force Princess Chocolat into a

marriage against her will.

If I was going to choose one, I thought it was better to believe Prince Robert. Even if he was the prince of the neighboring country, a country that had gone to war with the princess's own... I mean, first of all, the war had been over for more than ten years, and now the two countries were even trade partners, so that was a point I had to consider.

I turned to Princess Chocolat. "Well, we should arrive before sunset. Until then, walk next to me like we're going for a stroll."

"Okay..." Princess Chocolat wore a downcast expression. "But I wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"Why is my darling waiting in Waterwheel City?"

Don't ask me...

"Don't you think it's because the nightmare person who's out to get you might be lying in wait in Windmill City?"

Plus, he's the prince of Waterwheel City, so I don't find it all that unusual that he would wait in his own city.

Princess Chocolat hung her head. "And we were finally going to have our long-awaited wedding... It took so much time before we were able to get it officiated," she grumbled.

"Don't worry about that. It sounds like you're going to get what you originally planned on, in Waterwheel City."

"...What do you mean?"

"Your wedding, of course," I said to Princess Chocolat, who had her head tilted in confusion. "The original plan was to hold the wedding in Waterwheel City, right?"

I had said this much, when Princess Chocolat stopped on the spot.

"What are you talking about?"

She looked at me with suspicion. It was a strange sensation—a feeling that we were both talking about something very important, but we were on completely different pages.

Maybe we'd better start at the beginning.

"Your sweetheart is Prince Robert, right?"

"No." Princess Chocolat shook her head. Then she said bluntly, "He's the one I fear who's out to get me!"



Before I could even respond to this dramatic new development, it happened.

No, rather than saying “it happened,” I should say “it flew at me.”

“—Ngaaaaahhh!”

From the direction of Waterwheel City, where we were headed, a man came flying in.

He had blond hair and blue eyes. Screaming in a hoarse voice as he sailed past us, the man rolled along the road we had been walking down, scattering red leaves as he eventually came to a stop.

“I wonder if he’s all right?”

He looked pretty beat up.

“...That man is the scary person who will destroy my happiness,” Princess Chocolat said, gripping the hem of my robe.

He looks like he’s already been destroyed himself.

“But who on earth would...?”

There’s no way he could have caught sight of Princess Chocolat and come flying over from Waterwheel City. Or rather, if he had come flying, someone must have sent him flying.

Maybe he was kicked by his horse?

I looked in the direction he had come from—toward Waterwheel City.

“...Erm.”

And I took a step back.

“Rosamia...!”

Princess Chocolat murmured next to me.

Walking slowly toward us from the direction of Waterwheel City was the knight from Windmill City, Rosamia. She seemed to be in a very, very bad mood, radiating bloodlust. She had an aura about her like she would snap your neck even if you accidentally bumped into her. She was carrying an enormous log, and that only made her even scarier. She looked like she was ready to smash some heads.

“Rosamia! Rosamia, you came! Oh, thank goodness—”

“Huh? Ah, wait, Princess Chocolat!”

Suddenly, I had absolutely no idea what was happening.

The princess ran straight toward Rosamia, shrugging off my attempt to restrain her.

Just like a maiden reuniting with her sweetheart.

.....

.....*Hmm?*

I had a hunch—but no, no, it couldn't be.

“Princess!”

The scene kept playing out, completely leaving me behind. Rosamia spread out both arms to receive Princess Chocolat, who was running toward her.

And the log she had been holding?

She threw it away. Decisively.

“Princess!”

“Rosamia!”

The two embraced passionately.

“Urgh...”

I thought I heard the groaning of a man who had been beaten half to death coming from behind me, but I was scared, so I didn't turn around.

“Oh, Princess...! Thank goodness, thank goodness...”

“Rosamia...! I was so scared...”

.....

This was too much to process.

I just wanted to stop thinking altogether.



Just to be sure, I asked to hear about the situation from Princess Chocolat and Rosamia. If I were to summarize their meandering story, it would go something like this.

First, a bit of background.

The princess of Windmill City, Chocolat, and the knight by her side, Rosamia, were in love with each other. It was a mutual romantic love between two women, but love is love.

Love takes all forms, after all, so let's move on with the story.

Anyway, the two lovebirds were so passionately devoted to each other that no one could possibly come between them.

However, there was some resistance to the idea of the princess marrying a simple knight, and when the king of Windmill City, Princess Chocolat's father, found out it would be a marriage between two women, he was extremely unhappy because his daughter could not bear any children from this union.

And so the king decided to force her to marry someone else. Her partner was to be the prince of the neighboring Waterwheel City, Robert.

When the two lovebirds found out about the marriage between Robert and Princess Chocolat, planned in secret by the king, they were fiercely opposed.

“But, Father, I have no interest in men.”

“Your Majesty, I have decided to make my life with the princess.”

They presented their case before the king.

“Rosamia...”

“Princess...”

They were bashful when they told me all this.

However, the king had completely ignored them. Instead, he set a specific date and time for the wedding.

“In several days, Prince Robert will come for you. Go and get married in Waterwheel City,” the king had apparently told her.

I suspected that the plan for her marriage to Prince Robert had already been in the works for some time. Just as I had suspected, it was a political marriage.

That aside, the two were flustered by the upcoming wedding.

And then they had reached a conclusion.

“That’s it! If we get married before the wedding with Prince Robert, then the problem will be solved!”

“That’s my princess!”

And so Princess Chocolat and Rosamia had planned a secret wedding ceremony in a small church. Preparations for their secret ceremony moved forward, and Princess Chocolat was in tears over being able to finally marry the one she loved.

However, he had appeared. The scary person who was going to destroy her happiness—Prince Robert—burst through the church door and kidnapped Princess Chocolat. Then he put her in a sleigh (with a basket of croissants), hitched the sled to his own horse, and galloped off toward Waterwheel City.

Princess Chocolat dealt with it all rather matter-of-factly.

She very simply untied the rope connecting the sleigh to the horse and escaped.

And then, calmly eating croissants in the middle of the forest, she waited for her beloved to come rescue her.

Happily ever after.

.....

Well, not quite...



“Rosamia!”

“Princess!”

“Rosamia...”

“Princess...”

“Rosamia...?”

“Princess...?”

“Rosamia!”

“Princess!”

I’m sure you can imagine how cringey it would be to have to listen to this kind of exchange for minute after agonizing minute.

They’re just calling out each other’s names. Then why do I feel so much secondhand embarrassment? The scene was so awkward, I just wanted to cover my eyes and ears and hunker down on the spot.

“Kiss me...”

“I can’t, Princess. People are watching.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“But...”

“Do you not like me anymore?”

“No, don’t say that...”

“Then, please...”

“Princess...”

“Rosamia...”

.....

It was getting too hard to watch.

So I spun around and faced the other way. But I did that to escape the awkward atmosphere between them—and definitely not so I could look at *him*.

“...Oh, hello again.”

He was standing up when I turned around. He had taken a direct hit from the log Rosamia had tossed aside but was grinning directly behind me. His clothing was torn, and blood was trickling down his forehead, but I knew who he was, without a shadow of a doubt.

“You’re the prince, right?” I had to ask, just to be sure. “You’re alive?”

“Indeed, I am the prince of Waterwheel City. And it should go without saying that I am very much alive.”

“I thought you’d be a lot more beaten up after taking a direct hit from that log, but you’re doing better than I expected.”

“An attack like that is nothing.”

“Who *are* you...?”

“I am the prince of Waterwheel City.”

No, that’s not what I meant... Oh, whatever.

If I poked fun at every mistake, there would be no end to it.

“By the way, how do you feel watching that scene?”

I pointed out the girls—locked in a passionate embrace—to Prince Robert, who had been at the center of a grand and unfortunate misunderstanding.

“Ah...it makes my heart race...”

“Are you sure that’s not because of the blood gushing out of your head?”

“I feel like I might be awakening to something new...”

“Ah-ha, looks like your head injury is more serious than I thought.”

“Okay, enough joking around.”

“Was that a joke?”

“...I’m at least half-serious.”

“Not as serious as that head injury.”

“Can this even be treated, I wonder?”

“I think we’re a little too late for that.”

“.....”

“What’s up?”

“Ah well—I can’t help but come to terms with a few things, seeing all this.”

“What do you mean?”

Prince Robert was smiling, as always.

“Earlier, as that knight was beating me with a log, I learned a few things. Among them, I learned that I had been deceived by the king of Windmill City, and that true love was not meant to be between myself and the princess, but between a knight and the princess.”

“Huh.”

“I couldn’t believe it, but looking at the two of them, I get it now. It seems I was a simple buffoon.”

“.....”

Well, I figured as much.

I couldn’t say that, so I remained silent.

“Love between two women... How nice.”

As the prince stood next to me, waxing poetic, I did not say anything.

I stood there for a while, a spectator to the incomprehensible exchange between Rosamia and Princess Chocolat, until finally, Prince Robert started a serious conversation.

“I’ve decided to give up on marrying her.”

“Is that so? Well, then...”

“I mean, I suppose I have no choice but to give it up, really.”

“.....”

She doesn’t seem to have eyes for anyone other than Rosamia.

“Besides, now there’s something I need to return to my country and do.”

“Oh?”

“I’m thinking about legalizing same-sex marriage.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“That’s not a very enthusiastic response.”

“I held back a little.”

“...Well, even now I imagine that a few people will object. However, I think that there are other people who have found love across genders. If we, as a country, can recognize that, I’m certain the world will become more peaceful than before.”

I see.

“...And what do you really think?”

“Love between two women... How nice.”

“.....”

When I fell silent, the sounds of the two girls fussing over each other

filled the air. It was as if they had been whisked away to their own private paradise.

Even if I were to stop traveling in the future and settle down in a country somewhere, I don't think I would choose to live at either end of this road.

"Oh, that reminds me," I said, calling out to halt Prince Robert, who had begun walking away.

He turned around, smiling brightly (but still drenched in blood). "What is it?"

"....." I faced him and stuck out my hand.

"Huh? What is it?" It seemed my intention was not clear, for he tilted his head in confusion.

"Ten gold pieces, please," I said with a smile. "As promised, *I found the princess.*"



Sometime later, in a different country, I heard a rumor about Windmill City and Waterwheel City. Both countries now fully recognized same-sex relationships, and each had made their own degree of progress.

At the very least, it seemed that diplomatic relations between the two cities were now flourishing.

And thanks to the princess of Windmill City marrying another woman, other same-sex couples who had been keeping their love a secret began to go public.

In Waterwheel City, the prince made a big announcement in order to encourage such marriages. "Subsidies will be paid out to anyone who enters into a union between two women!" As a result, couples lined up to get false marriages, and it caused quite a bit of trouble, apparently.

In this way, the countries that had previously had nothing to offer but waterwheels and windmills acquired some new quirks.

I heard that many more people have been visiting.

However, the population seems to be decreasing.

I wonder why that could be?



CHAPTER 4

An Eyewitness Report

Um...

When was it that I met that man? Where was it?

It's all a blur.

I'm not so sure.

I met him by coincidence, in an extremely unremarkable place. Well, since we didn't actually speak to each other, I guess it would be better to say we crossed paths.

The place, if I remember correctly, was a road that connected one country to the next. I don't remember any details of the place. Just that we were on a road. That's all.

Oh, but I must have passed him on the road that leads out of the gate, since that is how I entered this country in the first place.

Now that I think about it, I'm certain I traveled here along that road.

The time was... That's right, it was around twilight. No, maybe it was early morning... Yeah, probably, it was early morning.

I arrived here in the afternoon. And since that man crossed paths with me on my way here, it must have been morning.

How's that? My deductive reasoning isn't half-bad, huh? Oh, you don't care? Ah, is that so...?

...?

Yes. I'm sure of it. I'm sure I crossed paths with that man on the road. What's so confusing about that? *You're* the one who asked *me*, after all.

And here I was planning to do some sightseeing, enjoy a leisurely visit...

As for the man you're describing...I'm certain he was headed for the country over there—a normal country, nothing out of the ordinary.

I mean, sometimes normal is nice. I enjoy taking it easy every once in a while. And that place was about as normal as it gets.

But this country is different, isn't it?

Huh? What's with that face? Mm-hmm. You've got to be kidding.

You don't expect me to believe that such an outrageously dressed fellow could come from a perfectly ordinary country, do you? This place must be holding some crazy secret, right? It's awfully exciting.

Huh?

...Oh, now that you mention it, you're all dressed rather normally. Why is that?

That man was abnormal? Oh, is that so...?

And then.

The soldier in front of me, wearing a particularly unpleasant expression, continued:

"I'm going to confirm one more time... You're certain you encountered a man with these features? On the road outside the city?"

The soldier was holding a picture. It depicted, in great detail, the bizarre clothing of the man I had passed on the road. It was such an outlandish getup that I had trouble holding back laughter.

What is that? Seriously?

Just what kind of person would walk around wearing that ridiculous costume? If it were me, I would die of shame. If I wore something like that in public, the disgrace would haunt me forever.

However, in the drawing, one crucial detail—the man's face—was an empty black void. It became no more transparent as I stared at it, and in the end, I couldn't recall the man's facial features.

Looking back and forth between the piece of paper and me, the soldier asked, "...Can you remember his face?"

"No, not at all," I answered. "By the way, what on earth did this man do?"

"Theft. He swiped all the gold he could get his hands on from the vault of the country's wealthiest citizens."

"A person dressed like...*this* managed to do *that*?"

"Yes."

"A man cannot be judged by his appearance, I guess..."

"His appearance is a costume."

True.

Then, with a sigh, the soldier folded the piece of paper in quarters and put it away in his pocket. It seemed that the questioning was over. "Thank you,

miss,” he said, giving me a salute.

I imitated his pose and said, “No problem. I just did what anyone would do—By the way, did I help as a reference?”

The soldier went back to his pained expression. “Well...I wonder. Knowing which way the criminal went could definitely be called progress, but...” His words were evasive.

“What’s wrong?”

He stopped saluting. “We’ve been collecting eyewitness reports, and unfortunately, not one person has been able to recall the criminal’s face.”

“.....”

Ah, I see.

“That means, in other words—”

“Yes. The only thing anyone can remember is the man’s bizarre outfit.”



CHAPTER 5

Pioneers of Style

As the girl on the broom soared through the desolate autumn air, the plants with the fluffy white tops, which were spread out over the land, swung their heads in disapproval.

“...Oops.”

That was close.

To damage the cotton fields, the girl on the broom slightly dropped her speed.

Her most striking feature was her ashen hair. This girl was a witch and a traveler. She wore a black robe and a pointy hat, as well as a star-shaped brooch on her breast that served as proof of her witchhood. As always, she was flying her broom without a care in the world.

Now then, this witch, who readily enjoyed all the luxuries only true freedom could offer, who on earth could she be?

That's right. She's me.

“.....”

I was aiming for the small country I could see beyond the cotton fields. I filled my lungs with the fleeting summer air like the cotton buds swaying beneath me, and the wind was soft, mild.



Good heavens, what a peculiar country!

That was my elegant reaction after I had done my rounds. Once I noticed a particular detail, it was all I could focus on.

“.....”

In both directions, there were princes and princesses as far as the eye could see.

Every single person I saw appeared to be extremely wealthy.

As they milled about town, the princesses all wore beautiful dresses, and the princes were all clad in extravagant livery.

What's going on here?

“Um, excuse me?”

I flagged down a nearby prince and tried to get some answers.

“I’m just a traveler passing through, but could you spare a moment?”

“Huh? Oh, me?” The very timid young man looked bewildered, but he stopped.

“Yes, you. Um, is there a costume party going on, or something?”

“Not that I know of...?”

“Then tell me: Why is every person I see dressed like royalty?”

“Like royalty...? I think this is pretty normal.”

“I see.”

In other words, showy clothes must be the norm in this country. I should probably get a second opinion just to be on the safe side. I really need to think of a way to cut this conversation short and then move on.

“I understand completely now, thank you very much. Well, I’m off.”

“Oh, sure. You’re welcome.”

I quickly parted ways with the prince who didn’t really seem to grasp the situation.

I went as far as the center of the city, but as expected, there was no end to the royal flock.

Princesses in the middle of shopping, princes and princesses having chats in cafés. *Ahhh, it’s enough to make my head spin!*

There was no escape in sight. Even if I looked straight up, there were advertisements depicting people in extravagant clothing on signs hanging from a building that looked like a cathedral.

The country itself was refined, but all the people living there made it seem particularly dazzling. I imagined how much easier everything would be to look at if I owned glasses with dark lenses. *When will modern innovation catch up?*

Anyway...

After looking at one ad in particular, I finally drew a conclusion about the state of this country.

“Um, excuse me.”

“Yes?”

This time, I called out to a nearby princess. “I’m a traveler, and I want to know—by any chance, is that style of clothing popular in this country?”

The girl made a puzzled expression. “Huh? Oh yes. It’s the current trend.”
“I see.”

So that’s why everyone’s dressed the same.

The princess nodded. She had clearly come to some conclusion as well.

“I thought you looked awfully strange, but you’re not from around here, are you...? Ha-ha.”

I wonder what she’s thinking. Her smile looks a little too condescending.

“Is there something strange about the way I look?”

“It’s a bit different, yes.”

“Could it be that this is your first time seeing a robe?”

She shook her head. “No. But the mages in this country don’t wear robes, so that’s why I said you look a bit different.”

“They don’t wear robes?”

“Right. They wear what’s in fashion.”

“.....”

That doesn’t sound very mage-y...

“Well, they do wear the pointy hats. So people can still tell they’re mages.”

A pointy hat and trendy clothes would definitely clash...

However, now that she mentioned it, I was sure there had been some people wearing pointy hats mixed in with the people wearing aristocratic-looking clothing.

.....

There had been some very, very unfashionable mages.

Those really don’t go well together at all...

“So they join in on the newest fad, huh...?”

“Yes. I mean, they wouldn’t want to wear outdated clothes. Plus, don’t you think it looks great?”

“It’s dazzling.”

“Right?”

I wasn’t actually praising the fashion, but the girl seemed satisfied.

“Anyway, can I ask you one more thing?” I asked. The girl, who was in a good mood for a reason I’ll never know, nodded enthusiastically. Just what I wanted. “Who decided that luxurious suits, dresses, and the like would be the

trend in this country?”

“Hmm? I’m not really sure. They were just popular before we knew it.”

“Mm-hmm.”

In other words, you just got swept up in the trends.

I see, I see.

“Thank you very much. I’ve learned a lot.”

“Sure—Oh, that’s right. If you’re interested in the latest trends, you’d do well to go to that store over there, Miss Traveler.” The girl dressed like a princess kindly pointed out the next place I should visit.

It was across the large avenue from where we were standing.

There was a clothing shop so large, it could be mistaken for a cathedral, displaying many advertisements.



“Welcome... Oh my. Might you be a traveler?”

When I entered the shop, a woman in a plain suit came over to greet me.

She must work here.

I decided to turn a blind eye to her immediate assumption that I was from out of town.

“Yes, hello. I heard through the grapevine that this is the hottest store in the country.”

“My, my! Well, that certainly is true. Did you come searching for the latest formal wear from other countries? If so, we have some recommendations—”

When I confirmed I was an outsider, the clerk’s eyes lit up, and she went on a full-blown sales pitch.

Dazzling, dazzling. By the way, do you have any glasses with dark lenses in this store? You don’t? I see.

“Oh, it’s very rare to have a traveler.”

As I was allowing myself to be shown to the center of the shop, an old woman, bent at the waist, appeared from the back of the store, propping herself up on a cane.

“Oh, the manager,” the clerk said.

The old woman who had been called manager shuffled over to us. “Are

you looking for some local fashions?”

I shook my head. “No, not at all. I’m just curious.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m sure you’ll find something interesting... The trends here are always on the cutting edge, you see.”

“Uh-huh.”

“By the way, what do you think, from a traveler’s perspective? About our clothing, that is. We’ve recently begun exporting it to other countries.”

“Well, honestly, I think it’s incredible. I’m sure a lot of labor goes into making mass quantities and a whole range of styles.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

One could see, just by looking around at the state of the country, that they had enough resources that even common folk could easily obtain beautiful aristocratic-style clothing, and it was clear that there was no shortage of talented tailors as well. And of course, it took peace and prosperity to develop an extensive history of fashion. This country had to look like a gold mine to foreign merchants.

“By the way, where do you come from, Miss Traveler?”

“From very far away.”

“And how long have you been traveling?”

“Quite a long time.”

“Uh-huh... Well then,” the old woman continued, still looking warmly into my eyes. “In that case, you must have seen all sorts of clothing in many different places.”

I felt the faintest of premonitions coming on.

“...Well, I’m not really traveling for the sake of studying fashion, so I’m not that well versed.”

The old woman stepped back, almost imperceptibly.

When she did, the clerk who had been standing next to her wheeled around behind me and grabbed me by both shoulders. “But, Miss Traveler, even if you’re not well versed, you have seen clothing around the world with your own eyes, right? I’m so jealous.”

“.....”

This does not bode well.

My path of retreat had been completely cut off, and the elderly woman in front of me was steadily closing the distance between us.

Okay, I'm officially scared.

“I can’t wait to hear all about the countries you have visited, Miss Traveler. *Ee-hee-hee!*” The old woman’s face wrinkled up in laughter.

And then I was taken to a room deeper in the shop, where a mess of sample clothing had littered the space.

“...Mm-hmm. So the clothing designs from that region looked something like this?”

“Um...yes. Well, more or less.”

“I see. And how was the clothing in the eastern countries? I have some clothing that a traveler from that region left here years ago... Ah, here it is. Is it like this?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’ve heard it’s called a kimono.”

“They use really nice textiles for these clothes... This glossy texture would certainly be difficult to reproduce with cotton. Do you know how it’s made?”

“I wonder...”

“Hmm—by the way, how about the neighboring country?”

“I’ve been there.”

“What kind of clothes were in style? Please tell me everything you can remember, okay?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. I mean, to start with, they seemed to be wearing totally ordinary clothing. Whether that was in vogue—”

“*Ee-hee-hee*, Miss Traveler, you say the strangest things. There is no such thing as ‘totally ordinary clothing.’ In the world of fashion, the ‘ordinary’ doesn’t exist. All we have is the uniqueness of each individual.”

“In that case, isn’t your country kind of...different?”

“Hmm?”

“I mean, by that theory, the people of this country have no individuality
__”

“Hmm?”

“Sorry, I didn’t say anything.”

“In that case, I have some samples here... Which one do you like?”

“The one in the middle.”

“That’s what I’m wearing now.”

“Oh, you were talking about the clothes you’re holding in your hands, huh? I like the one on the right.”

“I see, I see. All right, then. Next—”

In this manner, I was made to talk endlessly on and on.

After the woman wrung details that I don’t usually pay much attention to out from the corners of my memory, I was very, very tired. It felt like my head would explode.

After that, I made it through the rest of my day without anything noteworthy happening.

Maybe it’s time to head to the next country—, I thought as I watched the sun rise on my fifth day in this country.

I brushed my teeth, ate breakfast, and made preparations for my departure.

I went down to the reception desk at the inn and returned the key to my room. Just before I left, the old woman manning the desk said something strange to me. “Oh, miss, you look so fashionable. I wouldn’t expect less for a traveler.”

Even though, just yesterday, I had been scorned by people walking down the street for my strange appearance.



Any questions I had when I left the inn were soon answered.

I went back down the road I had come in on yesterday, and when I returned to the large avenue where that one clothing shop stood, mixed in with the usual aristocrats was...me.

And when I say me, I mean *people dressed exactly like me*.

I looked up and saw that the signs and advertisements had changed, and they now depicted a girl who looked like me, wearing the same robe, with the words HERE IS THE NEXT BIG TREND!

.....

“So the traveler from before was actually ahead of the curve... *Tch.*” I heard a woman who seemed ticked off for some reason.

“How cute,” said a man who was staring at the new advertisement.

“Now that you mention it, I feel like those clothes are much more

practical...!" There were people running off toward the store.

"Whoo-hoo! I got the latest style!" Someone came out of the store in high spirits, wearing a robe.

There were all sorts of others.

I felt a sense of relief at the decrease in blindingly ornate outfits, but seeing everyone dressed like me was a little... Well, it made me want to cover my eyes.

Anyway, what exactly is going on here?

I couldn't wrap my mind around it.

"Ee-hee-hee!" Before I realized it, the old woman from before was standing beside me. She gazed with gentle eyes at the store that was booming with business.

"Oh, hello there. Shouldn't you be in the shop?"

"It's fine, it's fine. I've been working myself to the bone for several days, so I wanted to take a break at least for the morning."

"Wow, you must be tired," I managed to offer before I asked my real question. "So tell me why."

"Why what?"

"You obviously modeled the 'next big thing' after me. Why?"

"Oh, it must be your imagination. Ee-hee-hee!" She dodged the question.

"....."

"Well, it was half by coincidence, half on a whim. I had been thinking of making clothing in this style from the beginning, but—yours were so very nice, Miss Traveler, so I nudged my design just a little closer to it."

"...Could I get some royalties for the use of my design?"

"If you can prove to me that you are indeed the designer of those clothes, then yes. Well, okay, I suppose it was wrong of me to use you in my ads without asking your permission. Here, I'll give you this as compensation."

There was a flicker of gold between the old woman's fingers. The flat, glittering object fell as if drawn into my two open hands.

It was a gold coin.

"It's an honor to be featured in your advertising."

"Isn't it?"

After carefully putting away the gold coin into my purse, I nodded.

"But you really made that many items in just a few days?"

"There are that many mages in our country."

“I see.”

I could easily picture a group of mages using magic to manufacture mass quantities of clothing in all sorts of colorways.

Those mages are now dressed the same as me, huh...? It's a little bizarre, like something right out of the horror genre.

“However, it’s a strange thing, isn’t it?”

The old woman studied the chaos surrounding her shop. Her kind eyes held a tinge of sorrow.

“I want our country to pioneer new styles, but as soon as I make new clothes and release them to the public, I feel as if a heavy burden has been placed on my shoulders. Even though it’s supposed to be several steps ahead of the competition, it’s like we’re always lagging behind.”

“.....”

“Well, I’m already well aware of what we’re doing wrong, though.”

When it came to clothes, everyone could wear whatever they liked. As for me, I liked my mother’s hand-me-downs, so I wore them all the time. If the old woman was right, if there were as many types of clothing as there were people, maybe wearing fancy suits and dresses could represent someone’s personality. Even if other people pointed and laughed and said that you look weird, you couldn’t change what was authentic to you.

I think that was what the old woman had been trying to say. And that was what made her feel so uneasy. The people in this country only cared to follow the latest fads. In other words, there was nothing individual about their style.

It was sad.

“Do you think I ought to change the way I do things, Miss Traveler?”

“Which is more important to you? Fashion or the individuality of the people here?”

“Fashion, of course.”

“In that case, I think you’re better off not changing.”

“Right? Ee-hee-hee.” The old woman laughed at me.

Well, then. I wonder just how long this new style will last? Unfortunately, I won’t be around to see the next big thing.

However, I was certain that a new traveler would arrive soon and unwittingly start a new fad, just as I had.

An eternity spent chasing trend after trend.

Coincidentally, this culture had founded this country, and it was how this

place would continue to be preserved forevermore.



CHAPTER 6

Before the Snow Melts

It was a cold winter day.

All sorts of people were meandering along the snowy road. Among them was a girl wearing a tattered hood, her eyes downcast.

“...It’s so cold.”

Her name was Elise. She was a cute little girl with long golden hair and skin as white as snow.

She was twelve years old.

Still a child.

“.....”

The girl walked for a little while longer before arriving at a bakery.

Only two people occupied the shop: an older man—the owner of the place—who was reading a newspaper, and a young witch, who was staring at the bread lined up on the shelves with a blissful smile.

“Mister, I’ll take this one, please.”

At that, the man glanced over, folding his paper, then looked at Elise with a troubled expression.

“Back again, huh? ...Sorry, but I can’t sell ya any bread. Hurry up an’ go home.”

“Why? I’ve got money. Sell it to me. I want to give my little sister something good to eat.” She dropped what she had on the counter.

“C’mom, I can’t take money that ya stole from who knows where.” The proprietor put his palm on top of the pile and pushed it back toward her.

“...Sell me bread.”

“Ya never give up. I already told ya, I don’t sell ta monsters.”

“...”

The girl turned and left the shop without buying anything.

“.....?”

The young witch watched their exchange with considerable confusion.

Shortly after being turned away from the bakery, Elise arrived at a small

street stall.

“.....”

It was an unmanned counter. There was no shopkeeper, only a box for depositing money. On it was written ONE APPLE FOR ONE COPPER PIECE. PLEASE LEAVE PAYMENTS IN THE BOX.

Since no store would sell her food, recently the girl had eaten nothing but these apples.

I'd like to give my sister something to eat besides apples once in a while.

As she thought this, Elise placed the apples into her bag and put the money for her purchases into the box.

However.

“Hey, you. What are you doing?”

There was a voice, and someone grabbed her hand. She looked up in surprise and saw a man making a scary face.

“I set up this box for *humans* to use. I didn't make it to sell to the likes of you—give those apples back.”

“But I paid...”

“I don't care. I don't want your money.”

“.....”

“Come on, give them back, Monster.”

Then his grip on her hand tightened.

At this rate, we're going to lose our only remaining source of food. We won't make it through the winter. My sister will probably die— With wild thoughts running through her mind, Elise panicked.

Chomp.

She bit down on the man's hand as hard as she could.

“Ow! What the hell're you doing, you brat?!”

The man flinched for a moment, and Elise wriggled out of his grasp and darted away, still clutching the apples.

She kept running, watching her surroundings carefully, until she finally made it home.

More than half the roof had collapsed—the aftermath of a fire—and the part that still had some roof left was lacking a proper floor. There were holes in the walls, which were practically paper-thin and offered no protection from

the wind, rain, and snow.

This is what she called home.

“.....”

In front of the house, there was a small package, which perfectly fit in her two hands. Morning, noon, and night, there was always a small bundle left in front of their house.

But maybe, just maybe, there was something different inside today. With a faint bit of hope, the girl crouched down, hands on the package.

And then she opened it.

“Ugh! Gross!”

Elise immediately threw it aside. The package sailed through the air before crashing into the wall of a nearby house. The corpses of mice and all kinds of bugs exploded from the wrapping and scattered across the snow.

Their mud-colored carcasses slowly sank into pillow white.

“...Oh no. And we went to all the trouble to make it.”

“What a wasteful thing to do.”

“How awful.”

Several neighbors stood watching her, exchanging words.

After glaring at those people, Elise disappeared into her home.

“Welcome back, big sister!”

Elise heard a voice from a corner of the house. She stepped farther inside and saw a smiling girl wrapped in a patchwork quilt.

She was the spitting image of Elise, with golden hair and pale-white skin.

She was Elise’s sister, two years younger.

Her name was Mirina.

“I’m home, Mirina—Here, I brought you something.”

After Elise had nestled close to her younger sister and wrapped herself in the blanket with her, she pulled a fresh green apple out of her bag and handed it to Mirina.

“Wow, amazing! How did you get this?”

“I bought it just for you because I want you to get better soon. Eat up, okay?”

“I will! Thank you!”

Watching Mirina smile as she bit into the apple, Elise’s expression

softened a little.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better, now that I’m eating an apple!”

“Oh? I’m glad.” Recalling the incident in front of the street stall, she felt a prickling pain in her heart. “...But I’m really sorry about everything.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Don’t you get tired of eating the same thing all the time?”

“Hmm...? But I love apples! I’m happy eating them every day!”

“...I see.”

That’s good— Elise put her hand into her bag and fished out her own apple.

When all the apples were gone, this time for sure, they would have nothing to eat. Their lifeline had been severed.

Elise pulled back her hood as she bit into the apple, brooding over the dark future ahead. In the safety of home, there was no need to hide what was protruding from her head.

“...*Sigh*. ”

Appearing from beneath the tight hood were two curled sheep horns.

The girl was a beastkin; she possessed a human form with a touch of the wild.

Sadly, she had brought home only enough apples for one day. By the next morning, they would be out of food. Elise slowly slipped out of the blanket, so as not to wake Mirina, and headed for the main street of town—toward the stall with the apples.

After checking that the proprietor was nowhere nearby, Elise took a number of apples and dropped them in her bag.

Then, after her bag was full, she took money from her pocket and was about to drop it in the box...

“...No, that’s all right. I don’t need to put any money in.”

...but then she didn’t.

It doesn’t matter if I pay or not. Which means I can steal as much as I want. This isn’t a bad thing to do. I’m not a bad person.

Repeating excuses to herself, the girl turned to leave the stand.

Then it happened.

A hand came down on Elise's shoulder.
When she looked up in surprise, there stood a witch.
"You mustn't do that. You have to pay for what you take."
It was the young witch she had seen in the bakery the day before.
Tossing several silver pieces into the box, she said, "Why don't we talk for a little while?"
Her ashen hair swung loosely, and she smiled gently as she spoke.



I had been traveling without a care in the world when I was first summoned by a government official, right after I had done some shopping at the bakery on my first day in the country.

From time to time, I'm called upon as a witch to help solve some country's problems.

"Please have a seat over there, Lady Elaina."

I was shown to the waiting room, where I took a seat on one of the sofas facing each other across a coffee table, bowing before I sat.

"So what seems to be the problem? Oh, want some bread?"

"No, thank you."

"Really? ...Mind if I eat while I listen?"

"...Go ahead."

"Thanks."

From my bag, I retrieved a piece of the bread I had just purchased from the bakery and stuffed it into my mouth.

The government official sighed and began his explanation.

"Our country has a bit of a problem right now... We'd like to ask you to solve it for us, Madam Witch."

"Mm-hmm."

Om-nom.

"....."

Wearing a dubious expression, the official continued, "Our request to you at this time involves this beastkin." He handed me a sketch.

It depicted a human with a strange form...or what looked like a human. The most striking characteristic was the pair of horns growing out of the

girl's head. They were curly and crooked, just like a sheep's.

"The truth is, there are these creatures currently living in our country, but there's a problem... To put it plainly, a rift has formed between these beastkin and our citizens. So we want to get the beasts to leave the country for the time being."

And then he told me the full story behind the request.

He told me about the cruel country, and its people, and the pitiful little girl.

"....."

I wonder what kind of expression I was wearing after I had heard the whole story.

I'm sure it wasn't a very nice face.

It must have been scornful. It must have been angry.

"...Are you telling me that's the reason you're banishing a child from this city?" I asked.

He tightened his fists at my statement and nodded slowly.

"Personally, I can't help feeling sorry for them... However, now that the situation has worsened, there's no other way." He continued, wearing a very gloomy, heartbroken expression, "Please. Isn't there some way you can save her...?"

I didn't want to decide whether to accept the commission based only on the official's story. That's why I decided to spend a day looking into the state of things myself.

I went to the place marked on the map that the government official gave me, the place where the beastkin were currently living—and found a dilapidated house there, more than halfway collapsed.

"...Goodness."

I found the girls living inside and was quite surprised.

One was the girl I had seen at the bakery the day before.

"....."

And so I decided to accept the commission from the government.

I didn't meet the girl in person that day. First, I did some investigating. I went around asking about the beastkin girls, interviewing the proprietor of yesterday's bakery, the owners of the shops lining the city's main street,

random passersby, and people in the neighborhood.

Every one of them told me the same thing, more or less.

The following morning, I set up a stakeout next to the crumbling house and watched the girl leave. She was headed for one of the stalls. It seemed to be an unmanned counter with a box set up for depositing money.

And there, the girl did a bad thing.

So I immediately stepped in to stop her.

“You mustn’t do that. You have to pay for what you take,” I said as I clapped a hand down on her shoulder.



I took her with me to a restaurant on a street corner. It was mostly empty because it was early in the morning.

After we were seated by the window, we turned to face each other.

“.....”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I assured the girl. “It’s my treat.”

Even as I told her she didn’t need to pay for the mouth-watering dishes lining up on the table, the girl’s expression was as gloomy as always.

I wonder if she’s nervous. She’s probably bothered by the negative attention she’s getting from the other people in here.

“What’s your name?”

“...Elise.”

“Elise, is it? My name is Elaina. I’m a traveling witch.”

“.....”

“So what exactly were you doing earlier?”

The girl flinched and drew her hood farther down to cover her face.

“...Um, please don’t tell anyone about that.”

“I didn’t ask to threaten you. I was just curious. I believe we first met in the bakery the day before yesterday, didn’t we? You were acting a little strange back then, too, so I was curious about you.”

“.....”

“And so, if you don’t mind, would you tell me about yourself?”

I made my inquiry, and Elise finally spoke normally. “...If I tell you about myself, I’m sure you won’t like what you hear.”

“Because you have horns growing out of your head?”

“How did you...?”

“I mean, I could see them under your hood the whole time. They’re cute horns, curly like a sheep’s.”

Elise quickly looked out the window. Brown horns peeked out of her hood, reflected in the glass.

“I’m a traveler. I’ve seen all sorts of people and hold no prejudices. I really don’t find you unpleasant.”

I actually think the horns are pretty cute. I said something to that effect, and she finally turned back to face me.

And then she began to talk, a little at a time, as if resigned to it.

“Um, please don’t tell anyone else this, but...”

She told me her story.

In the past, Elise had lived a quiet life with her family on a remote mountain.

Her father and mother had hunted the animals of the mountain with bows and arrows, and together with her sickly little sister, Elise had cooked the game they brought back. She and her family had passed their days in peace.

Then, about a month ago, something had happened.

“*We’ll teach you to shoot a bow when we get home,*” her mother and father had said, and then they went out together to hunt, like always.

While Elise waited with her little sister for their return, she had become restless, thinking about how she was finally about to come of age.

But even though the two girls waited and waited, their parents didn’t come back. Were they having a hard time hunting? Hours passed, but their parents never returned.

The following day, strangers pulled up in a big carriage and paid a visit to their home. One person introduced himself as a government official of the nearby country. There were three merchants with him.

The adults who had suddenly appeared outside their home took two huge sacks down from the carriage and told the girls the sad truth.

Elise’s parents had fallen off a cliff while hunting and perished. The merchants had found their bodies as they traversed the mountain. As he told them this, the official opened the sacks to show the girls the battered remains of their parents.

The girls wept. They clung to the bodies and wailed at the top of their

lungs. But the bodies of their parents had long since grown cold.

The government official had a proposal for the girls, now that they had no parents to support them.

"There's no way we can just leave you here by yourselves. I'd like to take custody of you in our country."

After commissioning the merchants who had found the corpses to make gravestones for the parents, the official took the girls by the hands. Without a moment to come to grips with reality, the two girls were whisked away to a strange new place.

When they arrived in this country, a house was provided for them to live in.

"From now on, I'm going to leave food in front of your house every day; so eat it, okay? Also, here's money to live on."

He placed food and just enough money for everyday expenses into Elise's hands. *"I'll bring you money at regular intervals, as well. You can use it however you like. I don't mind. If you lose it, please let me know right away."*

He also told her, *"Until your heart is whole again, our country will look after you."*

The country accepted the two girls.

"...But the people who live here were not so welcoming."

After a short pause, Elise said, "Right after it was decided that we would live in this country, the house that had been prepared for us was set on fire."

"....."

I recalled the place where she was living presently. It was a burned-out husk, more than half turned to rubble.

"The harassment continued after our house was burned, of course. We're treated like monsters by everyone we meet, we're not allowed to buy anything even though we have money, and the food and funds the official brings are all for nothing."

"....."

"So until the day before yesterday, we were living on apples from the unmanned stall, but—"

That went south, too.

I see.

"...I understand your situation. You could say you're in legit danger, and you'll probably starve to death if things continue as they are; is that right?"

“...Yeah. Well, something like that, I guess.”

“I see, I see. I think I’ve got the picture.” I nodded several times. “By the way, I have one favor to ask. Is that okay?”

“What is it?”

“If you’ll listen to my request, you can eat all this food. You can even take the leftovers home.”

“I thought you said this was your treat...”

“Oh, go ahead and forget I said that.”

“.....”

“Well?”

“...What’s your request?” She stared at me, eyeing me cautiously.

After a dramatic pause, I looked right back at her and made a simple request:

“Please allow me to help you.”

Elise continued staring at me, but this time, it was in confusion, maybe because she wasn’t expecting this.

As I waited for her answer, I reached for my knife and fork. We had been talking for so long that all the food we had ordered had gone cold.



At this point, the girl didn’t have many options—or any, really. She wasn’t allowed to use money, so she couldn’t even get the bare necessities. And since there was no one in the country she could really depend on, the girl had no choice but to join forces with an outsider like me. At least she was sharp enough not to let this chance slip away.

“.....Hey, what would you do if I denied your request?”

“I’d spread the news of what you were trying to do at the unmanned stand.”

“...No fair. You said you wouldn’t threaten me earlier.”

“Oh, go ahead and forget I said that.”

“.....”

“Well, how about it? Will you grant my humble request?”

“...Fine. But you do know I have nothing to offer in return, right, Elaina?”

“That’s all right. I’ve got a lot of time to kill. Besides...”

“...?”

“I’m not the kind of coldhearted person who can ignore your plight after hearing a story like *that*.¹”

And so it was decided that I would help Elise.

But it was too annoying to do something that very day—er, what I mean is, I needed time to prepare, so I let her go for the moment.

And then, the following morning, we met up next to the gate—outside the city.

“...It’s so cold!” I stamped my feet, clutched my gear, and waited several minutes.

She passed through the gate looking the same as yesterday. She trotted over when she saw me.

“Sorry. I was running late... Huh, what’s that?”

Elise’s gaze fell on the thing in my hand.

“Oh, this? It’s a bow and arrow.”

As I plucked at the bowstring and listened to the sound it made, I said, “I thought I would teach you how to handle a bow, Elise.”

“Why?”

“If you learn to hunt for your own food, you won’t have any reason to rely on the people of the country, will you?”

Which means that yesterday I had gone around acquiring a bow and arrow, along with various things the girl would need from now on.

“Miss Witch, can you shoot a bow?”

“I’m so good that I can pierce an apple placed on top of someone’s head.”

“Huh? When would you ever need to do that...?”

“You could call me an expert. I’m so good that if I was ordered to entertain someone with my archery skills, I could reluctantly shoot an arrow through a paper fan that was swaying on top of a boat.”

“Again, when would you possibly need to do that...?”

I pulled the dubious girl by the hand, and we walked into the forest of white.

Inside the forest, where tall trees grew in rows, a handmade, fully equipped archery range was waiting for us. The surface of one of the trees

had been shaved down flat and had a round target carved into it. There was a sign placed in a spot a little distance from the tree, upon which was written: *Please aim for the target from here (rewards given for hitting the center).*

By the way, it was my handwriting.

“There’s no way you’ll hit anything if you try hunting animals from the get-go, so let’s practice here for a bit.”

This was the place I had secretly prepared the day before.

“What kinds of rewards will I get?”

“Heh-heh, you’ll find out after you hit the target.”

And then I stood next to Elise and showed her the correct way to hold the bow, as well as certain techniques for hitting the target.

“For now, try taking a shot.”

“Okay... Hyah.”

She loosed the arrow, and it fell to the ground right in front of her.

“...Did you think the target was buried beneath the snow somewhere?” I asked.

“.....”

And that’s how the curtain rose on our training days.

Nearly every day, we would leave the city early in the morning, practice archery in the forest, return to the city in the afternoon, shivering cold, go to a restaurant, and then return to the forest with full bellies.

It wasn’t long before Elise’s arrows flew straight and hit their mark.

In less than three days, her shots were looking clean. *She picked that up surprisingly quickly. Or could it be that I am a particularly skillful instructor? Do I have a future in teaching?*

“Oh, yay! Look, Elaina! I hit the center!”

On the fifth day of training, I heard a *thunk* and then Elise’s cheerful shout.

“Hey, what are you going to give me for a reward?”

Rushing over to me in her excitement, Elise wore a broad smile.

So I spoke, putting on an air of importance.

“I’ll buy you all the clothes you want. That’s your reward.”

I had thought that this would make her happy, but her face scrunched into a complicated expression.

“...You mean...only for me, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Um... I was hoping I could ask you to buy some for my sister, too.”

“.....”

I patted Elise’s head gently.

“If that’s what you want, you can have it, no matter the cost.”

Running her fingers over her stiff clothes and feeling the rough texture of her horns, she smiled with her eyes.

“Yay!”



With her new wardrobe, Elise was ready for the next phase of her training. On the snowbanks, her petite footsteps had made little wave patterns as she stepped back and forth. Some distance ahead of her was a white rabbit that blended into the snow, twitching its nose and ears as it hopped off somewhere.

Today we were aiming not for still targets but living prey.

“Is there a reward this time, too?”

“If you hit that, I’ll let you eat my delicious home cooking.”

“...Is it more delicious than the restaurants we always go to?”

“It’s mean to have the same standards for amateurs and pros.”

“...I wish it was a different prize—”

“That’s a little too honest, Elise.”

“Eh-heh-heh.”

“Hey, your rabbit is going to run away if we keep wasting time,” I said, and Elise seemed to remember her task, readied the bow, and turned a keen eye toward the rabbit.

Then she exhaled one white puff of breath and released her finger.

The arrow buried itself into the snow with a *thunk*.

“...Did you think the rabbit was hibernating beneath the snow?”

And so, just as before, we spent many days going back and forth between the forest outside the city and the restaurants inside.

“Oh no, I ordered more than I can eat today, again! My mistake. Here, you can have it. Enjoy it at home.”

As we sat in the restaurant, I handed Elise my leftover food, as always.

“Thank you, Miss Elaina.”

Taking the leftovers carefully with both hands, Elise smiled faintly. The girl who always wore a dark expression now graced her gentle face with a warm smile—or so it appeared.

Maybe I've got the wrong impression. Maybe it's hubris.

But I got the feeling that her story was headed in a positive direction, little by little.

Maybe I'll be able to complete this job in my own way.

The day after I had that idea, Elise brought down her first rabbit. The snow had finally stopped, giving way to a beautiful sunny day.

“Hey, look, Elaina! I did it! I did it; look!”

A small field rabbit lay stretched out atop a mound of snow glittering in the sunlight. Its legs were twitching as if it meant to escape the arrow sticking out of its neck, and a red stain was spreading out on the white snow.

“Finally. Looks tasty.”

Without waiting for the rabbit’s life to come to an end, I held up the arrow. The rabbit came with it, hanging limply and heavily.

“...So about that prize you mentioned...”

“Yep. It’s my home cooking.”

“You mean you’re going to cook this?”

“That’s right.”

“Can you handle it?”

“I may look sophisticated, but I’m top-notch when it comes to dressing a rabbit. In fact, I’m too good. I make all the rabbits tremble in fear.”

“...Aren’t rabbits always trembling?”

“Also, this isn’t part of your prize, but I have a proposal.”

“What?”

I laid the rabbit, which had finally stopped moving, down on a patch of clean, unbloodied snow. There was a crunching noise, and the snow directly below the rabbit parted, as if splitting open.

“You have a house you used to live in long ago, right? Don’t you have any desire to live there again?”

“In our old house? But—”

“You’ve learned to hunt on your own. You no longer have any reason to

stay in that city. So how about it? Do you feel like returning once again to the house where you lived with your parents?"

"....."

She was silent.

"Of course, I'm not trying to force you, though."

I waited eagerly for her to speak again.

Silence fell over the forest. After a little time had passed, as if she had remembered what was going on, Elise nodded.

"That's...right. Yes. I want to go. I probably should have left this city a long time ago."

Her words brought me relief.

Now she would definitely thrive—or so I thought.



After bleeding out the rabbit Elise had caught, we tied it up with string and headed back to the city.

It was lunchtime when we got back, and there were plenty of people on the main street. When we passed them, they gawked like they were witnessing something unusual, and each time, Elise shrank a little more.

"You don't have anything to worry about anymore," I said, putting a hand on her shoulder. She smiled weakly.

For her, getting some distance from this country—from the thing that resembled a house, destroyed by fire—was a cause for happiness. As soon as we arrived at the house, Elise ran to gather her things.

The government official who had commissioned me appeared exactly at that moment.

"...Lady Elaina. How is that request coming along?" Holding a small package in his hands, he bowed slightly.

"Swimmingly. I think that things will soon go the way you all had hoped."

"...Is that so? That's good."

"You don't seem too happy about that."

"Well, when our wishes come true, it isn't always in our best interest in the end."

After a moment's pause, I said, "I've been trying to do the very best I can

for her sake. And now this can all come to an end. There's no need for you to leave those packages anymore.”

I could see that the government official gripped the package more tightly.

“...Thank you very much. Please accept our apology for dragging you into our business.” After bowing very deeply, the official turned his back on me. “This is rather forward of me,” he said over his shoulder, “but could I make just one more request of you, Miss Elaina?”

“Depending on what it is, I might require an additional fee; is that all right?”

He didn't answer. He simply said, “If you get the chance, I would appreciate it if you could somehow convey our true feelings to her.” Then he walked away.

I had no response.

Because I didn't know whether I would be able to do that.

“.....”

Elise came back shortly after the official left, balancing a great deal of luggage in both arms.

“Sorry for the wait. It took a while to pack everything after I woke my sister up.”

She had her little sister on her back.

“I haven't introduced you to Miss Elaina yet, have I? This is my little sister, Mirina.”

It felt like the time when I would have to tell her their true feelings was drawing near.

We walked on, slowly but steadily.



“We're home,” Elise said, sweeping off the snow that was stuck to her shoes near the front door. She walked inside, still carrying Mirina.

“.....”

Imitating her, I brushed myself off and followed the trail of melting snow into the house. The small, snowy footsteps led from the entryway to the dining room.

Just in front of the kitchen, there was a table set up with two chairs on

each side. They had likely been occupied by the four family members once upon a time.

She pulled out one of the chairs and sat her sister down in it.

“Hey, Elaina. What kind of dish are you going to prepare using that rabbit?” Elise’s gaze turned toward my hand.

“...How about cream stew?”

“Yay! Mirina loves that!” Elise hugged her sister’s shoulders from behind, happy as can be.

There was no response.

“...Yep! This is gonna be great.” Elise nodded at her sister with a wide smile.

“.....I’m going to start the cooking,” I said. “So wait just a little while longer, Elise.”

“Okay, I’ll wait here with my sister.”

Still smiling, Elise sat down next to Mirina.

“...Okay.”

My voice echoed vacantly through the house.

I heard her cheerfully chatting as I busied myself in the kitchen.

“Hey, this is really nostalgic, isn’t it?”

“I’m going to take the place of Mom and Dad from now on, okay, Mirina? Oh, but since I have to do the cooking, too, I think I’ll have even more jobs than they did.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure I can do a great job.”

It had been like this the whole way here. It had been particularly awful as we exited the city, Elise holding her sister in her arms. The whole way, she had been smiling and listening to her little sister’s voice, which I couldn’t hear.

“.....”

A pleasant aroma wafted out of the pot that had been brought to a bubbling boil.

Amid the suffocating atmosphere, I was finally able to suck in a breath. After inhaling deeply, I stirred the pot, and the fragrance of carrots, potatoes, and rabbit meat stewing in cloudy-white cream filled the air.

“.....”

Everything I had done since arriving in this country had amounted to nothing.

This included agreeing to the official's request, getting the girl out of the cruel city, and, at the same time, providing her with an environment where she could be able to hunt and live *on her own*. I had worked hard for her to be able to return to this house.

I thought if I could get her this far—get her out of the city, away from other people—then the pitiful girl would come to her senses.

But it was no good.

It seemed that had only been my wish.

And there appeared to be no cure for the deep sadness plaguing her.

From the kitchen, I looked over my shoulder and watched her.

Turning away from her sister with a smile, the girl noticed me.

“Oh, Miss Elaina, are you done already?”

“I just have to let it simmer.”

“Oh really? Well, it won’t be long now!”

“.....”

“What’s wrong?”

“...Nothing.”

“...? Hey, you’ve been acting kind of strange this whole time, Miss Elaina. You barely said a word the whole way here, and you haven’t spoken much since we got here.”

“.....”

“You know, my sister hasn’t said much, either... Isn’t that strange? Something’s off.”

“...I’m acting weird?”

“Yeah.”

“.....” I was silent.

“I know, right? Something’s definitely off.” Elise nodded in response to a voice I couldn’t hear.

And then she went back to the cheerful conversation she was having with her sister, completely disregarding me.

“...You must not be feeling well. That’s probably it.”

“...Ah-ha-ha. That’s right. You’ll feel better once you eat some stew.”

“...I know. I’d better cook her something next time to show our gratitude.”

On and on, she spoke to her sister, her face the picture of contentment.

“.....”

It was more than I could bear.

“...Elise.”

“What?”

I recoiled a bit as she turned her relentless smile on me. At some point, I had begun to find her smiling face terrifying.

“...Elise, just...stop it already,” I begged, unable to meet her eyes.

Then I said the only thing there was left to say. I voiced the truth that lay before me.

“Your sister is dead.”

There, propped up in one of the four chairs, was a young girl dressed in a long coat, the very same kind Elise was wearing. Beautiful blond hair dangled down from her hood.

The corpse reeked of death.



“It happened about a month ago. A group of merchants from the city made a grave mistake.”

“Hmm.”

The government official, seated across from me, began to tell an impossibly sad story.

“There was a family of beastkin living near our city. The merchants came up with a plan to capture and sell them. They told me it was because they were short on money.

“First, the merchants planned to capture the couple who went out hunting. They were going to lie to them and tell them they were lost, then get close to the man and woman, catch them off guard, and abduct them.

“Of course, there was no way they were going to simply catch a couple of beastkin. Surrounded by the merchants, the two resisted fiercely.

“As they struggled on the unstable sloping face of the mountain, they lost their footing.

“The merchants who survived went to the bottom to check on them, but

everyone who had fallen was dead. The innocent beastkin couple were intertwined with the evil merchants in death.

“This was the cause of everything that’s happened.

“Three merchants survived. They brought the bodies to our city and told me about what happened. Unfortunately, they lied to me.

“*Three merchants and two of the beastkin living nearby lost their lives in an accident,*” they said. Regrettably, I believed them. Since the two beastkin had been a couple, I thought that there might be children. I feared they might even be awaiting the return of their parents at that very moment. So I took the merchants with me into the mountains. We found their home.”

The rest of what he told me largely matched Elise’s story. The government official who visited Elise and her sister in their home had told them that their parents died in an *accident* and had taken the two girls back to the city.

However, as far as what happened from that point onward, Elise’s and the official’s stories were completely different.

“It happened several days after the girls came to this country. There was an incident.”

Then he told me the truth.

“The surviving merchants targeted the girls, for money and revenge. They sneaked into the girls’ house at night, torches and knives in hand.

“The three merchants found the older sister first. Just like her parents, she—Elise—did not falter, even surrounded by adults. She fought and fought and fought.

“But she’s still a child. Physically, she never really stood a chance.

“The merchants held her down and took their revenge. The men set their knives aside and beat her. They kicked her. Even when she was cowering, begging for their forgiveness, tears streaming, they did not stop.

“I suppose they intended to hurt her but leave her alive and abduct her, rather than kill her.

“That’s when one of the men was stabbed in the back by the very knife he had set aside. When the merchants turned, there was another girl, a bit younger than Elise. The little sister, Mirina, had tried to save her big sister from the one-sided assault.

“The wounded man released the older sister, screaming, and hit Mirina with a torch. Then he quickly tossed the torch aside and picked up a knife.

Mirina was wailing, her hands covering her face, and he stabbed her over and over again until she drew her last breath.

“It was awful. Horrified, the remaining two merchants tried to stop the third man. But just after they approached him, the man who was straddling Mirina stopped moving.

“Elise had killed the man using another of the merchant’s knives.

“While Elise stood still, in a daze, the fire rose from the discarded torch, the flames lapping everything in the house, the blaze growing larger by the second.

“The two surviving merchants ran away in a panic.

“Hearing news of the fire from citizens living nearby, I rushed to the girls’ house, and when I finally arrived, the fire had spread to the street. We immediately got to work fighting the flames, but even so, half the house couldn’t be saved.

“We soon identified the cause of the fire. We found the three knives at the scene, the charred corpse of the merchant, and received eyewitness testimony from the neighbors. With those things as proof, we questioned the other two merchants and arrested them.

“And then, upon cross-examination, the two of them finally told us the truth.

“However, even knowing what had really happened, it was already too late to do anything.

“Elise has been different ever since the day of the fire.

“She doesn’t want to part with her sister’s body. Far from it, she’s treating the corpse like it’s alive. She gives it food, dresses it in clothes, and snuggles up with it to sleep.

“Due to the poor judgment of our country’s merchants, as well as my own, the poor girl has lost her grip on reality.

“The two merchants have confessed to everything, and news of her actions has spread to the people of the city. Even though the citizens pity her, they’re frightened and have begun avoiding her.

“Also, she’s stopped listening to anyone else. She actively avoids people, regarding others with eyes full of terror.

“This problem goes far beyond anything we can solve, and it’s been out of our hands for quite some time now.”

That’s what the official told me.

But I was still foggy on one crucial detail.

“...To sum it all up,” I said, sighing, “you didn’t mind taking in the pitiful child, but now that the situation’s gotten out of hand, you want to kick her out. However, your words aren’t getting through to her, so even though you’ve tried a gentle approach, she won’t leave. You don’t know how she’ll react if you try a more aggressive approach, so you’re making an outsider do your dirty work. Sound about right?”

“.....”

The coward replied with silence, so I continued.

“...Are you telling me that’s the reason you’re banishing a child from this city?”

I headed for the partially destroyed house, debating whether to accept the commission, and I was very surprised when I saw you, Elise.

And that’s when I decided to take the job. Because I had met you once before, in the bakery.

Before I met you at the stall with the apples, I had carried out an impromptu survey inside the city. And in my research, I found that the people all had the same thing to say about you.

“The pitiful child.”

The people walking around town repeated the same phrases.

“She’s really pitiful.”

“To fall into such a state because of a group of bad men... It’s tragic.”

Even the housewives living in your neighborhood wrinkled their brows as they told me.

“She came to live here because of some horrible adults...right?”

“Right... How devastating. She doesn’t even touch the meals the official leaves for her.”

“Yes, look. Over there. That’s the lunch box she threw at the wall. She always does that—throwing what he leaves at the wall. She doesn’t care if it’s money or food.”

The man who owned the unmanned stand also spoke to me, rubbing his bandaged hand. “Yeah, it seems like she’s been stealing apples from us for a while. Well, I knew about her situation, so I didn’t really feel like scolding her, but—A kid can’t survive on nothin’ but apples, so I tried to get her to go

somewhere else, thinkin' she might eat something else if she did. But she just shouted some nonsense at me... And, well, this is what it came to."

I even talked to the proprietor of the bakery.

"Oh, Miss Witch. You saw it, too, didn't you? That girl always tries to buy bread with...*you know*. I know her situation is grave, but—I'm running a business here, so I wasn't sure how to deal with her."

The first day I met you, Elise, I caught sight of something strange in the bakery. A girl wearing a big hood pulled a heap of dead bugs from her pocket and tried to buy bread with them. A very peculiar sight.

The girl referred to the bugs as money.

After arguing back and forth with the shopkeeper, who gently explained with a concerned expression that you can't buy bread with dead bugs, that girl screwed up her face in shock and flew out of the store.

I tilted my head in confusion as I watched you go.

And then, the following day, I realized that that girl was you.

And that's why I decided to accept the request from the government, for your sake.



"Lies."

Right after I finished explaining everything, Elise mumbled a single word. From her spot next to Mirina, she raised her head.

"That story is a bunch of lies—all lies. Why? Why are you trying to torture me, too, Miss Elaina? Did someone make you do this? You saw everything that happened, right, Miss Elaina? Those people in the city are awful.

"The jerks from the city treated me like a monster. They burned my house. But my sister's not dead. She's alive and well right here beside me.

"So it must be a lie. That story is nonsense."

She shook Mirina by the shoulders. The little girl had been dead a long time, and her head lolled unnaturally.

"See? Look. There. She's alive, isn't she? My sister can't possibly be—"

As if to interrupt her, as if to betray her—the corpse she had been violently shaking fell right off the chair.

With a heavy *thunk*, Mirina slumped onto the floor.

“Ah—” In that moment, realization flashed over Elise’s eyes. “N-no... My sister is... Mirina is alive—”

She stood up, stretched a hand out toward the corpse, then stopped halfway. Her fingertips were trembling violently.

She made an unbelievably heartbreakingly figure.

“Elise...”

“No. No, no, no...! No way, no way, no way, no way! Mirina has, I mean, she’s been living with me the whole time. She can’t be dead...!”

“.....”

I stepped between Elise and the corpse and embraced the girl tightly. I could feel the rough texture of her long coat with my fingertips, still carrying the chill of the winter air.

“Miss Elaina...this can’t be. Mirina is...”

“...Elise.” I tightened my grip. “You can’t... You can’t run away anymore.”

“I’m not running—”

“You’ve been through a lot. There’s no denying that. I understand that you just want to run away from it all. But you can’t. Because if you keep averting your eyes and running away, you’re going to run so far that you’ll never be able to come back to reality.”

“.....”

“I’ve worked so hard to become your friend, and I can’t bear to watch as your trauma slowly eats you alive.”

“.....”

“Come back to reality, please.”

And then I asked once again.

“Please let me help you.”

There was no response.

Just silence as she opened her mouth, no sound escaping her lips. Her trembling fingers gripped my robe tightly as she mouthed incoherently, “*No, no, no way, stop it.*”

Before long, her mumbling turned to wailing, and she clung to me and cried and cried.

I didn’t let her go until the tears finally stopped.



“Hello.”

“Oh, Lady Elaina. Hi there... I see you’re eating bread from the bakery again.”

“Yep. I’ve taken a liking to it—but this is probably the last time I’ll be eating it.”

“...?”

“I told you: I finished the job without issue. After I leave the city, I’m not planning to return to this area again.”

“...Is that so?”

“A gloomy face, as always.”

“I told you before. We really didn’t want to cast the girl out. It’s just that was the only way.”

“In any case, that doesn’t change the fact that you were just going to throw her out—and let’s talk about my payment.”

“...Ah, right. There *was* that. Um—”

“I don’t need it, so would you send it to her house for me?”

“Huh?”

“I won’t repeat myself.”

“No, it’s just—”

“It doesn’t matter what you say; I’m not taking it. End of story.”

“...Lady Elaina, how is the girl? Has she recovered?”

“Who can say? Not me, that’s for sure.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yes. I’ll be going now.”

“...Please take care.”

“Oh, right, right. I forgot to say one thing.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“When she comes here again—do your very best not to make that kind of face again, okay?”



I had spent my time with the girl for a while.

We would run through the snowy scenery on sunny days, she would hunt, and we would cook together. Rinse and repeat.

I lived in this pleasant flow of time.

And then, when Elise had truly learned how to hunt on her own, suddenly she said, "I'm all grown up now."

In front of the graves where the three members of her family rested, she said that to no one in particular.

"Well then, I guess my work is done."

"I'm not saying you should leave, but... But thank you for everything, Miss Elaina."

"No need. I just did what I thought was best."

"What will you do now?"

"I'll get back to traveling."

"...I'll be lonely."

"...Me too."

"In that case, I could go with you!"

"Ah well... That's a little..."

"You're too honest, Miss Elaina."

"What are you planning to do now, Elise?"

She took off her hood and peered at the sky. Head tilted toward the clear horizon, her breath rose like smoke and disappeared in the cold air. The sun had given off the slightest warmth, but it was so weak that it was easily lost amid the frigid wind.

Elise turned to look at me.

"I think I'll try going back to that city for a little while."

"...Even though you have nothing but bad memories there?"

"Mm. If I go now, I feel like I can make some different memories," she said. "Plus, since I did some bad things to the people there, I'd like to apologize."

"....."

"I say that, but I haven't decided for certain yet, you know. It's just... something I think I'd like to do one day."

"Is that so?"

I think it's a good idea— I nodded.

"Well, in any case, if I go, it'll be after I've made up my mind and

finished saying good-bye to everyone. At least for a little while longer—at least until the snow melts, I'm going to keep living here.”

Just then, in the forest behind her, there was a rustling sound.

She turned around, and the snow that had been resting on a tree branch fell to the ground. The top of the tree swayed gently, and a bit of green returned to the pure-white world.

It seemed that the snow would be melting away little by little from now on.

However...

“I guess it'll still be a while, huh?”

She slowly shook her head at my statement and smiled.

“Soon,” she said.





CHAPTER 7

The Inheritance

One day, when I was sightseeing in a certain city, a very strange man approached me.

“Hey! Yer a witch, right? Annat means ya can ride on brooms?”

What a silly question.

“Yes, I am a witch and a traveler, which means I can obviously ride a broom.”

If I couldn't ride one, I wouldn't be much of a traveler.

The man nodded in satisfaction. “That’s perfect! Hey, hey, I wanna ask ya somethin’,” he said forcefully. He pulled out a map and kept talking. “I want’cha to take me to this area on the map! There’s somethin’ I gotta do there.”

“Huh?”

The place the man was pointing to looked like an ordinary forest to me.

You have business in a place like that? Just what are you planning to do? Not that I care either way.

I answered, “I don’t really mind taking you there, but...it’s going to cost you.”

“Ya don’t need to worry about that! I’ll pay up, so rest easy!”

“Then it’s fine.”

“That’s great—Oh, but I’m gonna hafta pay you after we get there. That okay? Heh-heh.”

“Or...you can pay up front.”

Somehow, I don’t think I can trust you. I get the sense that you might run off after I get you there. I can almost see you want to rip me off. It’s practically bubbling out of you. The way you’re speaking and acting is a dead giveaway.

“Hey, wait! Don’t be in such a rush! If ya get me there safely, I’ll pay up. I’m headin’ over there to get the money, see?”

“Oh. And it’s in the middle of a forest, is it...? Are you going to dig up buried treasure or something?” I asked sarcastically.

But the man nodded enthusiastically at my words.

“Exactly! My inheritance is buried in this spot!”

Okay, I’ll admit I wasn’t expecting that.



Looking back and forth between the map and road, I advanced toward the center of the forest.

A cord was tied to the handle of my broom, and the man was riding on a sled attached to the end of cord. I flew toward the spot he had indicated as the hiding place for the buried treasure.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

There was some screaming coming from behind me as I plowed through the forest, but I didn’t pay it any mind. An hour had passed since we had headed out on the broom. Right after he had gotten on, the man had complained, “What’s with the sled? Lemme ride behind ya on the broom,” but I had replied ever so kindly, “If you even think about trying to ride behind me, I’ll leave you right here and be on my way.”

But as time passed, it became clear that even bringing him along was a pain. Unfortunately, it turned out that the man loved to chat. From his spot on the sled, he went on and on about his many feats of heroism. According to him:

He was the son of a legendary gambler and made a decent living as a gambler himself. Following in his dead dad’s footsteps, he had been making easy money up until a few years ago.

But recently, his luck had run out, and his fortune had dwindled.

“When I win, I’ll pay you back.”

“I promise I’ll pay you back.”

His debts to his friends had piled up, and he continued to gamble, but as if the universe was mocking the flustered man, both his luck and his money had evaporated like morning dew.

To make matters worse, he had used up every bit of goodwill with his friends and acquaintances, and his father’s friends ended up whispering behind his back, “A cursed child was born of a blessed parent.”

However, not long ago, as he was worrying about dying broke and in

debt, the man happened to find a map in his family home, showing where his father's buried treasure was hidden.

"Well now, looks like the gods haven't abandoned me after all!"

He danced with joy.

Then the man found me, a traveler, and decided to make me his guide.

Oh, this must excite the gambler in him.

I didn't really get it, but that seemed to be the gist of his situation.

"This'll show those jerks who treated me like a fool! I'll prove to 'em that the old saying that 'the apple never falls far from the tree' is true!"

But that's an insult that the child will inherit bad characteristics of their parents, no matter how hard they try... Well, whatever. I let it slide.

After that, he just kept telling me about his life up to this point, regardless of whether I wanted to hear it or not. He spoke about his highest earnings in a single day, his passionate affairs with a beautiful girl, and all kinds of other stories.

At first, I politely kept up with the conversation, but it became more and more annoying the longer he went on.

So I *may* have decided to start flying less carefully.

"Aaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Ah, that's better.

And so we arrived at our destination.

"Bleeeeeehhh."

The man leaned against the thick trunk of a nearby tree and let out a long stream of vomit.

Gross.

"Are you all right?"

"Never better! This ain't a big deal compared to finding my old man's inheritance!"

"By the way, where *is* this inheritance?"

"Um..." He wiped his mouth and looked at the map. "Here, maybe? Oh, no... Well, here? No, that's not it. Um..."

He held the map in his hands and turned it around and around.

Aren't you going to throw up again if you keep doing that?

Indifferent to my apprehension, he kept turning it, and then—

“Oh. It’s this tree. I’m pretty sure my inheritance is buried under this tree.”

He pointed to a thick tree.

“.....”

“.....”

It was right where he had thrown up.

“...Well, that’s unfortunate.”

“...Ah, nah, that don’t bother me none...”



My job was finished, so I obviously didn’t lift a finger to help him dig. That would have been a pain. Staring vacantly at his back as he used a shovel to dig up the soil around the tree’s roots, I was just waiting for time to pass.

“Buried treasure....! Buried treasure....! Buried treasure....!”

He looked just like a robber.

The dirt made a crunching noise with every strike of the shovel, and by the time the shovel rang out with a sharp, metallic clang, a mountain of loose earth had formed next to him.

I stood up at the sound, and he turned around and gave me a thumbs-up.

“I found it! Hey, look here! The buried treasure!”

He held the shovel up and tossed it my way. A tin chest rolled over the ground.

“Oh-ho, is it inside the case?” I asked.

“Yahoo! Let’s open it!”

I nodded, and he opened the chest.

He peered in at the contents.

“Heh-heh-heh... With this, I can make my comeback as a rich man... Huh?”

In an instant, his smile turned upside down, and the color drained from his face.

“...? What’s inside?”

From where I stood, I eyed the contents.

The case did not contain a single coin.

Instead, it was packed full of slips of paper.

Papers from friends, relatives, inns, liquor stores, meat shops, and greengrocers. They detailed every bit of money his father had borrowed, including the deadlines for repayment, and even the names of guarantors, all meticulously recorded. The case was stuffed full of them, as well as a brief memo.

Dear son, take care of these for me, will ya? —Dad

“Of all the...unbelievable...! This can’t be happening...! Old maaaaaaaaan!”

Then he ripped every piece of paper out of the case and tossed it aside. Invoice after invoice went fluttering away on the breeze.

Among them was a single letter. He seemed to throw it away without noticing.

The letter read:

Sorry. The “buried treasure” thing was a lie. I was never actually some legendary gambler. Sure, things were going well at first, but eventually I stopped winning. I’m just a terrible father who fell deep into debt. Please find it in your heart to forgive your no-good dad somehow. And while you’re at it, it’d be great if you could settle my debts. I’ve explained everything to the lenders. They should be waiting for you to get the money together. I’m counting on you.

It really was an incredible setup. The father had been such a scumbag that it was almost refreshingly honest.

“Old maaaaaaaaan!!”

As I looked at the man with pity, I could think only one thing:
I guess the apple really doesn’t fall far from the tree.



CHAPTER 8

The Country of Truth Tellers

“...The Country of Truth Tellers?”

As I stood before the gate of a small country near the coast, I puzzled over the strange name the guard had said.

“That’s right! Our country is called the Country of Truth Tellers. As the name states, there are no liars here! And boy, does this place suck!”

“...Huh.”

“The moment a person passes through this gate and enters our territory, they lose the ability to lie. It doesn’t matter who they are—even if they’re a witch.”

Contrary to my expectations, I felt a small surge of interest.

“Exactly how does that work?”

“The magic sword in our king’s possession has some mysterious power and apparently blankets the whole country with a net of honesty. Oh dear, I suppose that sounds very fishy, but that’s how it works.”

“.....”

“So, Madam Witch, what do you think? Will you enter our country?”

To that, I gave my response.



I requested a three-day, two-night stay and passed through the gate.

As I entered, the faint scent of the ocean wafted in on a cool, early summer breeze.

The seaside townscape was vibrant. The houses lined up along the road were painted blue, red, yellow, green, purple, and other bright shades. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason. But the mismatched colors worked together somehow.

The whole atmosphere in this country was nice.

“Miss Witch! Come buy our bread! It’s not that delicious, and it’s been out for a while, so it’s getting a little stale. Oh, and the bread at the very front

of the store is leftover from two days ago, but we're selling it at regular price anyway! Buy it!"

"...Um, who would intentionally buy garbage?"

An unbelievable voice had come from a stall that I passed by, and without thinking, I had made a jab at the speaker.

For some reason, what came out of my mouth was about 20 percent meaner than usual. *Is it because I can't lie?*

"How could you?! Obviously, the taste and quality go down because we've left it out for a long time! But it's not inedible! Buy it!"

"....."

For a moment, it seemed like the very first thing I would do after entering the Country of Truth Tellers would be to get in a fight with a random shopkeeper. But apparently everyone here was used to that sort of interaction.

"Oh, Miss Witch! You're so cute it's sickening! By the way, I've made a new perfume recently. Won't you buy some? I don't really want to sell it to a cute young lady like you, but I am running a business here, after all."

"Oh, hello there. Honestly, you're not really my type, and you're far too young, and worst of all, your chest is way too small, but right now I'm practically starved for female attention. If you like, we could go get some tea over there—Oh, no?"

Everyone was so brutally honest, it made me want to give them a piece of my mind, like "*To be perfectly blunt, are you all stupid?*"

Their inappropriate comments gave the whole country a vaguely sinister air.

"Bald as ever, huh?"

"Yup, and you're fat as always."

"I've thought this for a while, but your breath reeks."

"Yup, and your body odor makes me want to gag."

"...Ha-ha-ha."

"...Ha-ha-ha."

The combative natures of people were being forcibly brought to the surface, since they were unable to conceal their true selves.

...What on earth could that king have been thinking when he made the country this way?

I wandered through the town until I eventually caught sight of the castle.

“As of today, it has been half a year since we abolished lies from our country! What do you think, everyone?! Isn’t it wonderful to have a country without dishonesty?!”

The young king was in the middle of delivering a spirited speech.

In his hand, he held an elaborately decorated sword. The thing was so gaudy that, if anyone had asked me, I wouldn’t have been able to keep myself from remarking that the king suffered from a serious case of bad taste.

The crowd before the king roared, holding up signs:

YOU'RE THE BEST, SIRE!

THANK YOU FOR OUR WONDERFUL COUNTRY WITHOUT LIES!

I GOT A GIRLFRIEND THANKS TO YOU!

LONG LIVE THE KING!

There wasn’t a single person shouting a coherent sentence. They were all just cheering and hooting in incomprehensible garbles.

The king nodded at his citizens, evidently satisfied, and pointed the sword toward the heavens.

“Lies are evil! We must hold them in contempt! I swear on this sword: Our country will continue to be a noble and righteous land with absolutely no falsehood!”

I'LL FOLLOW YOU FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE!

I LOVE THE KING!

INCREDIBLE! SLEEP WITH ME!

LONG LIVE THE KING!

LONG LIVE THE KING!

“From words without lies, and from honesty without deception, come real, trusting relationships! By pitting truth against truth, let us lead this country down the path of righteousness!”

.....

As I watched from a distance, filled with feelings about the strange spectacle that I hesitated to say in public, someone suddenly tapped my shoulder.

When I turned around, there stood a witch in an earthy-brown robe and pointy hat. She looked to be in her early twenties and had disheveled, mud-colored hair.

“...What is it?”

Wearing an elated expression, she silently held up a sketchbook with the words *You're the witch who was dispatched from the United Magic Association, right?* written on a page.

“.....?” I tilted my head in confusion. “No, I’m not.”

Oh, the United Magic Association was the organization that held the apprentice witch advancement exams, resolved any magical incidents, and researched new types of magic. To put it simply, they were a mysterious organization that wanted to have a hand in all things magic.

“You should know, members of the United Magic Association wear moon-shaped brooches on their chests.” My brooch was star-shaped and served as proof of my witchhood.

Once I had kindly explained that much, the girl seemed to realize her mistake—her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment, and she began to run her pen around the page in a panicked rush.

I'm sorry, wrong person, please forget I said anything!

She held up the sketchbook again and, after bowing several times, ran off.

What on earth was that about?

“...Hmm?”

Come to think of it, why did she write everything down on paper? Does communicating nonverbally somehow exempt you from the truth-telling rule?

Doubts arose in me as I shifted my attention between the strange witch who didn’t speak and the mob of people gathered in front of the king.

Spoiler alert: The truth-telling rule does, in fact, apply to written words as well.

For example, a sign advertising a new type of treat at a shop read TRY OUR NEWEST BAKED GOODS! and after that was appended ACTUALLY, WE JUST ADDED A NEW INGREDIENT TO SOMETHING WE HAD ALREADY BEEN SELLING. At other shops—a candy store, a café, a bookstore, and others—generally speaking, the signs were a mess.

THE MANAGER’S SPECIAL! OUR HOT NEW ITEM ON THE MENU! THEY’RE DELICIOUS! THAT’S A LIE. THEY’RE TRASH. THEY’RE CRAP. IF YOU EAT THEM, YOU’LL DIE.

A DEBUT NOVEL WEAVES A TALE OF MYSTERY! EVEN BESTSELLING AUTHORS

WERE SHOCKED! (AT HOW BAD IT WAS.)

THESE NEW PRODUCTS ARE FORTY PERCENT MORE EFFECTIVE THAN THE PREVIOUS ONES! WELL, YOU'LL AT LEAST THINK THEY ARE.

And so on.

The signs at every store all had sentences that could be taken as slander—added to the end of each statement. Never at the beginning, it seemed, but always tacked on after the pitch. On top of that, every advertisement and sign had marks like it had been dirtied on purpose with parts that were forcefully erased, and there was no ignoring the fact that they were hard to read.

Feeling bored with all the uncontrolled honesty, I stepped foot in an inn that had a blurred, dirty signboard standing next to it that read SUPERCHEAP INN! CHEAP BUT EXTREMELY CLEAN!

Since this is the Country of Truth Tellers, those words on the sign can't possibly be a lie.

“.....”

However, the room that was prepared for me was far from beautiful. It was trash. It was the worst. It looked like if I spent the night there, I would die.

Is this what passes for clean to the owner of the inn...? He must have vision problems.

I holed myself up in the room, feeling disappointed by cruel reality, and took a memo pad and pen out of my bag.

“...What should I write?”

I figured I might as well push the limits on this prohibition on lying.

I held the pen to my mouth for a little while, then hit upon the idea to try to write down what had happened that day.

And so I wrote. Fretting over it, remembering as I went, I pushed the pen over paper.

Now I could see that somehow or other, whenever I tried to write a lie, my hand would move on its own and write the truth instead. I thought I would try writing some noncommittal untruths, but despite my best efforts, after I finished writing, only facts were written on the page.

For example, when I tried to write the lie “I’m actually a man,” the letters on the page would spell out the opposite, and even when I tried to make the lie come out of my mouth, I would end up saying “I’m actually a woman”

instead.

Amending it afterward also had no effect. When I tried to say “The previous statement was a lie,” both out loud and in writing, what I saw and heard instead was “The previous statement was true.” This was pointless.

Even when I got a new piece of paper or devised some new roundabout way to lie, it seemed I was unable to say or write any false words.

“...Hmm.”

It was a strange sensation.

Once I had familiarized myself with the feeling, I spent a while playing around, making my body do things that didn’t follow my intentions.

“...Huh?”

I soon realized something odd.

I realized that the residents of this country, who had forcibly become truth tellers, all had an unspoken agreement to keep their mouths shut.



I strolled around town the following day as well.

As I passed through the profusely colorful cityscape, I asked questions at the food stalls, like “Is this tasty?” “Is it fresh?” and made them tell the truth. I bought tons of fresh and tasty food without any doubts, humming as I went.

Since this was a seaside town, I could hear the sound of gently crashing waves as I went about my food tour.

It was a good feeling.

I knew this town had a good vibe.

“You jerk! I’ll kill ya! You bald bastard! Yer breath stinks!”

“Shut up, fatso! That’s big talk coming from someone with your BO!”

“Die!”

“You first!”

.....

The pleasant atmosphere was immediately obliterated.

I turned to look, and in the direction I was headed, I saw two men hurling insults at each other as they grappled: a fat man who was so inflated that he looked like he would pop if stuck with a pin and a bald man whose head was giving off a dazzling sheen. Incidentally, they were surrounded by a miasma

of body odor and bad breath.

...Actually, those are the two men I saw yesterday.

“...Wah!”

Caught up in their struggle, the two men didn’t pay any mind to the crowd forming around them. The people just watched. No one seemed to have any desire to intervene.

I mean, I did the same thing.

“Is it okay that no one’s stopping them?”

I posed the question to a nearby man. I knew it would be better to stop them, but since I didn’t want to do it myself, the next best thing was to get someone else to do it.

However...

“Hmm? Miss Witch, could it be that you’re not from around here?”

I nodded, and the man smiled.

“Arguments like that happen on a daily basis in our country. But watching other people fight is a great way to relieve stress, so no one ever intervenes.”

“.....”

“We have so much pent-up rage thanks to that idiot king of ours, so this is a good way to blow off a little steam.”

What a strange thing to say.

“Trusting relationships will be born from struggle”—I could see that there was a hopelessly deep rift between the words of the king and the experiences of his subjects.

“Okay, stop iiiiiiiiiittt!”

Just then, I heard a voice so loud, it made me want to cover my ears from across the road.

When I looked in the direction of the voice, next to the two grappling men stood a lone witch, gripping her wand—using magic, she had forced them to stop just before they were about to get physical.

The witch wore a black robe adorned with both star and moon brooches. She had short, glossy black hair and seemed to be a bit younger than me. She glared at the two men who had been fighting.

“Enough with this senseless squabble. It’s the middle of the day! Can’t you see you’re bothering everyone around you?”

I recognized her face, and she wore a familiar pointy hat.

“And as for the rest of you! If you’ve got time to watch, then stop the

fight. Why should a nobody like me have to step in when they're surrounded by their own countrymen?"

She was absolutely fuming, with smoke coming out of her ears and all.

"....."

Long ago, I had given a girl a hat just like mine, and now here she stood before me.

"...What are you doing here, Saya?"

I pushed my way through the crowd until I was face-to-face with her.

She also noticed me.

"Ah...Elaina...?"

Her eyes went wide with surprise, and her limp mouth swung open. Her grip on her wand faltered, and the spell that was stopping the two men fizzled out.

Suddenly released from the grip of her magic, the men regained their momentum and punched each other right in the face. They both collapsed.

"Oh, sorry."

It was a very, very flimsy apology.



"I never thought I would meet you in a place like this, Elaina! Could this be fate? It's fate, isn't it? At this point, we have no choice but to get married!"

After the two men passed out, and we left them at the mercy of the crowd, we sauntered around town and spoke for the first time in ages.

"It really has been a while, hasn't it? Have you been well?"

I pretended I hadn't heard the last thing she said.

"Thanks to this hat, I've been extremely well! I made it. I became a witch."

Saya gently stroked the pointy hat as she spoke.

The most important thing is that she's taken a liking to it.

"What witch name did you take?"

"I'm the Charcoal Witch."

"Huh... That's pretty similar to mine..."

I'm the Ashen Witch. It's almost exactly the same.

"I asked my teacher to choose a word that felt close to *ashen*."

She puffed out her chest as she spoke. When she did, the two brooches on her chest bumped into each other and made a ringing sound.

There they were: the star-shaped brooch and the moon-shaped brooch.

“You joined the United Magic Association?”

She nodded. “I did. I thought it would be the easiest way to earn money while I traveled.”

When a person joins the United Magic Association, they are provided with a moon-shaped brooch and are eligible to receive commissions from any Association branches they visit. It seemed she was able to earn a stable living that way.

I see. In other words...

“You’re here on business?”

“That’s right. That’s why I would be grateful if you would tell me a little about this place. I don’t really know anything about this country.”

“You accepted a commission and entered the country without knowing much about it...?”

I’m sorry. Are you an idiot?

“Well, it’s just that, right now, I’m low on funds because of some expensive purchases... I took this commission blindly because it promised a hefty reward. That’s why I’m here.”

“.....” I let out a sigh at Saya’s carelessness and lack of foresight. “What would you have done if that reward had been a lie?”

“But this is the Country of Truth Tellers, right? They shouldn’t be able to lie.”

“That doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“What do you mean?”

“Saya, do you have a piece of scrap paper?”

“I do, but...”

“Let me borrow it, please.”

“...?” Tilting her head in confusion, she pulled a single sheet of paper from her pocket and held it out to me. “Okay, here you go!”

The thick paper was covered in neat, closely packed writing. By all appearances, she had handed me the formal request that the country had issued in sending for a witch.

“...It should be obvious that I can’t scribble on *this*.”

Incidentally, the request Saya received was as follows:

Dear United Magic Association,

I would like to extend a request. Currently, due to the power granted to our king by a magical sword, no one in our country is able to tell a lie. Telling the truth is not inherently bad; however, it is a tremendous inconvenience to us citizens. Can you please send a representative to our country to help us solve this problem once and for all? We will pay a reward in accordance with the following—

Sitting next to me as I took a long, hard look at the request form, Saya puffed up her cheeks.

“It’s nice that the reward for this commission is high, but it doesn’t have the client’s name or address or anything else written on it. So I have to start by searching for the sender. Basically, I can’t get any information from that letter. What I’m saying is that that paper may look important, but the truth is I don’t need it. Do whatever you want with it. Eat it for all I care.”

“I think you’re mistaking me for a goat, Saya.”

As Saya fumed, I sighed and took another look at the paper in my hand.

Somehow, I had the feeling I had seen it somewhere before. The thick paper looked just like the paper used in a sketchbook, and the beautiful handwriting looked familiar as well.

.....

Oh.

“I think I might know who sent this request.”

“Ah! Really?!”

“Do you know what country we’re in right now?” I said as I returned the thick paper to her hand.



We went back to the palace. In contrast to the previous day, there was nothing you could call a crowd, just people coming and going through the square.

“.....”

“.....”

In no time at all, we found the witch we were looking for.

She was running around in a panic, thrusting her sketchbook at various people passing by. On it was written *Is there anyone here who knows about the witch dispatched from the United Magic Association? She's wearing a moon-shaped brooch.*

It was extremely suspicious behavior. She stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Hey! You again! You can’t hang around in this area after being banned from the palace, you incompetent witch!”

Eek! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!

She was chased off by a soldier.

“...That weirdo?” asked Saya.

“That weirdo.”

I nodded at Saya, who looked doubtful.

Then we chased after the runaway witch.

What a terrible experience...

The witch who had been running around was now huddled up in the back of an alleyway, clutching her sketchbook. She was crying.

I stuck my face out from the alleyway to check the road and confirmed that the soldier was nowhere nearby.

“Hello there. Haven’t seen you since yesterday.”

She was surprised.

You’re the witch from yesterday! What’s up?

“If I remember correctly, you’re searching for the witch who was dispatched from the United Magic Association, right?”

Ah, yes, but...

“Allow me to introduce you. This is my friend Saya. Apparently, she’s the one who the United Magic Association sent.”

I put a hand on Saya’s shoulder and pointed to her chest with my other hand as I spoke.

“Ah, hi there!” Saya chirped very casually.

The girl was surprised again.

That brooch! So you’re the witch I’m looking for! I see... I am the Quicksand Witch, Eihemia. I’m the one who sent the request to the

United Magic Association.

Saya took out the thick piece of paper. “Is this your form?”

Nodding several times, Eihemia turned over a new page in her sketchbook, and after holding up the word YES, she turned the page again and wrote on the new page: *Sorry. I was in a hurry. I carelessly forgot to write my name or a place to meet. Oopsie*, she explained.

It seemed she had prepared some simple answers in advance.

And so—

“Um, you can’t talk?”

YES.

“Why?”

Out of the mouth comes evil.

“Would you be serious, please?”

...There's some backstory to it, she wrote. But it is deeply connected to the current state of the country. Since you've taken the commission, please allow me to tell you my story.

“Hmm.”

“Ah, wait a minute, please; I’ll take notes.”

I nodded, and Saya got a pen and paper ready. She certainly looked like an overly attentive new hire, trying to leave a good impression on her first day.

And then, after Eihemia had looked the two of us over, she began to write.

The truth is, I was the one who crafted the king's sword.

For some reason, she looked a bit proud.

It all happened a little over half a year ago.

Eihemia, who was working in the palace at the time, received a request from the king.

“Rid this country of liars. I only want honest people around me.”

She had listened to the situation. Apparently, the king believed all his retainers were lying to him. He could no longer bear this treachery, so he decided he had to eliminate all liars.

Eihemia respected the king deeply—and might have even harbored an unrequited love for him—so she immediately accepted the task and brainstormed ways to bring the lying to an end.

Then she had a flash of inspiration.

“That’s it! I can set up a barrier that will prevent people from lying as long as they’re within its boundaries!”

But creating this barrier would require a ton of magical energy. And so Eihemia sacrificed her own voice, greatly empowering the spell. However, it still wasn’t enough. With no other option, she resorted to pouring every last bit of her magical energy into the spell.

As a result, she lost the ability to use magic entirely and her voice, but she completed the sword.

You might ask why she had decided to sacrifice her voice. I asked her in the middle of her story, and she blushed and wrote *Because I was worried that if I lost the ability to lie, I might accidentally confess my feelings to the king...*

She was that shy.

Afterward, she had taken the finished sword to the king immediately.

My king. If you grip this sword with your dominant hand, the whole country will immediately lose the ability to lie. If you let go, or hold it in your nondominant hand, the effect will vanish. Please accept it.

This way, the king would always have to carry around her gift. She was quite the schemer.

“...Why does it have to be my dominant hand?”

The spell is stronger this way.

That had been a lie. The truth was that Eihemia hoped to remain by the king’s side, helping him whenever he had trouble because he couldn’t use his dominant hand.

“Hmm... By the way, why can’t you speak?” The king thought it was strange. She revealed everything about the situation to him, and he lamented, *“You went that far to obey my orders... If everyone was as devoted as you, I wouldn’t have had to resort to this kind of action...”*

Your kind words are wasted on me.

Then the king took the sword in his dominant hand and said, *“But wow, what’s with this tacky sword? You sure have bad taste. I guess I’m stuck carrying this piece of junk around, huh?”*

...Huh?

“...Oops.”

That day ended on a somewhat awkward note, after the king accidentally

spilled what he really thought.

The following day, the king used the sword to bring sweeping reform to the entire country. First, he banished retainers who refused his orders. Next, he used military might against the citizens who complained about being unable to lie.

Thus, the Country of Truth Tellers—or rather, the Country of Hostage Loyalists—was founded.

And now the only people left were those who agreed with the king, no matter what.

By the way, after losing her magic, Eihemia was deemed incompetent and expelled from the palace.

I had no value to him other than my magic powers..., Eihemia wrote, finishing her story.

I had never heard anything so absurd.

“Of course your magic was all he cared about. You were employed as a witch.”

I thought I would still be able to stay by his side, even after I lost my magic.

Indifferent to Eihemia’s suffering, Saya added, “But knowing you’re the reason someone gave up their voice and used up all their magic just to follow your orders is a lot of emotional baggage, isn’t it? Didn’t you consider that the king might feel uncomfortable?”

Those are choice words coming from someone who talked about fate and marriage the moment we were reunited!

Ignoring my exasperation, Saya stared at the request form.

“The request you submitted was for me to return this country to normal, right, Eihemia? What’s the best way to go about doing that?”

Take the sword out of the king’s hand.

“I see.” Saya nodded.

“What would happen if we destroyed the sword?” I asked.

The magic energy that I poured into the sword would dissipate, and both my voice and my powers would be restored.

“Oh-ho.”

“In that case, the easiest way would be to destroy the sword while the king is making a speech like he did yesterday, right?”

The next speech is in one month.

“Elaina, the two of us could share a room for a month—”

“Let’s come up with another plan, shall we?”

To steal the king’s sword, you can’t go wrong by entering the palace.

“...But won’t it be difficult to get in if we can’t lie? If anyone asks us what we’re doing there, our cover will be blown,” argued Saya.

True.

“This is the Country of Truth Tellers, right? So it must be impossible to lie your way in.” I continued, “But if we use that thing Eihemia is holding, we can make it work somehow. The magic here prevents lying, but there’s more than one way to deceive a person.”

Even if we couldn’t lie out loud, we could get by with writing.

Eihemia nodded and held up her sketchbook with the word **YES** written on it. She seemed to realize the loophole in her spell—the fact of the tacit understanding already established here. She may have even arranged it that way on purpose.

“...? What are you talking about, Elaina?”

Allow me to explain.

I borrowed the sketchbook from Eihemia.

“Ready? We can do it like this—”

And then I wrote out our strategy for her.

.....

Before I knew it, I was lending a hand with Saya’s operation, but I didn’t want to touch on that until the very end. After all, in a country where you couldn’t lie, it would be impossible to hide your embarrassment.



“Pardon me. What is your business here? You can’t go any farther in without prior approval from the king.” As we had expected, a guard stopped us at the entrance to the palace. Then the guard noticed that Eihemia was with us. “Ah! You! What are *you* doing here?! You’ve been banned!”

Eek! I’m sorry! Sorry!

“Hey, now.” I grabbed Eihemia—who had turned tail and prepared to flee—by the scruff of the neck and pushed Saya forward with a slap on the back.

“Saya, hurry up and explain the situation, please.”

Standing in front of the guard, Saya confidently held up a single sheet of paper.

“Ahem. Mr. Guard, do you understand what is on this piece of paper?”

On that slightly dirty paper was the following:

I repeal the banishment of the Quicksand Witch, Eihemia. I grant permission for her, along with the Ashen Witch, Elaina, and the Charcoal Witch, Saya, to enter the castle.

It was written quite clearly and even included the king’s signature.

“It says your banishment was revoked...? This is suspicious. Is this real?”

Playing hardball, huh?

“What are you saying? Isn’t this the Country of Truth Tellers? It couldn’t possibly be false, could it? Or are you saying the king is lying to us?”

“...Hmm, that is a good point.”

“Well, step aside, please.”

“.....” The guard begrudgingly stepped aside, allowing us to boldly pass through the gate.

Phony letter in hand.

In this country, no one could tell a lie. Verbally. However, the situation was different in writing. Letters were different than words, as they could be erased. If one was to erase a letter after writing it properly in the first place, one could very easily craft a lie.

Since revisions didn’t work for whole words, it was impossible to write a lie, no matter what you tried. But if you only edited the letters... Well, there were a number of ways to tamper with them.

The previous day, when I was testing the limits of the spell in my hotel room, I had realized this fact. The ragged signboards everywhere in this country seemed to have been made in the same way. I understood why I had gotten a dirty room at a place that advertised its cleanliness. The people of this country had realized they could lie in writing and were keeping quiet about it.

“Yay! That went really well, didn’t it? Just as I expected of one of

Elaina's ideas."

"Thanks for saying so."

As we walked through the castle, Saya stared at the letter I had forged. By the way, I had copied the king's signature. After properly writing that *This is an imitation of the king's signature*, I had erased everything except for his name, completing the forgery.

No doubt about it! The pen is mightier than the sword!

There was someone next to me writing strange things and wearing a triumphant expression, but I pretended not to see.

"And, Eihemia? Where should we go from here?" Saya asked.

Probably the throne room? The king is always there, killing time.

"Oh-ho. So where is the throne room?"

Pretty far from here.

"Got it. All right, you two, follow me, please! I'll protect you."

"You're awfully enthusiastic, Saya."

Welp, I can't fight anyway, so I'll hide in the back.

"All right, leave it to me. In my capable hands, it'll only take a second to get the sword away from the king."

Where is all this confidence coming from?

"Do you have some sort of plan?"

"First, I'll go right through the main door. Then I just have to say '*Hello, I am a witch from the United Magic Association, and right now we're conducting research on magical artifacts. If you don't mind, would you please let me see that amazing sword?*' And then the king should hand it over, right? I mean, it's a perfect plan, hee-hee-hee!"

"It's obviously full of holes."

There's no way he would part with my sword for such a stupid reason!

We have two witches, so one could distract the king while the other steals the sword. That would be a more reliable method, I think. Well, we could do that even without two of us, though.

Anyway, we'd better touch base before we confront the king—I thought as we progressed through the middle of the palace.

"What's with all the noise?"

The king emerged from a door directly ahead of us.

But why? Isn't it supposed to be a ways off? I turned around with a virtual

question mark hovering over my head.

Sorry. The throne room is here. It was actually quite close.

Eihemia had written these words.

It was a very flimsy apology. In every sense.



“There’s no way around it, now that we’ve been discovered. Your highness, please let go of that sword right now.”

I realized it would be impossible to proceed safely, so I quickly pulled out my wand, pointed it at the king, and stepped forward, pushing him back into the throne room.

However, as he retreated, the king shouted “Intruderrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrs!” and summoned his guardsmen.

A huge crowd of soldiers came thundering down the hall, shouting things like:

“What was that?”

“That was the king’s voice!”

“Is something wrong?”

They surged through the open doors, and in an instant, our path of retreat had been cut off.

Mm-hmm.

“Saya. I’ll deal with the king. You do something about the soldiers, please.”

“Leave it to me!” Saya readied her wand.

As for Eihemia, she shrank into my side and held up the words *I am a noncombatant.*

She was totally unwilling to participate.

Well, I guess that’s better than getting in the way.

“Your highness. Hand me the sword, please.” Slowly and steadily, I closed the distance to the king.

“Eh, shut up! Be quiet! Eihemia...what the hell are you doing?!”

My king. That sword is dangerous. I should know. I made it. Eihemia was holding up her sketchbook behind me. *So please give it back.*

“What are you saying?! This sword is the best weapon I have to lead this

country. As long as I have this, I can guide the country in the right direction.”

And then the king said, “Even if villains come after my sword, I can deal with them myself—like this!” He swung the sword in a horizontal slash.

A burst of magical energy flashed from the blade. The bluish-white light formed a crescent-moon shape and flew toward us with the force of his swing.

“Oof.” I dodged it no problem.

It hit Saya.

“Owwwwwwwwwwww!”

The sound of her shrieking filled the hall.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Wahhh... How awful...”

It sure would've been nice to know that sword can use magic...

Watch out. That sword can release accumulated magical energy when he swings it. It will really hurt if it hits you.

And why are you telling me this now?

“Tch... So my ordinary methods won’t work against witches—in that case, how about this?! Take that!”

Over and over, the king swung the sword, firing blasts of magical energy. I knocked down every attack so they wouldn’t hit Saya.

Behind me, I could hear signs that Saya was watching, in her half-desperate cries of “Hyah!” and “Damn you!”

“Your Highness, do you think this country has improved since you banned all lying?”

“Of course! All the citizens of my country are happy, aren’t they?”

“Isn’t that because the only people left are the ones who admire your country, while the others have all been chased out?”

“Same difference. We had to eliminate any rebels or traitors.”

“That’s true—on that point, we agree. But there’s a possibility that not everyone really admires what you’re doing.”

“...What did you say?”

As the king furrowed his brow, I thought back to all the signs I had seen in this country—and to the men who had been fighting in the street.

“This place is the Country of Truth Tellers, right? Here, lots of people openly admit their feelings and speak their real opinions, for better or worse. However, there is a downside to all this honesty.

“If you go out of your way to say something that doesn’t need to be said, it’s probably not just because you want the other person to improve their ways. More often than not, it’s stress and frustration taking over.

“It’s the same thing if you write something that doesn’t really need to be written. Not to mention the fact that some other person might then come along and make harmful additions to what you wrote.

“Your citizens may cheer for your speeches, but they keep their mouths shut the rest of the time to hide their true feelings.

“It turns out honesty isn’t always the best policy. And so, in this country where lies—”

“Elaina! Sorry to interrupt, but we’re out of time! There are too many enemies! I can’t deal with them all! It feels like my brain is boiling! Nooooo!”

Do your best, Miss Witch from the United Magic Association.

“Heeeeelp meehee!”

I’m sorry. I’m just an observer.

.....

“It seems we’re out of time, so let’s wrap this up, shall we?”

But the king snorted at my proposal.

“Wrap this up? You fool. It’s taking everything you’ve got just to defend against my attacks!”

“...No, sorry. I already finished my preparations for taking your sword long ago.”

“Hmph. You’re bluffing.”

“Look behind you and tell me if you still think so.”

“...What?”

Without letting his guard down, the king peeked behind his back, then hesitated.

Behind him, my broom was floating there.

“Wha—? When did that—?”

Cutting the king off, I recalled the broom. At full throttle.

Whoosh! The broom charged at the king’s back. Letting out a low groan, the king flew toward me.

In that moment, the magic sword fell from his grasp.

“Hyah.”

I conjured up a lump of solid iron and sent it flying at the falling sword.

Boom! With a heavy crash, the iron broke the sword in two, then cratered the floor.

With a pleasant snap, magical energy shot out of the sword all at once, and the bluish-white light returned to Eihemia. The shimmering beads of magical energy looked like stars in the night sky.

I marveled at the beautiful spectacle for a moment.

“People with ill will can do evil deeds without lying, and there’s no guarantee that all the people left in this country are good people.”

“.....”

“Plus, not everyone who lies is a bad person.”

If the sword was truth, then lies were the scabbard. To keep it from swinging around indiscriminately and injuring people, lies held the truth in check. That was one way of thinking about it.

“.....”

The king slowly dropped to his knees. He stared motionlessly at the floor, either deep in thought or simply upset. And then, after several very long seconds had passed...

“So what’re you saying...?! That I’m... That I was wrong...?” he mumbled at someone.

“No, you weren’t wrong.”

Replying to the king was a voice I hadn’t heard before, but I knew right away who was speaking.

It was Eihemia. She had regained her voice.

“My king—it’s just, you’re a little too honest about your own feelings. From now on, how about you take a breather and use every trick in the book, including lying—and holding your tongue when something doesn’t need to be said?” Eihemia spoke, smiling gently.

I couldn’t tell whether she spoke the truth or lied for the sake of the king.

It was no longer possible to tell which was which.



Here’s what happened after that.

The king appeared before his people and apologized for the six-month period that banned all lies. He told them with sincerity that he was sorry for

everything he had done and begged for their forgiveness.

As for how the citizens reacted, they were surprisingly indifferent. They didn't revolt or anything—didn't even jeer at him. They just accepted his apology dispassionately, and when he was finished talking, a smattering of applause rose from the crowd gathered before the palace.

It was clear that the king had not yet won back their trust.

Eihemia, who had regained her voice and ability to use magic, was reinstated as the official palace witch.

"I'm going to be busy from now on!" she said rather enthusiastically. Her eyes twinkled as she stood next to her king, who was eager to put an end to the whole affair.

It seemed like it would take some time before the country was back to normal—before the various tasks of the king had been completed.

"Elaina, I'd like to talk to you about the payment for this job." Saya grabbed my sleeve as we passed through the gate and left the country.

"What is it?"

"I got your help with this job, didn't I? So I was thinking... I should probably pay you."

"Eh, that's okay. I don't really need any payment."

"You can't say that." Saya frowned. "According to the rules, I must split my reward with any mages that help me. I have to repay you somehow."

"If you always stick to the book, you'll never learn to act off script."

Besides, it's not like I did it for the money. I can't say that, though.

"But please, let me do something to thank you!"

"...No, it's really fine."

She was begging me to let her show her appreciation, but I just kept shooting her down.

It felt strange.

"Well, how about this? I'll give you something nice, as thanks for giving me this great hat!"

She clapped her hands, fished around in the bag she was holding, and pulled out something small.

In her hand were two necklaces.

She held on to one and held the second out to me.

"...What is this?" I asked as I took it.

Saya snorted. "Hmm-hmm. What is this, you ask? This is something I

bought using all the money I had on hand, for when I next met you, Elaina. Actually, the reason I ran out of money is because I spent it all on these. Because of that, I took this commission, and I was able to meet you here. It must be fate!"

"Oof, that's a lot to bear."

I thought it was weighty enough to rival Eihemia's backstory. It seemed likely that she had talked me into letting her give me a token of her appreciation just so she could present me with this necklace. *That little rascal.*

"Treasure that necklace as if it were my heart."

"....."

I don't really want something like this, though...

What if I think of you every time I look at your gift? And what if it makes me miss you?

That'd be a pretty bad habit for a traveler to develop.

.....

After staring at the necklace in silence, and at Saya for several seconds, I finally said, "Thank you very much. I'll take good care of it."

Well, whatever.

I guess it can't hurt to go with the flow every once in a while.

"Well then, this is where we part ways—I'm heading for the branch office of the United Magic Association, and I suppose you'll be getting back to your travels, Elaina?"

"Yes," I said as I put on the necklace. "This is good-bye, Saya."

"...Well, let's meet again sometime, somewhere."

"If we meet, then we meet. If not, this is it."

"I won't let this be the end." She stuck out her pinkie and thrust it toward me.

"...What are you doing?"

"This is a good luck charm for promises, from my hometown! Hook your little finger onto mine, please."

"....."

How on earth is hooking our pinkies together supposed to bring us good luck?

I latched my pinkie onto hers.

"Elaina. I promise. I will definitely see you again someday. And by then, I

will have become an even more impressive witch," Saya said, grinning.

So I replied, "I'll travel as I wait patiently."





CHAPTER 9

Regarding the Bomb

There was a forest full of tall, thin trees.

On my broom, I glided over the winding path that seemed to force its way through the gaps between the trees. Piles of dry leaves rustled and stirred as I passed.

The air was cool, and the wind was gentle.

Wow, this feels great!

This would definitely be a wonderful place to just lie down and take a nap.

“.....”

I proceeded through the forest for a while until I caught sight of a carriage. To everyone's inconvenience, it had stopped dead in the middle of the narrow path, luggage piled high.

I could only see the back of the carriage from where I was, which meant I couldn't see the coachman. *He must be enjoying a nap of his own. Or maybe he's the self-appointed gatekeeper, holding up anyone trying to pass.*

“...Hyah.”

There was no way around it, so I tilted my broom upward a little, lifting higher off the ground.

High enough to fly over the obstacle.

When I was directly over the carriage, I looked down.

There I saw the carriage roof and a horse munching on some grass—and also the silhouette of a man lying on the side of the road.

With a single glance, I understood the reason why the carriage had stopped in the middle of the road. The man wasn't taking a nap or slacking off, and he certainly hadn't meant to block anyone's way.

“.....”

The man was covered in wounds and smeared with blood.

He had collapsed limply by the side of the carriage.



What on earth happened here?

I had no way of figuring out what transpired, but what I did know was that the life of the coachman was in danger.

I felt it would be too heartless of me to fly away and let him be, so I landed my broom right away, pulled out my wand, and healed him using a magic spell. A warm white mist enveloped the man, caressing the bloody cuts and bruises all over his body and erasing them.

He was on the younger side, although he looked older than me. Around his midtwenties, I guessed. His disheveled black hair was dull and full of dirt.

“...Unh.”

As the man’s wounds finally faded, he cracked open his eyes. He stared vacantly up at the forest canopy before noticing my existence.

“Are you all right?” I spoke to him from above.

“.....”

There was no response.

“Um. Are you all right?” I tried passing a hand over his face.

“.....” And then, after that, he blinked his eyes, opening and closing his mouth a few times before finally pushing himself up into an upright position. “Ah, um...! I don’t know who you are, but how long was I out?”

He must not be fully awake yet. His inquiry seemed hurried and hysterical.

“I just happened to be passing by, so I don’t know—but it couldn’t have been that long.”

Because the blood hadn’t dried yet.

“Th-thank goodness! In that case, I can still make it...! Um, I don’t know who you are, but—”

“Elaina. That’s my name.”

“Elaina! Would you be so kind as to listen to my request?” He reached out to grab my hand, but I deftly pulled away.

“I’m very sorry, but I’m in a hurry.”

“I u-understand, but please just lend me an ear!”

“...Uh-huh.” I sighed. I could already sense a big old headache coming on.

Ignoring my growing exasperation, the man desperately tried to string together an explanation. “I fully get that this request is outrageous, especially after you’ve already helped me once. But if we don’t do anything, the unthinkable will happen! Please, I’m begging you! Lend me your strength!”

He knelt on the ground and bowed over and over again. “*Please, please,*” he repeated as he bowed.

...Somehow, I feel like I've had this exact same exchange somewhere before.

Giving it some thought, I realized this was just like an earlier turn of events, when I got roped into a strange situation after healing some other person. It was starting to feel like this was my inescapable fate. I guess I’m just the type of character who gets roped into things after helping those in need.

With my finger, I felt around to confirm that the star-shaped brooch was on my breast where it belonged. “Well, I suppose I can just listen to your story.”

When he heard that, without a moment’s delay, the man shouted, “If we don’t do anything, lots of people will die!”

I was more confused than intrigued.

Eventually, I got him to slow down and backtrack.

According to him, he was the driver of the coach and a merchant, and he had been in the middle of hauling a certain package to the next country over. However, the carriage ran into some trouble along the way.

Long story short, it was attacked by a gang of thieves.

One horse and one feeble man against a gang of ten brawny outlaws. He never stood a chance. The man had very quickly been yanked from the carriage, and then the thieves beat the living daylights out of him and stole anything of monetary value.

“That sounds awful.”

“Yes. It was very painful. It’s a small mercy that I didn’t die.”

“So how is this connected to the deaths of lots of people?”

Are you royalty disguised as a merchant? Is there a twist, where you’re going to kill a bunch of thieves in retaliation?

The man took a deep breath. “Well...the thing I was carrying in the back of my carriage was made at the behest of the country down the road... It was a bomb.”

“A bomb?”

“Yes. They said it was for making a tunnel or something. I don’t really

understand it. They spent an unfathomable amount of money to have someone else make it for them.”

“Oh-ho. How much?”

“About ten thousand gold pieces.”

My head started to hurt. That was an insane price to pay for a tunneling bomb. *Are they stupid?*

But now I understood.

Somehow, the plot was coming together in my mind.

“In other words, you handed over an incredibly expensive bomb to a bunch of thieves, giving them the ability to use it for their own evil purposes —Is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s right. It’s a very grave matter. If the thieves carry the bomb into our country, many of our people may die.”

“That does sound serious.”

From the way he spoke, it sounded like he wouldn’t be nearly as concerned if the thieves had carried the bomb off toward the country down the road.

Why is that? Are they on bad terms? Why even make this bomb in the first place?

“Yes... Also, most importantly, the bomb is extremely volatile. If there’s even the slightest error in calibration, it will instantly explode.”

“What the heck...?”

“I’m one of the people who was involved in its development, so I know how to handle it, but the bomb has an extremely complicated structure. And of course, the customer paid for power, so it’s got plenty of that, obviously.”

“You helped make it?”

“Yes. I designed it, and I wrote the manual.”

“.....”

That’s not exactly what I would call helping. You’re no simple merchant; you’re the lead developer! Why did you lie, I wonder?

“We made it easy to operate, but even so, I can’t say it would be impossible to make a mistake.”

“In other words, even thieves could easily handle it.”

“That’s exactly the case. And since they can use it, I don’t know what they’re going to do with it.”

“.....”

So this man must want to keep the gang of thieves from going to his country and using the bomb for evil.

I see. Now I get why he's so flustered. There would be nothing sadder than having your own country destroyed by a bomb you had a hand in making.

"If we do nothing, then something bad is going to happen. We have to take the bomb back from the thieves by any means necessary."

Obviously, we couldn't let this sit. Sooner or later, this situation was bound to get even more troublesome. It made me feel like we didn't have time to hesitate. If no one did anything, people would die.

I realized I was getting flustered when I noticed I had unconsciously picked up my broom.

"I'll try to pick up the thieves' trail from the air. You go warn the people in the country down the road that the bomb has been stolen."

"..." His eyes darted around for a second. "Ah y-yes. Understood." And he dashed off on his horse.

And then—

"All right, let's go."

I got on my broom.

But the moment I did, the dreadful sound of an explosion blasted through the entire forest.

The shock wave ripped through the trees, and animals cried out in confusion. Looking up at the sky, I could see birds flying away, screeching.

The man and I looked at each other.

His complicated expression revealed a jumble of emotion.

This time, I felt a little bit of regret for dawdling about, making casual conversation.



In a confused panic, the man had said "*Wait, I'll go with you!*" but I shook him loose and headed in the direction of the blast alone.

In case the worst had happened, I didn't want the man who made the bomb to see whatever I found there.

...That was my outward reason, but I imagine I was also panicking a little.

The explosive sound that reverberated through the forest had been terrifying.

When I had risen above the treetops on my broom, I could see sandy-colored smoke curling thinly through the air to the south. I headed toward the smoke and saw that there was a small settlement there. Emphasis on *was*.

“.....”

The people who had been living there no longer existed.

Blood and sinew and scraps from their settlement were scattered all over the place.

The humans and their flimsy wooden houses had been completely obliterated. Anything and everything that had been there was in pieces, as if it had been sliced clean through with a sharp sword.

In the center of the settlement was a gaping crater, as if the ground had been punctured by something huge. A cloud of dust was billowing out from it, rising into the air like smoke.

“.....”

It was there, on the site of the blast, that I picked up two ragged scraps of paper.

One appeared to be the instructions for the bomb.

The other was a letter.

I read it.

“...So that's what happened.”

After pocketing both pieces of paper, I went back and told the man of my findings, omitting the detail of the notes.

He had only one thing to say in response.

“Is that so...? That's too bad.”

And that was all he said.

“Are you all right, Mr. Merchant?! We heard a loud noise from the forest...” When we arrived at the country farther down the forest road, we were greeted not by the gate guards, but by the head vizier, who came out to meet us personally. And just like us, he was in a panic.

“Milord, I cannot possibly apologize enough.”

Then the man told him a simple version of the story that had led us here.

After he finished listening to the whole story of the terrible explosion, the vizier appeared struck with grief.

“What on earth...? How could such a thing...? And you weren’t injured, Mr. Merchant?”

“I was healed by this passing witch... Anyway, my wounds aren’t important. What matters is that I lost the bomb for the tunnel. I feel morally responsible for the incident. There is no question that this is my responsibility.”

“No, no! Please don’t put this on yourself! This was an unfortunate accident. Tragically, people’s lives were lost, but...”

Mm-hmm.

“But you were up against a bunch of thieves, right?” I interjected from the side, against my better judgment. “I suppose they got what was coming to them.”

The vizier glared at me. “Madam Witch. I cannot condone such a statement. Even if they were bad people, they were still people. It is always sad when lives are lost.”

“.....”

What was that?

I placed a hand to the pocket that contained the letter and didn’t say anything further.

The conversation continued without me, and the man launched into an explanation, completely ignoring my comment.

“But still, it was really unforgivable... Do you think you could find it in yourself to give me another chance?”

“Hmm? Another chance?”

“Could you possibly allow us to build another bomb? I won’t ask for any payment. And I will refund you for the first bomb as well. As an apology for the delayed delivery, please allow us to build you a new bomb for free, under my authority.”

The vizier was clearly very surprised at the man’s proposal.

“Never...! I could never allow that! In fact, we were prepared to offer you some compensation for your...difficulties.”

“Please, don’t even think about it. I want to see my project through. Would you be so kind as to allow me to bring another bomb to your country?”

“No, you mustn’t.”

“No, no, I insist.”

.....

Their unauthentic exchange continued for a while after that before reaching the compromise that the man would make a new bomb, and the vizier would pay him for his trouble.

The amount to be paid was one hundred gold pieces. It was a greatly reduced sum compared to the original amount. I wasn't sure if the bomb maker and the people of the other country seemed satisfied with the new agreement.

“.....” I remained completely silent as they spoke.

“All right, let's meet here again in one week's time.”

I stared at the bomb maker as he waved good-bye.



I met him again one week later, in the middle of the forest road.

“Oh, hello there. What a coincidence to meet again.”

I stood in front of the carriage blocking the way, waving my arms in the air.

The man looked down at me from atop the carriage. “Oh, Miss Witch. Thank you again for your help last week. I am truly grateful to you for healing my wounds.”

“Don't mention it.”

“Why don't you take a ride in my carriage? I'll get you a bite to eat as an expression of gratitude.”

“No, thanks. I'm in a hurry.”

“That's too bad. Well then, I'll take my leave.”

Then he cracked his whip and set the carriage rolling again.

But it soon stopped. The horse stomped its hooves, snorting in irritation.

I was the one who blocked it. I stroked the horse's head and exerted considerable force to thwart its movements.

“...? Just what could you be trying to do?” Anger flashed across the man's face as he stared down at me.

I stood in front of the carriage, obstructing his way.

“Nothing. I just have something I need to talk to you about.”

“...? What?”

“The truth is...,” I started. “It’s about that bomb. The other country has canceled their order.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Oh my. You couldn’t hear me at this distance?”

“I meant that I don’t understand what you’re saying. Why would they withdraw their request for our bomb? And why are *you* acting as their messenger?”

“I wonder? Maybe they realized what kind of bomb you were intending to make.”

“.....”

“Looks like your country tried to play a very clever trick.”

“.....”

I took a step toward the carriage.

“There’s a bomb loaded up in the carriage right now, isn’t there? Would it happen to be made the same way as the last one?”

I opened the carriage to reveal a bomb.

...No, it was the scattered pieces of a bomb.

When the thieves’ camp had been destroyed, I’d gotten a look at the instructions for the thing—including the steps to assemble it. In the manual were suspicious warnings: “The bomb is extremely volatile. Even the slightest error in calibration will cause it to explode without warning.” and “Please assemble on site before placement.”

“From the very beginning, you all *meant* for the bomb to malfunction, didn’t you?”

“No. That was, without a doubt, an unfortunate accident.”

“Yes. It was an unfortunate accident that the people who died were the thieves—and not the people of that country, right?”

“...Just what are you trying to say?”

It was simple.

The bomb to be delivered was riddled with design flaws. It was far too powerful to be useful as an excavator, and on top of that, it was incredibly prone to malfunction.

To make matters worse—and this was just my own hypothesis—there was the undeniable possibility that the usage manual itself was inaccurate and following it would cause even more malfunctions. In short, this man’s country had set the whole thing up from the start, for the very purpose of

snatching away people's lives. They intended for an accident to happen as the recipients assembled the bomb, causing a pandemonium.

"I'm holding onto a message from the vizier of that country, you know. Will you listen to it?"

"....."

Taking his silence as an affirmative, I lied to him, as he had lied to me.

"They decided not to order a second bomb from your country. In fact, they'd like to ask you not to have any further dealings with their country at all... So please take the bomb home, as is."

"...Quit messing around. Just how much money do you think we've sunk into the development of this bomb—?"

"Ah, now that you mention it, this is from that other country for your troubles. It's not much, but please take it—*Hup!*"

I cut him off and loaded the hundred gold pieces onto the carriage.

It was extremely heavy. Ridiculously heavy, actually.

"This should be sufficient," I said, stretching my sore shoulders. "You're good to head home now, right?"

Then I said, "Since you went to all the trouble, how about trying to use that bomb to excavate your own mining tunnel?"



It was about a week earlier, before I met the man a second time and immediately after his incredibly insincere exchange with the vizier.

I took a certain letter out of my pocket.

"Your Honor, do you remember this?"

It was the letter I had recovered from the thieves' hideout.

"...! That's..." Staring at the piece of paper, the vizier went pale.

"So you do remember it."

I mean, there's no way you wouldn't.

After all, the vizier's signature adorned the bottom of the letter.

I had read its contents very carefully, trying to imagine exactly what use the vizier of an entire country might have for a gang of bandits and thieves. The more I read, the more questions I had.

I want you to steal the explosives for the tunnel construction. If you

are successful, I will give you one hundred gold pieces, promised the letter.

It's enough to make you wonder.

“It seems that the thieves’ attack was not a mere coincidence.”

I'd go as far as to say it was premeditated. Rather than paying ten thousand gold pieces to a country you're on bad terms with, I guess you thought it would be to your advantage to get the bomb from thieves with no strings attached.

That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

“...What do you want, Madam Witch?”

Is this the part where you try to buy my silence?

“Do you have something for me?”

“If you keep quiet about this, yes.”

“Is that so?” Then I spit out the lie. “But in that case, I think it’s better to offer something to the merchant, rather than to me. After all, he was with me when I saw the corpses of the thieves, and he knows about the letter.”

“What did you say...? But he just promised to make a new bomb...”

“Oh my. But haven’t you considered that the new bomb is meant to retaliate against you? I would strongly suggest that no one here have anything to do with items brought over from that other country.”

“.....”

The vizier fell silent, deep in thought, and I said to him, “Oh, that’s right. By the way, regarding the fee for my silence...” I clapped a hand down on his shoulder. “How about one hundred gold pieces?”

That's quite cheap for protecting your people from that country that you hate, isn't it?



It was always sad when people lost their lives, so I had tried to ensure that there wouldn’t be any more grief piled on top of what had already transpired.

As for the relations of two feuding countries after I left, that wasn’t for me to know as a traveler. If I had to guess, I’d say that their animosity continued.

One country hired thieves to cause trouble for its rival.

The other country tried to deliver a faulty bomb to deal a blow to their

opponent.

How stupid.

I'd say having an aloof relationship was probably a little bit better than attempting to blow up one another. Maybe someday, in time, both the bombs and their rivalry would fizzle out.

That was why I was never going to stop hoping for the two countries to keep biding their time, staying rooted right where they were.

Until the day their bitter relationship ceased to exist.



CHAPTER 10

Travel Tales

A little while ago, I briefly reunited with my former teacher, Miss Fran.

“You know, I also admired The Adventures of Niche so much that I went on a journey of my own. I even started a novel while traveling,” she’d said, as if she had suddenly remembered it.

“...Wow, is that so?”

“You don’t seem very interested.”

“No, no, I’m on the edge of my seat.”

“Your reaction says otherwise.”

“I was just unsure how to react.”

Privately, I’d thought, *What is this lady talking about all of a sudden?*

“So when you say you started a novel, do you mean you gave up partway through?” I asked.

“No, I never said that. It’s more accurate to say I had no choice but to stop in the middle of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wrote it as a pastime and never showed the draft to anyone, but when the manuscript reached about one hundred pages, I read it over, found it painfully embarrassing, and lost any and all desire to write more.”

She had gotten a chill up her spine as she reread it. My teacher slumped her shoulders as she told me.

“So that’s why you had to stop?”

“Yes. I thought, Oh no, my writing is downright terrible and decided I would never write anything again. Then I stuffed the manuscript into the bottom of my bag.”

“Oh, so you didn’t throw it away?”

“I mean, it was my manuscript. After all the hard work I put into it, I couldn’t bring myself to just toss it out.”

“...You can disparage it all you want, but your actions don’t match your words.”

“Well, I guess you could say that. In the end, that pitiful past is a part of

who I am, so I couldn't really bring myself to abandon it. Not at the time, at least."

"Hmm." I nodded.

My teacher's shoulders sagged even lower, and she let out a long sigh. "Of course, I didn't feel like showing my novel to anyone—because those were my personal memories. But it didn't take long for something terrible to happen."

"What?"

"It all went down when I visited a certain country. A merchant who saw my bag said something like this—"

"Hey, you! That bag in your arms. Could it be the legendary traveler's bag? It is, isn't it?! I knew it! That's the type of bag that the legendary traveler used to use! Sell it to me! Please!"

That had been what he said, allegedly.

Just what is he saying? Back then, Miss Fran had tilted her head in confusion. The bag was just some cheap thing she had purchased from a nearby pawnshop. She had no knowledge of any legendary traveler or whatever, and she certainly hadn't known there was anything special about it when she bought it.

"Well, I guess one man's trash can be another man's treasure. That merchant offered me an unbelievable sum for the bag. I was so surprised. To the point that I wondered if it was some new scam."

"Hmm..."

I felt like I could finally see where this story was going.

"And I was pretty strapped for coin at the time...so I agreed and handed over the bag. I poured out the contents, bought a new, cheap bag on the spot, transferred all my possessions, and handed the old bag to the merchant. And of course, I accepted a mountain of dough."

"....."

"There was something about my own writing that was addictive. On rare occasions, I would want to read it over again, you know. A few days after I parted with the bag, I fished around in my new bag, searching for the novel I had patched together from my cringey stories. And in that moment, I realized something awful."

"....." Don't tell me. "...Your novel wasn't there?"

".....I was shocked. Apparently, I had handed over the old bag

with my manuscript still inside.”

“Oh gosh.”

“I went straight back to the merchant’s place, but a week had passed since he’d bought my bag. The merchant had long since left for another country. Ultimately, even though I searched for the merchant, I couldn’t find him, let alone the bag.”

Miss Fran buried her face in her hands.

“...Sometimes, there’s something that I think about. What would I do if that manuscript was to fall into someone’s hands, and what if they read it? What would I do if I was made a fool of...?”

“Miss...”

Her ears were bright red. *Is she gonna be okay?*

“When I think back on my time spent traveling, when I remember my lost manuscript, I get uncontrollably embarrassed. It sends shivers down my spine. Oh, what should I do...?”

“.....”

There wasn’t really anything I could say, so I stayed quiet.

After a few moments, Miss Fran removed her hands from her face, looking like nothing had happened. *“Well, it’s just a random memory that popped into my head. Yeah, it’s an embarrassing one, but at this point, it’s in the past. A good travel tale.”*

“...Huh, is that so?”

“You don’t seem to be very interested.”

“No, no, I’m on the edge of my seat.” By the way— “So what did you want to tell me?”

“Well, there’s only one thing to say, isn’t there?” my teacher said. “As you continue on your travels, I think you will have many fantastic experiences.”

After a short pause, she stared directly at me. *“If we should meet again, please tell me of your lovely memories—let me hear your travel tales. That’s all I wanted to say.”*

Then my teacher smiled gently at me.



I recalled that conversation with my teacher in that exact moment.

“.....”

It was just as I happened to drop into a bookstore in a certain country, entirely by chance.

“*The Adventures of Fran*, huh...?”

There was a book there engraved with a familiar name. The author was also named Fran. It was all too familiar.

.....

I proceeded to stand there and read the whole book. It might not have been the right thing to do, but I just had to know what was in the book.

The contents were extremely simple. It was just the story of a witch named Fran who went around sightseeing in all sorts of countries. The main character had a personality that wasn’t all too different from my teacher’s.

“Miss Witch! If you’re going to stand there and read, please purchase the book.”

After a little while, an employee discovered me reading. They came up beside me, beating the dust off books with a scrap of cloth attached to a stick.

“...Hmm? Oh, if you’re reading *The Adventures of Fran*, you must have good taste.”

“Is it popular?”

“You can’t be serious! In this country, there isn’t a single person who doesn’t know that book. It’s a wonderful novel. A real bestseller.”

“Is it really that interesting?”

This book gives me secondhand embarrassment.

Apparently, no one else in this country shared the sentiment. The bookstore clerk nodded over and over at my question.

“Of course it is! It’s downright fascinating! Miss Witch, I haven’t seen you around here before. Are you a traveler? I think you should do some sightseeing in this country. After all, our country is overflowing with merchandise for *The Adventures of Fran*, you know.”

“...Hmm.”

“By the way, are you going to buy that?”

I said, “Give me three copies. I want one to save, one to share, and one to enjoy.”

Taking my new purchases, I tried to do some sightseeing, and it was just as the bookstore clerk had said.

The town was teeming with merchandise for Fran the Witch.

For some reason, a bronze statue had been erected that resembled my teacher, and its plaque read THE LEGENDARY TRAVELER—STATUE OF FRAN THE WITCH.

A restaurant there advertised a false-sounding sign declaring it A RESTAURANT BELOVED BY THE LEGENDARY TRAVELER—FRAN THE WITCH.

There were any number of inns declaring themselves to be “the inn that once housed the Legendary Traveler, Fran the Witch.” *How many inns did you flit around to, Miss Fran?*

“.....”

But that’s how popular the Legendary Traveler was.

When I asked some people walking down the street about the stories, I learned some interesting facts.

“Huh? Did you just ask me why Fran the Witch is so popular?”

“About ten years ago, the king of this country purchased the bag that the Legendary Traveler had used from a merchant.”

“When he looked at the contents of that bag, there was allegedly a manuscript inside. And apparently, that was the novel that the Legendary Traveler had written!”

“The king read it and was moved. Then he decided to distribute it as the book that the Legendary Traveler wrote.”

“Everyone read it, and it was really gripping—I bet there isn’t a single person in this country who doesn’t know about Fran the Witch.”

That’s what they told me.

.....

“Um, and that so-called Legendary Traveler was Fran the Witch?” I asked each person, and everyone gave me the same answer.

“Of course!” they said.

The merchant and the people of this country are definitely thinking of different people as the Legendary Traveler—

As a matter of fact, *The Adventures of Fran* did not seem to be that valuable of a book—

Well, there was no reason to go out of my way to contradict them.

As my teacher had once said, the value of things differs depending on the person.

“...But that was a good find, huh?”

While staying in a room at an inn that was supposedly loved by Fran the Witch, I cracked open the book.

I had a feeling that the next time I met Miss Fran, I would have a very, very interesting travel tale for her. I smiled to myself.



CHAPTER 11

The People Who Hunt the Lazy

It was a peaceful day.

I had some time to kill and had chosen to amuse myself in the outdoor seating area of a coffee shop that faced the main avenue of the totally ordinary city where I was staying.

“...*Sigh.*” I took a sip of my café au lait and set down the cup.

I wasn’t dressed like a witch today. I was taking a break from my travels—and a break from being a witch. Dressed in a relatively plain outfit of a navy blue sweater and white flared skirt, I blended into the cityscape.

“.....” I opened up the newspaper.

Somehow, this particular country seemed especially peaceful.

GRANDFATHER LOSES DENTURES

WATCH OUT FOR A PERVERT WITH WOMEN’S UNDERWEAR ON HIS HEAD!

YOUTH AVOIDANCE OF JOBS INTENSIFIES

IN NEED OF METHOD FOR SOLVING TRUANCY!

These were the sorts of things that made the headlines, after all. There were no wars that needed to be won and no news of any importance that needed to be conveyed to the public.

Well, to put it simply, it was so peaceful, it was boring. You could say it was perfect for a vacation. I reached for my cup again.

“...*Huh?*” However, just as I did, the cup and the table with it disappeared from my sight.

Or perhaps I should say, they blew away.

Something came flying out of the shop with a terrible noise, swept them up, and disappeared.

“...*Ahhh.*” When I turned to run after my café au lait, I found that the contents had been dramatically dashed all over some bloody young man. He was collapsed on top of the tables and chairs that had piled up like debris.

Oh, my café au lait. I can’t believe you would die on me.

“You’ve got some nerve skipping work to fool around with women! Take your job more seriously!” The vulgar man appeared out of the shop, yanking

up the guy by the collar and shaking him violently.

Still bleeding, the young man begged, “P-please...! Let me go! It was a date with my girlfriend to celebrate our one-month anniversary!”

“No way. I won’t forgive you. It’s an established rule in this country that we shall pass judgment on anyone who neglects his work—without exception.”

Then the man started walking.

“Eeeeeek! S-stop, please...”

Dragging the wailing youth with him, he left the seating area and headed for the main avenue.

“.....”

Hey. I didn’t hear any apology for the untimely death of my café au lait.

I wasn’t planning to do anything witchy or traveler-esque today, but the man in question was totally calm after ruining a drink that I paid for, so I didn’t feel like letting him off the hook.

First, I folded the newspaper and stood up.

Then I picked up a stone lying nearby and chucked it with all my might. “Hyah!” The palm-size stone soared through the air, heading straight for the back of the vulgar man’s head.

It landed a magnificent direct hit.

“Ow!” The man stumbled dramatically, then turned around with a demonic expression. “Hey, which one of you bastards hit me with a rock just now?!”

Who could it have been?

“It was me,” I responded.

He barreled toward me, still dragging the battered young man. “Oh? You’ve got some nerve trying to pick a fight with me—hmm?”

But he lost his momentum halfway through and came to a stop.

“.....?” I tilted my head in confusion at his incomprehensible behavior.

The man stayed rooted to the spot and stared at me. The wind blew between us, and someone shrieked upon witnessing the disastrous scene around the café; only then did the man seem to regain his senses.

“...Huh. Crap, I blacked out.” I must have hit him in the wrong place, because the man was shaking slightly.

“You. Don’t get carried away just because you’re kind of cute, okay? Do you know who I am? Hey.”

“I have no clue. Who are you?”

“.....”

“Who are you?” I asked him again.

He cleared his throat forcefully. “...I am Loegred, of the Truancy Inspection Bureau. Disturbing my work is a major crime.”

“Is that so? It’s kind of you to explain that... By the way, you wasted my café au lait. Do you have any idea of the severity of *that* crime?”

“Your café au lait?”

“Yes.” *Anyway, what’s the Truancy Inspection Bureau? Color me curious.* “My café au lait is now all soaked by that young man’s clothes because you ravaged the place. Please take some responsibility.”

“.....” Loegred—or whatever his name was—looked back and forth between the young man and me several times. “That’s got nothing to do with me. Get this guy to pay you back.” He spit as he spoke. *Disgusting.*

“No. This would’ve never happened if you hadn’t ransacked the café.”

“Blame the guy who made me act that way—”

“It’s your fault. You were the one thrashing around.”

“.....”

“With that in mind, please take proper responsibility for your actions.” I glared at him.

The man smiled slightly. “...Well, okay then. I’ll pay up. This is my third year working for the Truancy Inspection Bureau, so I’ve got a pretty penny. I’ve got more than enough money to treat you.”

It was a mystery to me why he suddenly started bragging, but unfortunately, his proposal was a little different from what I had in mind.

I shook my head and refused his offer. “No, I’m not saying that I want your money.”

Then I made a totally different offer.

“Would you tell me a little bit about that Truancy Inspection Bureau, or whatever it’s called? If you do that, we can call it even.”

“...?”

I could see several emotions making their way across the man’s face, proving he couldn’t wrap his mind around my request.

“You don’t mind, do you?” I made my follow-up attack, and the man nodded in confusion.

We’d reached a consensus.

Before I knew it, my wonderfully boring vacation was nowhere to be found.



After helping to put the coffee shop back in order, and taking the opportunity to order another café au lait, the two of us sat at the tables outside.

Facing me was Mr. Loegred of the Truancy Inspection Bureau.

The young man whom he had been dragging around earlier had been taken away by another Bureau member.

But just how massive of an organization is this Truancy Inspection Bureau, or whatever?

“I see. So you’re a traveler? In that case, it’s not that surprising that you’ve never heard of us. By the way, may I ask your name?”

“It’s Elaina.”

“Elaina, huh? Nice name. And are you free right now, Elaina?” He addressed me very casually—no title, no “Miss,” no nothing.

“I am, but...”

“How about tomorrow?”

“Probably free, but...”

“I see. So you’re free... And you want to know about my job, right? In that case, why don’t you come shadow me?”

“Eh, that’s all right.” *I think I’ll be satisfied just to hear you talk about it.*

“Come on, now, don’t say that. If you want to know about what we do, I think you’ll understand best by working alongside me. After all, it’s a pretty complex job.”

“.....”

Even though I felt like he was pulling my leg, there was a part of me that thought he was being certainly reasonable. And it seemed sort of interesting.

...*Hmm.*

“I guess that would be fine, but...before that, please tell me precisely what the job entails.”

“All right! Sure thing!”

After pumping his fist up in the air, the man went on and on about the Truancy Inspection Bureau.

As the name suggested, the Truancy Inspection Bureau conducted research regarding truancy and was an agency unique to that country. Its objective was to manage the attendance of every worker registered at a business, and the Bureau investigated any suspicious people and censured them.

Those who have been censured, without exception, were severely punished by their place of employment.

Apparently, the adults had decided that this method was bound to curb truancy among young people. Certainly, the newspaper had also run an article regarding absenteeism, calling it “Youth Avoidance of Jobs Intensifies,” and it was plain to see that the people of this country were no slouches when it came to work.

Maybe it's because they've got nothing else to worry about?

“Well, in short, we’re making great efforts, and as a result, there are fewer and fewer jerks who ditch work.”

“Huh. In other words, you’re special operatives sent in by the government to correct people’s attitudes toward their jobs.”

“Simply put, yes.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And since we’re backed by the government, no one gets angry with us, even if our methods get...*extreme*. I’ve never lost a fight in all my life, so this job is my calling—because no matter what I do, I’m always in the right.”

I want to know why you suddenly started bragging about yourself.

Totally ignoring my annoyance, Mr. Loegred drained the rest of his café au lait.

“Shall we get going?”

“Where to?”

He flashed a smile, looking quite pleased with himself. “To have you come watch me at work, of course.”

It would have been a pain to turn him down, so for the moment, I just brought my warm café au lait to my lips and said nothing.



That afternoon, I shadowed him as he did his job.

The first place on our tour was a furniture shop.

The middle-aged man there talked to us as he assembled shelves. The inside of the shop was saturated with the smell of wood.

“That’s right. I’m really at a loss, Mr. Inspector. This week, his younger sister apparently passed away.”

According to the man at the furniture shop, a young man who was newly apprenticed under him for the past three months had stopped coming to work.

“This week? Have there been previous incidents?” I interjected.

I wasn’t an inspector, but this caught my interest.

The man nodded. “Yeah. Last week, it was his father who died.”

“Oh.”

“And the week before that, his mother passed away.”

“.....”

“And the week before the week before that, it was his grandfather.”

“.....”

“And the week before the week before the week before that—”

“Okay, that’s enough.”

I had no idea how long that was going to continue.

Right away, I understood that this was an extremely suspicious situation.

After that, Mr. Loegred collected some additional information from the shopkeeper, and then we left the shop.

“Well, this really got interesting, huh? Do you suppose that young apprentice is cursed to have a family member die each week?”

“That’s exactly why we’re keeping an eye on him. At any rate, we’ve got to investigate whether it’s true—though I’m almost positive he’s playing hooky.”

“Seems like it.”

After that, we headed for the young man’s house and found him absentmindedly gazing at the wild birds in his neighborhood. Mr. Loegred immediately apprehended him.

From what I overheard of their conversation, not a single member of his family had passed away. His parents and grandparents were still very much alive. On top of that, he was an only child. That meant his younger sister had never existed in the first place. I suppose that was how badly he didn’t want to work.

“*Youth Avoidance of Jobs Intensifies,* ” indeed...

After that, I spent several days observing Mr. Loegred on the job.

The excuses offered by the ditchers were really pathetic. It was really too miserable to watch. *Just what compels them to go to such lengths?*

On this day, one of the first people on our schedule was a young man who worked at the library. They hadn't heard from him for about a week, so we paid him a visit.

"About a week ago? Oh, it was raining that day, so I took it off," the young man calmly explained. "Since then, I've been taking days off for one reason or another."

Growing visibly vexed at the young man's attitude, Mr. Loegred pressed closer to him. "Well then, I suppose you'll be able to go today, huh?"

"Yeah, sure thing... Ah, sorry. You know, the wind is pretty strong today, so I'll pass."

"Hey!"

Naturally, he was dragged away.

The next person we encountered was a young woman who worked at an inn. Her employer had not been able to get in contact with her for three days.

"You've got it all wrong. I haven't been playing hooky for three days. I've been saving lives for that time, so I haven't been able to work, even though I really wanted to."

"That doesn't explain why you're absent today, though."

"Oh, it's because I was planning to find someone who needs a little saving."

"....."

Don't you think you should be helping people at your place of employment?

The third person on our schedule was an older boy who worked at a grocery store. He had been occasionally absent for several months, but this time, at last, he had failed to show up for a full week.

This was what he had to say for himself.

"I didn't want to do my job, so I stayed home."

"....."

"....."

Why not just quit?

And that seemed to be the extent of it.

That was how jobs cropped up for the inspectors of the Truancy Inspection Bureau.

I spent a little more time observing Mr. Loegred's work, which did seem quite difficult, but I eventually gave it up when he suggested setting up surveillance on a teacher who had recently gone rogue.

That's enough of that, I had thought. Who knows how long I might have gotten tied up if I hadn't put a stop to it? And honestly, I had simply lost interest in being dragged around on my vacation.



It happened several days after that.

Somehow, I had ended up with too much free time and was amusing myself in an outdoor seating area of a coffee shop that faced the main avenue. I was reading one of the three books I had purchased in a bookstore in a certain country. Blowing on and sipping a steaming café au lait.

However, my peaceful solitude soon came to an end.

"Hey. So this is where you've been hiding." Mr. Loegred took it upon himself to sit across from me.

"Hello."

Even after I had stopped observing his work, he had repeatedly come to invite me back. He was kind of persistent.

"You won't be joining me today?"

"Right. I don't feel the need."

"Uuuuh," he groaned, wrinkling his brow in discontent. "...All right, Elaina, are you available right now?" he asked.

"I am, but..."

"I see; so you're free."

"Yes."

"You're free, huh?"

"That's what I'm saying."

I don't have anything going on, so I'm reading a book. And since I'm busy reading, I have no intention of getting wrapped up in some other matter.

If he had come to ask me on a date, I was intending to turn him down

flatly, but...

“Well, in that case, would you like to go have some fun with m—?”

...His words were interrupted partway through. They were drowned out by a thunderous roar. When I looked up from my book in surprise, he was nowhere to be seen.

Everything—including the table—had disappeared from my sight.

Or perhaps I should say, they had blown away.

I looked around, only to find the bloodied figure of Mr. Loegred atop the tables and chairs that had piled up like rubble.

And overturned on top of it all, my café au lait.

Oh, my café au lait. I can't believe you would die on me again.

“Youuuu! You've got some nerve skipping out on work to fool around with women! You're a member of the Truancy Inspection Bureau, for crying out loud! And didn't you say you were taking the day off because of a fever?! Hey!” jeered someone at Mr. Loegred from behind me, as I mourned the loss of another innocent thing.

“Y-you're wrong! I was planning to go to the hospital just now! I wasn't playing hooky!”

Oh? I think I've heard this conversation before.

“Don't lie to me, you brat! There's not a man in this world who would enjoy lunch at a café with his girlfriend and then go on a little date to the hospital!”

“Uh, I'm not his girlfriend.”

There's been a misunderstanding.

“...After enjoying lunch with a friend who's not his girlfriend—”

“I'm not his friend, either.”

“.....”

“We're just acquaintances.”

“Show me a man who would have lunch with an acquaintance at a café before going to a hospital.”

Then the big man grabbed the nape of Mr. Loegred's neck. “What I'm saying is that you're coming with me. Got it?”

He dragged Mr. Loegred away slowly.

“C-crap...! Let me go! Let gooo!”

He heaved him from the terrace, out toward the main avenue.

“.....”

Hey. I didn't hear any apology for the second passing of my café au lait.

I stuck a bookmark between two pages, closed my book, and stood up.

Then I picked up a stone lying nearby and threw it. "Hyah!" The palm-size stone soared through the air, heading straight for the back of the enormous man's head.

It landed a magnificent direct hit.

"Ow!" The large man stumbled dramatically, then turned around with a demonic expression. "Hey, which one of you bastards hit me with a rock just now?!"

Who else?

"It was me," I responded.

The large man stomped toward me, still dragging Mr. Loegred. "Oh? You've got some nerve trying to pick a fight with me—Hmm?"

But he lost his momentum halfway through and came to a stop. The man stood rooted to the spot and stared at me.

The wind blew between us, and someone shrieked "Not again!" at the disastrous scene around the café; only then did the man seem to regain his senses.

It took a slightly different course than the time with Mr. Loegred.

Well, maybe it wasn't all that different.

"What the—? Well, aren't you a cutie...?"



The Truancy Investigation Bureau had been established by the state in order to curb absenteeism in the youth, but the organization was forced to temporarily halt operations around the time I left the country.

What on earth happened to it? According to what I heard, for some reason, the inspectors (mostly men) started skipping out on work one after the other, and it got out of control.

It was a disaster, like if a conman got conned. It caused quite an uproar among the people there. The news didn't have much else to report, so the entire Truancy Investigation Bureau was subject to harsh criticism.

And what of all those male inspectors who were severely punished for neglecting their posts, you ask? Apparently, they all gave the same strange

testimony regarding the incident, stating, “A cute girl tricked us. We regret nothing.”

Oh, is beauty a crime now?

Anyway, they’d better come up with a smarter way of solving the truancy issue. While the Bureau has halted operations, I only hope that calm conversations can be had among adults.

If not, they might be tempted by some big bad witch.



CHAPTER 12

A Paradise for the Resurrected

I drifted across the plain, enjoying the soft morning sunlight.

Following the rolling hills, I passed over fields of wildflowers.

The breeze was almost warm, enveloping me as it blew past. It was so relaxing I was worried I'd drift off to sleep and fall right out of the sky.

I could see my destination just up ahead; I had always wanted to visit ever since learning of its existence. And now there it was, right in front of me.

It was a tiny country surrounded by a tall wall. From where I was, I couldn't get a good look beyond the border.

But I had a feeling in my gut that I'd have a lot of fun there.

At any rate, the border must have employed a different set of skills than in other countries. And by *skills*, I meant that large letters had been written on the wall.

“...Wow.”

Here's what was displayed:

THIS COUNTRY HAS BEEN OCCUPIED BY THE DEAD. NO ENTRY.

Wow, very atmospheric.

I went as far as the gate, but it remained closed.

No response to the arrival of a visitor? How weird. Then I can't get in.

Even when I rapped on the gate—which was so large I had to crane my neck to see the whole thing—my knocks didn't echo. It just made a feeble clunking sound.

.....

Ah, I see. What a group of committed actors. The scene is that the country has been overrun by the dead, huh. That's why the big gate won't open. Did I hit the nail on the head or what?

There must be another entrance around here somewhere, right? I wandered about restlessly near the gate.

“Hmm...?”

And I quickly found it.

Next to the gate, there was a relatively small door. In truth, the size of the

door was perfectly average, just like you'd see on a house.

“.....”

But just as I was about to open it, I noticed a sign stuck to it.

This place has been overrun by the dead. Do not enter.

The words had been messily scrawled, and below that was written ***However, there are probably survivors other than us. If there is anyone brave and strong enough, please enter and save the people inside.***

Incidentally, there was a sign reading OPEN hanging from the doorknob.

“Oh-ho!”

Oh, what an elaborate set. Just as I expected. Okay, I'll bite.

I opened the door without hesitation.

Because I'm brave and strong.



Inside was the strange country known as the Paradise for the Dead.

It was an incredibly weird place, designed to delight visitors by making a spectacle of spirits called ghouls. (Well, they were actually theatrical props.) It seemed to be a popular destination around these parts. Every time I asked the locals, “Do you have any places you'd recommend I visit?” I could almost guarantee one out of three people would mention this country.

It seemed too interesting a place to pass up, and I had purposefully avoided researching it to avoid any spoilers and found it overflowing with an interesting vibe.

Not only had they set up attractions to hook sightseers before they even passed through the gate, but on the other side, an even more amusing scene awaited.

Most of the buildings were halfway destroyed, with ivy creeping up the sides. The remains of fallen buildings were piled up along the large avenue extending from the gate, and the heads of weeds were poking out from the cracks.

It must have been in this state for quite a while.

“...Oh-ho—”

With just one step beyond the gate, I'd already reached an area that was in ruins. Man, what a cool atmosphere! It felt like a ghoul would pop out at any

moment. My hat was off to whoever put all their energy into turning a whole country into a tourist resort.

I soared calmly around the country on my broom. I figured they had made the whole place look like this on purpose. I flew over the sunken road, pockmarked with pools of stagnant water, surveying the area in astonishment —to the extent that I wasn't looking where I was going.

That's when it all went down.

"Aaahhh...!" Something jumped out from the side of the road, groaning.

"Ack!"

I was unable to stop my trajectory or even dodge it, and I heard an unpleasant *splat* as my broom came to a sudden halt.

I'd practically crashed right into the thing.

I was thrown from my broom, flew through the air, and landed right in a puddle, leaving me soaked from the knees down. *Well, this sucks.*

Needless to say, I was pretty upset.

"Hey! It's dangerous to jump out like that—"

However, when I turned around, I saw something even worse, and the handle of my broom was lodged deep within it.

"...Oh."

Before me, I could see my broom: One end was in a puddle of water, and on the other end of it, there was a humanlike figure.

My broom had pierced straight through the man's temple. The man, gripping swords in both hands and naked from the waist up (with bulging muscles), looked several kinds of dangerous. He was lying facedown in the pool of water.

He was dead. Punctured through the head by a broom.

"...Um." I fearfully approached the man and touched his shoulder.

And when I did—

"Unh..."

The human-esque creature with the half-rotten face spoke to me. One eye was an empty socket, and drool dribbled from his mouth.

Oh, it's just a ghoul.

"Are you all right?"

"Ahnnn..."

He seems fine.

Better get going.

I stood on the ghoul's shoulder and tried to yank my broom out. I couldn't leave without it, of course.

"Ahnnn..."

But I couldn't pull it free. The only thing my actions accomplished was making ripples in the puddle as the ghoul's head splashed up and down.

"Nngh...!" I tugged with more force.

Then, finally, the broom came free with a *splorch*.

Yay, I got it out!

"...Uahhh—"

Uh-oh, I spoke too soon.

The ghoul's head was still stuck onto the tip of the broom handle.

Looks like I accidentally pulled off his head. When I glanced down at my feet, the rest of his headless body was still twitching around.

.....

Oh, crap.

My visit had only just begun, and I was already damaging public property. Even if I was to put him back together using magic, it would be meaningless if my broom was still impaling him through the head.

But I felt a little awkward wrestling it out by myself. I didn't really want to touch him.

"....."

For now, why don't we find someone and apologize...

As one would expect, I didn't feel like walking around holding a broom with a ghoul's head stuck on it. So for the time being, I wrapped the ghoul in fabric scraps I picked up around the area and flew on the broom.

But when it was just wrapped in cloth, the head made too much noise, with its *Aahs* and its *Nnhs*, so I ended up stuffing a rock in his mouth. It added a decent heft to the end of the broom.

"Heyyy, is anyone theeere?"

Unfortunately for me, this country was fully committed to setting the scene. Even though I flew around calling for people, no one came to assist me.

"Aanh..."

"Uuuuh..."

“Ohhh...”

What’s more, I was even being ignored by the ghouls who just groaned as I flew overhead and made no attempt to follow me.

“...Hmph.”

Before long, I encountered the first living humans I’d seen since entering this country.

“Hey, look! A witch! A witch is here!”

“Heeey! Please help us!”

Two people were waving their hands at me from the window of a very, very large house.

Thank goodness.

I was happier than I thought I’d be to see another living person.

I can finally say good-bye to the ghoul on the end of my broom!

My heart pounded with excitement as I gently picked up speed and proceeded toward the two people.

“.....”

And then, I looked down at the garden of the big house.

“They’re really delivering the performance of a lifetime, huh?” I mumbled to myself as I stared at the scene.

Directly below me, ghouls had grouped together, swarming around the garden. There were about one hundred. They were *Uhhing* and *Ahhing* in a big, awful chorus.

“.....”

Now, I was sure no one would mind if I just happened to destroy one.



I hadn’t understood it very well when I had looked from outside, but the moment I entered the building, a weird sensation overtook me.

As for the two people who had been leaning out the window, they were pretty odd, themselves.

“We’re saved! Just as I would expect from a witch. You did a great job spotting us.”

One member of the pair was a woman with disheveled brown hair and glasses. Now, that part seems normal, but for some reason, she had a very

large sword strapped to her hip. *Wow, she's so cool.*

"We're so lucky you came! We've been stuck in this building for a week, and we were running out of food! Thank you!"

The other half of the pair was a man wearing armor and a helmet. He was also extremely cool. But smelly. I had to take a half step back.

"Are you two working here in this country?"

The woman nodded. "I think it'd be more accurate to say we *were* working. This country has already broken down into anarchy. As you can see, it's been completely overrun by ghouls." She sighed.

I was already over their whole act.

"But if you two are from here, that saves me some time. Actually, I need to apologize to yo—"

"By the way, Miss Witch! Could we ask you your name?!" Mr. Helmet cut in from the side.

You smell!

"Ah, I'm the Ashen Witch, Elaina. It's nice to meet you, but could you maybe not stand so close?"

"Ah, is that so? It's nice to meet you! By the way, I'm Anthony. This is my partner, Anna," he exclaimed, excessively energetic.

Letting his little speech waft right past me, I asked in a roundabout way, "By the way, there are a lot of ghouls in this country, right? Just how many are there?" I tried to lighten the mood a little.

"The mob of them outside are all the real deal. There are no artificial ghouls in operation right now," said the woman with brown hair and glasses, or rather, Anna.

"Um, let's just drop the entire gig for a second. Just how many are there?"

"...Well, if we're counting the artificial ones, there are about fifty."

"Really? Only fifty? Just from looking at them, I'd say there were more than a hundred outside."

"Those are the real deal."

"Yes. I know. That's the whole act, right?"

"It's not. They're genuine ghouls. In the past, we used shabby imitations, but recently some moron started using the real thing, saying 'Authenticity is important!' and thanks to him, the ghouls have taken over. The result is... this."

"....." For some reason, a part of me still wanted to believe she was

lying, but her words started to sound a little too real. “That’s...all part of your acting gig, right?”

“It’s all real.”

“.....Oh, quit pulling my leg.”

What a joke.

That’s the setup, right? ...Right?

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m telling the truth. If you still don’t believe me, why not try getting bit by one of the ghouls outside? You should have all the proof you need then.”

“.....”

“I’ll say this as many times as it takes. This isn’t a joke.”

“.....”

“Our country has been overrun by ghouls,” Anna delivered matter-of-factly with a tight smile on her lips.

I couldn’t believe it.

The ghouls running rampant through town are real? Seriously?

The very first thing I did after that was get my broom as far away as possible.



Now that I was up to speed, this country’s unique circumstances didn’t actually seem to be all that complicated. If one was to tell it clearly and concisely, it would be something along these lines:

Rewind to a little more than a week ago. One of the mages living in this country said, “*Why is our country doing business using fakes? It would be much better if we went with the genuine article.*”

But the citizens had their own opinions about that:

“*Isn’t using the real thing just asking for trouble?*”

“*I don’t understand how we’re supposed to catch the ghouls in the first place!*”

And so on.

In response, the male mage laughed. “*Don’t worry. I’ll use my amazing powers to control the ghouls.*”

So the next day, he brought a number of ghouls with him.

“...So is it safe to say that all the characters in this story were idiots?” I asked.

This was my main takeaway.

Anna replied, “There’s an error in your interpretation. You see, I’m not an idiot.”

“...Well, never mind that. The fact of the matter is that you two are the last remaining survivors of the ghoul epidemic, right?”

“There’s an error in your interpretation. We’re not the only survivors.”

“And by that, you mean...?”

I tilted my head in confusion, and Anna continued, “Well, as far as we’ve been able to confirm, as of right now, there are actually hundreds of survivors. Look out the window. From here, you should be able to see messages that they left.” She pointed to the broken window behind me.

When I turned around, I could see nothing but clear skies overhead. *What lovely weather.*

“...Hmm.”

Gazing out at the ruined cityscape from the window, I understood what she was trying to tell me.

I hadn’t noticed them while I was flying through the city, but there were signs hoisted all around town with things written on them, like “Help!” and “We’re alive” and “There are children here. Please rescue us!”

“Customers were in here as usual on the day the male mage brought the real ghouls. Which means that some of those day visitors also became ghouls.”

“I see.”

“As long as there are still survivors, I’d like to go around and help the people that made those signs, at least...”

“...That seems like it will be quite difficult.” I looked down.

I made eye contact with a group of ghouls. *Ahhh.*

Anna sneered at me as I glared back at the ghouls below us, fed up with them. “Oh, it’ll be easy enough to break through that bunch.”

“That many? How?”

As I tilted my head, a metallic clunking noise cut in between us. By which I mean, Mr. Helmet came over.

“You know, we were academics researching the ecology of ghouls back when this country was still functioning normally. Incidentally, Anna is quite distinguished among researchers, as she’s known by the nickname the Ghoul Artisan.”

“I don’t really care about that, but why are you wearing a helmet and armor?”

“It’s cool, right?”

“Amazing.” *But smelly.*

“Right? So back to what Anna was saying—”

According to Mr. Helmet, Anna had been the number one crafter of imitation ghouls. One could say that, generally speaking, she knew all there was to know about ghoul behavior.

Anna snorted “Hmph” as if this was no big deal. “Well, if we had a specimen, maybe one of the ones that are crammed in directly beneath us here, I could easily make something for ghoul countermeasures. To that effect, I made this.”

She held a small bottle up to me.

“...What *is* that?”

Connected to an atomizer on top, the bottle was filled to the brim with a dark-red liquid. It looked somehow dirty. It looked like it smelled bad.

“This is ghoul-repelling perfume. Those creatures won’t cannibalize their own kind, no exceptions. So if we can give off the same scent as their buddies, it should be possible to avoid the ghouls. Their sense of smell isn’t amazing, so they shouldn’t be able to sniff out the truth. That’s how I came up with this little invention. If you use this, the ghouls won’t attack you for as long as the scent lasts. It’s perfect.”

“...Oh. That’s amazing.”

“It’s also my get-rich-quick scheme. Heh-heh-heh...”

“.....”

Even if a country is in ruins, it isn’t completely destroyed so long as a bold, shameless commercial spirit lives on. This was the first time I realized that fact.

I could only hope that this woman was not the same type of person as the male mage, or whatever he was.

“Uh-oh. What’s this? So you don’t believe me? Well, relax. Its effectiveness has already been proven. The two of us tried going out into

town together after putting on the perfume, and the ghouls didn't even notice us. I'm not going to screw up like that stupid mage."

.....

"In that case, why didn't you go rescue the townspeople still in hiding?"

"There's a major reason. A troublesome fact came to light when we went out into town."

Anna gripped the perfume bottle, looking dejected, and Mr. Helmet continued for her.

"The mage who brought the other ghouls to this country is now a ghoul himself, and...well...he's incredibly powerful."

"...What does that mean?"

"It seems he's a mutant form, and that ghoul mage is supernaturally strong. To make matters worse, the perfume has no effect on him. Even when we hid among a herd of ghouls, he sniffed us out and chased us around. Ugh!"

Mr. Helmet stamped his feet in frustration. *So noisy.*

"Dammit... If we could just do something about that ghoul mage...! If only he weren't around...! We would be able to go around and help everyone...!"

Anna was glancing at me to gauge my reaction.

She thinks she's so slick.

.....

Is she seriously trying to use me?

Indifferent to my sixth sense of impending doom, Anna continued talking. "The mage turned ghoul is a powerful enemy, unlike the average ghoul. He's very muscular, and for some reason, he doesn't wear a shirt. To make matters worse, he carries a sword in each hand. We tried mimicking him and carrying swords, too, but we didn't stand a chance against him. If only we had someone who was capable of striking at him from a good distance away, we'd definitely be able to take him down. Then we could go around helping people."

My terrible hunch was proving to be right. Then, suddenly—

"...Mm?"

Something strange occurred to me.

Hey.

Hmm?

Muscular? Half-naked? A sword in each hand?

I had seen someone who checked those boxes somewhere before. To be more specific, just after I had entered the country.

“...Um.” I trotted over to pick up the broom I had tossed aside earlier and peeled off the strip of cloth wrapped around the bulge on the end. “By any chance, did the ghoul mage have a face that looked something like this?”

Liberated from the fabric, the ghoul...or his head anyway, spit out the stone that had been stuffed into his mouth and turned toward the two of them, groaning a greeting. “Ngaa...”

“.....”

“.....”

The two were silent for a moment, then looked at each other.

And then, *bang!* They exchanged a booming high five.

“You’re the greatest!” said Anna.

“I get that a lot.”

As it happened, I didn’t bring him down from a long distance, but from no distance at all.



Right before we headed out, as Anna was sprinkling perfume over herself and Mr. Helmet, she said, “Ready? Here’s the plan. First, the two of us wearing perfume will go out into town. You’ll give us directions from up in the air, Miss Witch. From there, you should be able to get a good view of the houses that seem to be waiting for rescue, right?”

The smell of the ghoul repellent perfume was already in full effect, so stinky that just a whiff made you wonder if they had covered themselves with excrement.

“Uuuurp...”

By the way, Mr. Helmet *actually did* cover himself with excrement. His legs were sloshing with it.

Gross.

“All right, Miss Witch. Next, it’s your turn.”

“Um, thanks, but I’ve got this, so I’ll be fine.”

I gestured to the ghoul head stuck to my broom and turned Anna down.

Our rescue operations began in a casual fashion.

“I can see a house with HELP! written on it after you turn that corner. And there are five ghouls on the road,” I said, giving directions.

“Roger.” The two nodded and headed down the road.

To my surprise, the perfume seemed to be working, and the ghouls didn’t pay any mind at all to the two of them, letting them pass by with a moan.

So they were able to rescue the hidden citizens without difficulty.

“Thank you! I didn’t think anyone would come rescue us!”

“You guys stink.”

We had rescued a couple.

Anna showered the embracing couple in perfume without mercy. They promptly threw up.

And so the rescue operations continued.

I would give directions from the sky, guiding the horribly smelly people to salvation. However, the rescued—the people who had survived until now, without exception, were all people with hopeless backstories.

For example—

“Heh-heh... So this is the last bottle, huh...? Heh-heh-heh...”

There was someone who was practically drowning in alcohol.

“Guh... I’ll take on these ghouls! You all go ahead!”

There was someone who suddenly started spouting nonsense.

We came to rescue you; what are you talking about?

“The ghouls are no match for us, seriously.”

“Totally; it’s an easy win. They move so slow.”

“Anyone who’s afraid of ghouls is a total coward, for real.”

“Woot-woot!”

We found a group of carefree teens loudly hooting. It was a total mystery how they had survived this long.

“She’s not here! My sweet little Madonna has been missing since yesterday! Madonnaaaaaaa!”

There was also a rich-looking middle-aged woman searching for her dog that had suddenly disappeared. I knew her type. On top of being completely useless, these people were seriously prone to dangerous flights of fancy, so I was opposed to taking her along, but in the end, the woman came with us.

“Nooo, I’m scaaared. I hate ghouls and stuff.”

There was a woman with a voice so sickly sweet, I thought my ears would rot just from listening to her. They rescued her, too, of course. And then she was sprayed from top to bottom with perfume and covered with excrement. *Yaaay.*

“.....”

Before I knew it, we had rescued ten people.

What was it about them? I got the feeling that the only people left alive were the hopeless ones who normally would be the first to die.

Of course, our rescue operations didn't have a one hundred percent success rate. We'd visited a few houses with the intent to rescue the people inside, only to discover that we were too late.

“Hey! We came to...help...”

“Aaann...”

“Unn...”

The people who politely came out to meet Anna when she briskly opened the door had already turned into ghouls. About ten of them.

“...Damn. Looks like this house is a bust.” Anna clicked her tongue in frustration, like something had gotten on her nerves.

It was around that time that she and her companion began to lose it.

“...Another bust, huh.”

Whenever they found residents who had already turned, or when the numbers of the survivors swelled, Anna and her partner would become arrogant.

“Hey, hey. They've turned into ghouls. Let's hunt them down right away, shall we?”

Finally, when they found yet more ghouls in one of the houses on the rescue mission, they began slashing with their swords.

“Niiiiice! More ghouls! Hunt them down! Don't let a single one escape!”

In the end, it turned violent.

“.....”

Pretty soon, I had trouble telling who the real ghouls were.

I wouldn't mind some perfume for repelling fanatic ghoul hunters.



The ten survivors gathered in front of the gate.

Standing on top of rubble, Anna looked down at them.

“Once you pass through this gate, you’ll be able to return to the outside world. Anyone who wants to escape, you may do so right now.”

Standing next to her, Mr. Helmet finished her speech. “We intend to remain here and rebuild. We can’t allow our country to remain a base of operations for ghouls. We’d like to resurrect it as a theme park.”

“If there are any among you who want to stay with us and spearhead the rebirth of this country, your assistance would be greatly appreciated. Won’t you work together with us to resurrect the greatest theme park ever? If you would like to volunteer, please raise your hands.”

The survivors just stood there silently. A few inhuman figures shuffled around them and between them, groaning “Uaagh...”

Finally, one man raised his hand.

“S-say...if we work for you, will you give us some of that perfume?”

As for who it was, it was the man who had been deep in his cups.

Anna nodded readily. “Of course.”

“In that case, I’ll do it! Heh-heh... I’m already getting addicted to the smell of that perfume, you know... I can’t give it up... Heh-heh-heh...”

I suddenly got the feeling that he was a dangerous individual even before this whole disaster.

One after another, people started following him and expressed their support for Anna’s mission.

“I’ll do it, too! I haven’t found my darling Madonna yet!” said the rich lady searching for her dog.

“I’ll go, too!” said the girl with the too-sweet voice.

“Woot-woot!” hooted the rambunctious group of teens. They probably didn’t think much of it. I’m sure that they were leaving everything up to the mood of the place.

Finally—

Every person in that place raised their hand and got on board with Anna’s plan.

“Hooray, Anna! If we have this many people, we can definitely revive the country!” Mr. Helmet was extremely pleased with the situation.

“Heh-heh-heh... The reconstruction will go off without a hitch, and once the country is resurrected, I’ll be a billionaire... Heh-heh-heh...”

Anna was mumbling some disagreeable things to herself.
...*She's dead set on making money.*

Right before I left the country, I got Anna to take off the ghoul's head.

"So it turns out you're the only one who's going to leave the country, huh?"

Anna yanked it out with her bare hands, chucking it far away.

The head fell to the ground in front of the group of carefree youngsters who kicked away as they *Woot-wooted*.

Gross.

"It seemed like a good idea to leave before the end of the day."

"If you're feeling up to it, come back in a month. By then, I'm sure our country'll be back to normal—in fact, it should be even better than it was before."

"....."

I replied with silence, then looked over her shoulder. The survivors were all gathered together, punting the ghoul head. I didn't watch for long.

"Well, if I feel like it, I might come again."

In the end, I left the country without making any definite promises.

But, well, eventually, I would probably end up coming back. Because I still hadn't gotten my chance to experience the country in the way I'd hoped after being excited for so long.



One month later.

I followed the same road, proceeded toward the same walls inscribed with writing, and made it through the door that had an OPEN sign on it.

And then I soared through the country on my broom, same as before.

Well, what do you think I found there?

"Aan..."

"Uooah..."

"Uee...i."

"Uwah..."

"Ohhh..."

...What's going on?

“It’s completely in ruins...”

It was completely in ruins.

To clarify, all the familiar faces had, without exception, been changed into ghouls. Anna, Mr. Helmet (I forgot his name), the rich-looking lady, the hooting lads, the drunk man, the couple.

They were all ghouls. Not a single living soul was left.

“Huh... But why?”

My mouth hung agape in astonishment. What had happened in the month since I had left?

“Aaah...”

“Ooooh...”

“Anhh...”

“Ouuu...”

I watched them for a little while, dumbfounded, and saw Ghoul-Anna hand a perfume bottle to Mr. Helmet and, in return, receive a notebook from him.

The notebook had *Armor Diary* written on it in big letters.

I immediately snatched it from above, ignoring a sad groan from Ghoul-Anna, and flew back up into the sky.

I thought I might learn what had happened in the course of the past month if I read the diary.

“.....”

So I opened it.

XX Month / XX Day

My armor is in excellent condition again today. The way it shines is especially splendid. I want to ignore my research and pour all my energy into my armor. I really love my armor. I love it.

“Oh. Who cares?”

I skipped ahead.

XX Month / XX Day

Today we were able to take the first steps toward the restoration of this country, thanks to a witch.

Anna is very happy, too. We had a party, an advance celebration of the restoration. Using the head of that mage as a ball was so fun. After the party, the woman who was looking for her dog disappeared somewhere. Oh well.

XX Month / XX Day

Three days have passed since we began preparations for the restoration. Everyone's really motivated. Anna is absorbed in her research, so I'm keeping busy by brainstorming attractions. Everyone else chipping in, according to their specialties. The older woman is still missing, but oh well. It's probably nothing to worry about.

XX Month / XX Day

The woman who was searching for her dog finally came back, but not before she had been turned into a ghoul. She must have run out of perfume.

XX Month / XX Day

Something terrible happened.

While we were prepping one of the attractions, one of the youngsters was bitten by a ghoul. Not by a human ghoul. By a dog ghoul. And it had a tag on its neck that said Madonna.

It seems that Anna's perfume doesn't have any effect on dog ghouls. Apparently, they can detect human smells even when it's mixed in with ghoul scent.

The people I had been working with on the restoration preparations were bitten one after the other. Anna, too. Actually, I'm the only one left. This sucks.

By the way, I was safe because I was wearing my armor. Even though I was bitten, it's impossible for a dog's fangs to pierce metal.

Thank goodness I had on my armor.

*My plan right now is to try to escape tomorrow morning.
Right now, I'm just so...sleepy...*

XX Month / XX Day

They got me while I was asleep. I thought I was only dreaming that my helmet was torn off by some doglike creature. This is the worst.

XX Month / XX Day

...Shit.

The diary ended there.

And there you have it. *The plan looked perfect on paper, but it came apart at the seams*—These were words Anna had once spoken to a certain someone.

In her own mind, there's no doubt that the strategy of making ghoul-repelling perfume was a perfect one. However, that unraveled in a way that no one expected.

“Aaah...”

“Woo...t.”

“Ooooh...”

“Augh...”

“Blergh...”

If I were to describe what Ghoul-Anna had been doing ever since I took the book from her, she seemed to be doing business with the other ghouls. She was taking notebooks, rotting meat, and clothing from the ghouls, and in return, she was handing them boxes stuffed with perfume bottles.

Apparently, the ghoul-scented perfume was popular among ghouls, as those who received the boxes all doused themselves with it and moaned with ecstatic expressions while drooling.

“.....”

I guess even death couldn't extinguish her shrewd soul of a saleswoman.



I left the country soon after that.

There wasn't really anything else to do, so after witnessing the people's fate, I left. In the end, I still hadn't been able to experience the country I had long looked forward to seeing, but in exchange, I had gotten to see something rather amusing.

From now on, this country would be the land of the resurrected, hanging on by a thread in a remote corner of the world. Living people were no longer needed there. It could be a paradise for the dead only.

Therefore, in order to allow them to immerse themselves in their own world—my final responsibility, as someone who had been involved—I returned to the sign on the small door of the gate.

Then I flipped it around from OPEN to CLOSED.



CHAPTER 13

For the Sake of My Hometown

Squat, sand-colored mountains stretched over the horizon.

The small cluster of trees and plants were like specks on the desolate landscape, providing the tiniest smattering of color. But the sky was engulfed in ash-gray clouds, which must have been why even the vegetation was totally immersed in shadow.

A girl flew past the barren scenery on a broom. Looking witchy as ever in her black robe, pointy hat, and a star-shaped brooch, she was, in fact, a witch and a traveler.

Her hair was the same shade as the clouds, billowing in the arid wind that scattered the sand, and her lapis-colored eyes remained focused on her destination.

But her next country was not yet in sight.

Yet something strange had caught her eye.

The young lady gazed out over the unforgiving terrain ahead. Oh, who on earth could she be?

That's right. She's me.

“.....”

I was supposed to be heading in the direction of the corpse of a fox-like animal that looked large enough to swallow a human whole—if I remember correctly, a type of giant fox. Swarming around its carcass were the figures of several men and women.

They were standing on the back of the dead fox, shearing off its sandy fur. With saws in hand, they were hacking away its thick, heavy tail and had pried its large mouth open, trying to remove its teeth.

Paying absolutely no attention to the congealed black blood leaking out of the corpse, they were chopping the body up.

“We caught a big one today,” one said, chummy.

“This should fetch us a nice price,” another commented in high spirits.

Their faces beamed with pride.

“.....”

I slowed my broom and stopped when I got close to them. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to pass them by.

Plus, there was something I wanted to confirm.

When I dismounted, a cloud of sand whipped up around my feet for a few moments before disappearing. It was then that the people noticed me.

"..." They stopped and turned their faces toward me all at once.

A man on top of the fox, who had been hacking away with a sword, spoke to me. "Hey. What is it? Do you have some business with us?"

I didn't sense any hostility or distrust. That was a bit of a relief.

I took a big breath and shouted so everyone there would be able to hear me. "Um, I want you to tell me the way!"

"Ah, I see. You're lost, huh? Did you run away from home or something?"

"I'm a traveler."

"Oh. And you're lost?"

"Well..."

I didn't want to admit it, but I had no idea where I was. Though the visibility was good in this mountainous terrain, I couldn't see my destination. On top of that, this whole desert was mostly empty, devoid of established kingdoms. After all, it would be hard to live in a place without much water.

Because of that, there was often quite a distance separating country from country in the dry zones.

I had been camping in the open air for the past several days. Occasionally, I had even lost my way and flown off to some strange places. If I could help it, I really wanted to avoid doing that again; that was my reason for interrupting them midhunt.

The man on top of the giant fox said, "Ha-ha! I see. But unfortunately, Miss Witch, we're not familiar with this area, either. We're foreigners ourselves."

I could feel myself beginning to sink into despair, but the man smiled.

"However, we do know the location of the closest country. We'll show you."

He had a great smile, but since his face and his sword and his skin were completely plastered with blood, it was a strangely disgusting sight.

Oh dear.



The one who pointed me in the direction of the closest country was an older girl who I had seen earlier with her hands deep in the giant fox's mouth. She was pretty, with dark-brown skin and glossy black hair.

"Let's see. For starters, this is where we are right now, so—"

Her finger was tracing over my map that we had spread out on top of a boulder conveniently close by.

A fierce odor surrounded the girl, which must have been because she had previously had both hands in the mouth of a giant corpse. *There are flies buzzing around you. Are you okay with that?*

"In that case, the country closest to us is this one," the girl said, pressing her finger to the map.

"Oh?" I urged her to continue as I resorted to breathing through my mouth.

"I don't know how fast your broom can go, but if you go by horse, it's about a day, maybe?"

"Hmm."

Then I can arrive in several hours. Great!

"There are no mountains in between, so you can get there if you just head straight. Like this." *Squish, squish.*

"Ah."

"...You've been breathing heavily for a while now; are you all right?"

"Don't worry about it." I nodded. "So which way should I go from here?"

The girl looked back and forth between the map and our location several times. "Um... Ah. It's this way. You should head this way." She turned to me with a smile, pointing a finger into the distance.

Okay, then.

And that's how I got back on track after getting lost.

"Thank you very much. With your help, I should be able to arrive at the next country today."

"It's fine, really. Giving someone directions is no trouble at all."

Beneath the girl's exterior—a chaotic mix of pungent smells and buzzing flies—beat the heart of a good person. Meanwhile, her companions continued their grisly work.

They stripped off the fox's pelt, carried it away, and cut off the tail.

“What are they—? I mean, what are you all doing?”

“We’re...hunting?”

Her reaction made it seem like she really wanted to ask, “*Isn’t it obvious?*”

“That’s a giant fox, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Have you seen one before?”

“Never. Not a live one, at least.”

Though I’ve heard they’re ferocious enough to eat people.

“We can sell its fur and teeth for a lot of money. That’s why we’re hunting in this area.”

“Oh?”

“And then we take the money back home—and help the people in our hometown.”

“...?”

I tilted my head in confusion at this extraordinary development, and she told me the situation.

According to her, these people were travelers who had come here to try to save their hometown that had been overrun by a terrible disease.

By hunting the giant foxes and selling their fur and fangs in a large country nearby, they could earn enough to buy medicine to cure the epidemic. One by one, they hunted down the giant foxes that roamed the desert, and before long, they had become quite well-known in the surrounding lands. Now they had been tasked by the nearby countries with eliminating the giant foxes entirely.

The girl told me proudly how, in the three months since they had fled their hometown, they had saved up enough money to help their friends and families suffering back home.

She brought over a money pouch from a nearby cart and dropped it into my hand. I could feel its considerable heft.

The pouch was full of powder. *This must be the medicine.*

“This is the medicine,” she told me, just as I expected. “By the way, Miss Witch, as thanks for showing you the way...well, not really, but if possible, there’s something that I’d like to ask you to do while you’re traveling.”

“What’s that?” I tilted my head.

“If you happen to visit our hometown on your travels, could you please give this to the village chief? We have to keep hunting here for a little

longer.”

“Is it all right for a traveler like me to bring it to him?”

“You don’t seem like a bad person.”

“...You’re very trusting.”

Well, it’s not like I would swipe it or anything. I didn’t have any use for it, after all.

Plus, I do owe her for showing me the way.

“Could you show me where your country is?”

She looked deeply moved when I asked. “Thank you! This is a huge weight off our shoulders! Let’s see; our country is—”

She lowered her eyes to the map; screwing up her face, she walked her fingers over the sheet of paper.

“Huh? It’s not on here. It should be around—” *Squish, squish.*

She was pointing to the edge of the map.

To a place I had visited once.

.....

“I’m sorry; I’m not going that way. I’m planning to go to the country closest to here and then flying in the opposite direction, away from your hometown,” I said, feigning composure.

“Oh really...”

“I’m sorry. You went through the trouble of showing me the way, and yet...”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I’m the one who should be sorry. It was rude of me to ask.”

“.....”

I returned the purse containing the medicine to the disappointed girl.

The heavy burden had been taken from my hand.

“.....” After being at a loss for what to say, I finally blurted out something foolish. “I hope you all are able to return safely to your hometown.”

That was all I could think to say.

“Thank you. You’re very kind.” The girl smiled sadly.

Her expression made my heart ache.



I had been to the place she pointed out on the map once before.

It was exactly two months ago.

Before I had acquired my map of the area.

“.....”

It was no accident that their home village was not recorded on the map.

Because it didn't exist anymore.

When I had visited two months prior, the place had been full of corpses. They belonged to lots of giant foxes, lots of soldiers, and lots of citizens. Their bodies had been piled up on top of mountains of rubble. There were people who had died with their eyes open, people with their guts spilling out, whose bodies had been mauled, and clumps of matter that were no longer human-shaped. The area was rife with death.

It was such a gruesome sight, it made me want to cover my eyes.

However, there had been survivors. In the place that had once been the village, they were swarming over the remains of the giant foxes, just as the people here had been doing earlier.

I asked them what on earth had happened.

The men gathered around the giant foxes told me.

“We're soldiers deployed from the surrounding countries. We heard that giant foxes had been appearing more frequently around these parts, so we were sent in to investigate.”

“By the time we realized what was going on, this village was already done for. As you can see, the villagers were completely annihilated.”

“It sounds like some idiots drove the giant foxes out of their home territory—they don't really live in these kinds of climates.”

“Because of those assholes, the devastation has reached as far as our home countries. It's just deplorable.”

“According to a merchant, there's some gang overhunting the giant foxes. They're probably the reason for this disaster.”

“The damage won't stop here. Driven from their desert homes, the giant foxes are gradually devouring everything in sight. It's only a matter of time before they attack our houses.”

Then one of the soldiers entreated me and said, “Miss Witch, if you happen to see a group hunting them over the course of your travels, would you please tell us? I won't be satisfied until I kill those fools.”

In response to that soldier's earnest request, I nodded.

Because at that time, I didn't yet know about this girl and her countrymen.



Sending up a cloud of sand, I continued flying on my broom.

I kept following the path that had been so kindly shown to me. Before long, I would be able to see the next country.

The wretchedly empty terrain continued, and there were no signs that a country might be nearby, but certainly, if the place wasn't already in ruins, there ought to be living people in that direction.

.....

In the end, I hadn't been able to fulfill either request: neither the plea of the soldiers who had been troubled by giant foxes nor the appeal of the girl and her fellows who continued to hunt dangerous creatures for the sake of their hometown. I hadn't been able to grant either wish.

I had averted my eyes from the very sad incident—and from harsh reality.

No one was happy now; and knowing they would never be...was just too tragic.

But there was nothing I could do.

No matter how they struggled, only despair awaited them in the end.

How heartbreaking.

“...I’m sorry.”

Mumbled to no one in particular beneath an intensely clear sky, my simple offering was covered in sand and quickly forgotten.



CHAPTER 14

The Ancient Country and the Divine Cat's Reincarnation

I was crying.

In the middle of the day, when there was still plenty of pedestrian traffic, whizzing down the main avenue of an old city on my broom, I was weeping. The wind on my face swept the tears out of my eyes.

“Wait!”

“Don’t let that witch get away! Catch her!”

“Bring her back alive!”

In hot pursuit were soldiers of this country. There were mages riding on their brooms, trying to catch me.

And those weren’t my only concerns.

“Leave it to me!”

“Damn...! A little more, and I would’ve had her!”

“Don’t let her get away! Chase her! Catch her!”

Every person in town was leaping into the air, trying to pull me off my broom. They were coming at me from all sides.

Until moments ago, these people had been doting on cats, or in the middle of a conversation, or doing their shopping, and even some people who had just left the stores.

I avoided them all.

Right now, this entire country was uniting against me. They thought I was an evil person who was going to bring ruin to their whole civilization.

Unfortunately, that was the truth.

“Gah... Ohhh...”

I wiped away my tears and kept my eyes forward. I was in much worse shape than usual. The trajectory of my broom was incredibly unstable, and I wasn’t flying straight by any means. I felt that if I stopped focusing for even a second, I could crash. I tightened my grip on my broom and forced it back on course.

I pressed onward, doing my best to avoid the angry mob.

From the crook of my left arm, in a voice that only I could hear, *she* muttered, “I’m starting to feel sick...”

She must have felt unwell from being tossed around by my hectic steering, which made sense.

“Please hold on... I’ve got my own share of problems at the moment.”

I wasn’t able to breathe very well. Every time I inhaled, I had the unpleasant sensation of something hot and heavy in my lungs.

She looked at me with round, blue eyes. “Well, do your best. Look, there’s the gate.”

Then she let out a meow and nuzzled my cheek.

I started crying again. I wonder if they were happy tears or if something else made me weep.

“Give us back the Divine Cat!” rang out a voice from behind me.

As if refusing the request, the one I was holding—the cat—let out another “Meow.”



Let’s backtrack a little bit. About two rotations of the hands of the clock. Or one rotation of the sun and moon.

In other words, this time yesterday.

“*Oh? A country with a strange custom?*”

“*Yes, indeed.*”

I was in a village I had stopped by during my travels. I had casually asked a local, “*Do you know of any interesting countries?*” That was when I learned about this country.

“*How is it strange?*”

“*I know’st not. Alas, of those who have gone yonder from our village, nary a one has returned hence.*”

“*Um, sorry, but could you speak normally?*”

“*.....I have no way of knowing what makes it strange. Only, I am certain that it is a strange country.*”

“*Oh-ho.*”

Well, then.

How odd.

When I pressed the villager for more details, I was told this village had started a campaign just a few years prior to bring in tourists by marketing itself as “Very quaint!” Apparently, it worked, and many naive city dwellers flocked to the village, falsely believing the boonies would offer them a peaceful life of freedom and harmony. The village raked in their cash, which gave them enough social capital to boss other groups around.

But more recently, a country with a strange reputation had cropped up nearby, and the quaint village had nearly lost all their income. The villagers sent spies to see what the big deal was to copy their scheme that attracted new visitors, but each and every spy had decided to stay in the new country instead. The flustered villagers tried to take it all in stride and decided to draw bigger crowds by “talking in an old-fashioned way,” and they just went with it.

That about sums it up.

.....

I wondered just how interesting their competitor could possibly be.

I got curious, you see.

“*So how can I get to that country?*” I asked, and the villager used many affected, old-timey expressions to explain it carefully to me.

Beneath the afternoon sky, I pointed my broom west from the village and flew off. I proceeded over the plains, crossing a river that had a small bridge and passing over more flat land.

Soon I could make out the figures of some slim conifer trees among the green scenery that stretched across the horizon, and then, right where the plains gradually turned into forest, the country slowly revealed itself.

The large rampart wall was more faded than one would expect for a country that was so recently established, and with ivy growing up the sides, it faded into its surroundings, to which it was well suited.

I approached, avoiding the trees as the forest got more dense, and saw an iron gate that was shut tight. Strangely enough, only the gate was brand-new, as if it had recently been replaced, so it stood out among the rest of the balanced scenery.

When I landed my broom and stood before the gate, a small window that

was built into the wall opened. The shiny helmet of a soldier peeked out at me.

“Who goes there?”

“A traveler. A witch. My name is Elaina.”

“What business do you have in this country?”

“I heard that this country was amazing, so I came to see for myself. If it’s all right, I thought I would spend a few days here.”

The soldier nodded slightly. “...Very well. But if you want to enter this country, you’ll have to answer a question.”

And then, “Do you love cats?” He asked me without any preliminaries.

“Um, kitties...?”

“Not kitties. Cats.”

“...What’s the difference?”

“The difference is whether you pay proper respect to cats. Well, how about it? Do you love cats?”

“Um... Well, I like them...I guess?”

In truth, I’ve never even touched one—, but I couldn’t tell him that, no matter what. I mean, I think they look cute, and I have no reason to hate them, so I guess that’s fine.

“...Very well. You may enter. There are no bad people among cat lovers.”

“Um, yeah...”

“But I shall conduct an inspection of your belongings before you enter the country. Come in through the door to the side.”

“Uh, sure...”

And so I easily finished all the necessary immigration procedures and successfully entered the country. I could not have predicted a single thing about the place that lay before me. It was much stranger than I ever could have imagined.



The city looked very old.

People were coming and going along a main avenue that was lined with orderly brick houses, all dull colors and covered in ivy just like the border wall. I was curious about the fact that the door of every house had a low

square hole that looked much too small for a person to pass through, even on their knees.

The cobblestones paving the street were covered in moss, and I got the distinct impression that this city itself had been here for a long time.

“.....”

With the slightest investigation, I finally understood the purpose of the question I had been asked upon entering the country.

This country was just teeming with cats.

If I looked down even slightly, I'd find the ground was covered with them. Weaving their way through the people, basking in the sun in the middle of the street, playing in the grass—there were cats everywhere. So many that it seemed strange.

I guess the reason they ask visitors if they like cats is because this would be your personal hell if you don't, I thought as I was enticed by an incredible, yeasty scent drifting over from a food stall.

“Ah, I'd like some bread, please. I'll take this one and that one and that one and that one.”

“Righto.” The generous-looking man on the other side of the counter nodded. He used tongs to pick up one of each, placed the bread in a paper bag, and then handed it to me.

“That'll be four coppers.”

“Sure.”

I paid and received my bread. *Yay!*

Immediately afterward, I heard: “Mister, I'll have some bread, too, please. This one and that one and that one and that one.”

I hadn't noticed there a witch who had appeared next to me. She ordered the exact same thing. She was an adult witch, wearing a blue-tinged robe and a pointy hat.

She exchanged four coppers for a paper bag and headed toward me after bowing to the shopkeeper. Her short blue hair fluttered slightly in the breeze. Though it was cut short in the back, her bangs were overly long, and she was looking at me with only one eye.

“Hello. I haven't seen you before. Would you happen to be a traveler?”

After taking a piece of bread from my paper bag and biting into it, I replied, “Yes, that's right. And you?”

“I'm a witch. Also, I live here.”

“Oh.”

“Ah, sorry for approaching you out of the blue. I’m the only witch in this country. Even mages are a rarity, so I took the opportunity to talk to you. I hope it’s not a bother.”

“I was just surprised to be spoken to so suddenly.”

She smiled bitterly. “Sorry about that… By the way, have you already had a look around?”

I shook my head after chewing on another mouthful of bread. “I just got here a moment ago,” I admitted.

“Oh, I see! I can give you a tour if you want. This country can be strange, so if you wander around by yourself with no guide, you might get swindled out of your money, or arrested, or something,” she suggested.

.....

I was dying to find out what the deal was with all the cats. A tour sounded perfect.

How convenient.

“I’d like to take you up on that. If you promise not to rip me off, that is.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I won’t collect an information fee or anything. Relax. I came from another land, too, so I remember how difficult it was when I first got here! This country has some unusual rules, and if you inadvertently break them, you’ll be sent to jail.”

“Jail…?”

This was the first I’d heard about that.

“Yes. I’ll explain everything so that doesn’t happen to you. After all, there’s a chance that you and I are going to live together in this country from now on—” She smiled.

At that time, I hadn’t yet grasped the meaning behind her words.

We walked through the city side by side, munching on bread.

“Oh, I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? My name is Lucie. The Fair Weather Witch, Lucie.”

“I’m Elaina. The Ashen Witch.”

She bowed and said “Nice to meet you, Elaina” with a little grin.

My pleasure.

“Please allow me to tell you about this country as I show you around.

First, there are three laws you absolutely must obey.”

“Oh?”

“That said, two out of the three are simple rules you would probably never break if you love cats. First off, ‘Under no circumstances should you bring harm to any cat.’”

“What happens if you break the law?”

“Huh? You go to jail, basically.”

“Isn’t that a bit strict...?”

“Only toward people who harm cats. Don’t they deserve it? The second law overlaps with the first one to a certain degree... ‘You must treat all cats with unconditional love.’”

“That’s a little abstract... By the way, what if you break that law?”

“Jail.”

“.....” *That’s extreme...* “Um... Specifically, how do you—? Achoo!”

“Hmm? Are you okay? Do you have a cold?”

“Excuse me. Don’t worry about it. Anyway, how specifically should you attend to the cats?”

“Well...the same way you usually do.”

“So if I treat them like I normally would, it would count as showering them with love...?”

I don’t get it.

“I know! It’ll be easier to understand if I have you see it in action, won’t it? Okay, um—Ah! Look, over there.” Tugging on my sleeve as I stood there in bewilderment, Lucie pointed to the side of the road.

There was a stall selling seafood and a calico cat staring at the rows of fish.

The cat kept its stance low as it approached the stand, trying not to be caught by the shopkeeper, then stretched out suddenly when it got right under the stall. It skillfully snatched one of the fish stretched out on the stall with the tip of its paw and held it in its mouth.

“Ahhh!”

But the shopkeeper spotted the cat as it made the steal. The surprised calico cat glared at the shopkeeper.

Oh dear. He’s gonna be angry, I thought, but...

“Ah, Mr. Cat! Thank you very much! Please take as much as you like!”

For some reason, the shopkeeper was delighted. Moreover, he started

throwing all the neatly stacked fish in his vicinity out into the street. Cats immediately swarmed the area and began making off with the goods.

.....

Huh?

“What just happened?”

“Love.”

“That doesn’t answer the question...”

I had a feeling we were talking past each other. Maybe this country was known for its unique expressions? That would be a simple answer.

“Ah, look! Over there! That might be easier to understand.”

“.....”

At her urging, I let my eyes pass over the scene.

And I was knocked speechless. This one was even worse.

“Aaah! Mr. Cat! Mr. Cat! Thank you! Thank you!”

There was a man with an ecstatic expression lying faceup on the road. On top of him was a cat seated in a comfortable position with its eyes narrowed, kneading the man’s stomach with its front paws.

“What’s going on?”

“Love.”

“.....”

I turned my eyes away from this strange and incomprehensible new world. But everywhere I looked, I was astonished by bizarre spectacles.

“Oh, oh, oh! You are just so cute! Meow-meoooow!” cooed a woman in a peculiar voice, holding a cat like she was rocking a baby.

What on earth...?

“And that?”

“Love, of course.”

“What does ‘love’ mean to you, exactly...?”

We continued walking through the city, and I kept being baffled by everything in my line of sight; and as we ventured farther, the number of cats increased, and the behavior of the humans became more peculiar.

People were passing by, going out of their way to avoid a cat that was sleeping in the middle of the road. A devilish cat stole the main dish from a couple having lunch at a restaurant, and the victims looked on as it happened, appearing all too pleased. A group of cats, like a pack of evil gods, swarmed mercilessly around clothes for sale, climbed up them, and ripped them to

shreds—and the shopkeeper just smiled through it all.

There was no one to stop the rampant cat attacks, and not a single person stood up to them. The cats were allowed to do anything they pleased.

“This is what we mean by unconditional love,” Lucie told me boastfully. “You look surprised, but the people of this country—no, once you come here, everyone feels that way. Everyone treats the cats with love.”

“Honestly, it looks like they’ve lost any sense of reason and resorted to spoiling the cats.”

“Well, the cats in this country are different from anywhere else in the world. They’re especially cute. We can’t help spoiling them a little bit. You’ll understand soon enough, Elaina.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand...” *Maybe it was because I’ve never touched one.* “For starters, I don’t really understand how these cats are different from the cats they have anywhere else.”

“Huh? They’re obviously hundreds of times cuter than the cats in other countries! I came here for work, but I was totally taken in by the cuteness of the cats, and I couldn’t bring myself to ever leave!”

“For work, you said?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, reconnaissance work.”

“.....”

“I was sent here from my village with instructions to observe the culture here and make note of anything that we could steal.”

I feel like I’ve heard that story somewhere before.

“...You’ve adapted quite well to this place for someone who came on a reconnaissance mission.”

“It’s fine! I’m planning to go back eventually! But I’m going to have my fill of this place first!”

“...Haven’t you lost sight of your goal? Are you all right?”

“Do I seem like I’ve lost sight of it?”

“I think you know what I mean.”

“Ah, look at this little one!”

Somehow, it seemed she had even lost the will to speak to me. Once she saw the figure of a kitten toddling over toward us on unsteady legs, she immediately leaned down and began clicking her tongue, hand outstretched.

I don’t know whether it was intentional, but sure enough, the kitten did finally make its way to her.

And then, it chomped down on her hand.

With a tight hold on Lucie's index finger, it began gnawing gently.

"Ah..."

Lucie stared in surprise at this state of affairs, then—

"Aaaaaaaaaah! How cuuuuuuuute!" She looked like she might keel over. She was breathing heavily as the kitten kept biting her finger, like it was trying to drink milk, twisting its little body around.

Isn't that a little much? Are you all right?

"Ah... Aaahhh! Haaaaaaaah!"

"....."

This seems hopeless.

I withdrew from her sudden, overwhelming change in personality. I withdrew quite far.

This was the person who, until just a moment ago, had been having a normal conversation with me. She was now blushing and fawning over a kitten. It gave me the creeps, and my entire body immediately felt itchy.

It was enough to make me want to leave already.



"Achoo!"

I sneezed with every step I took.

How many times was that today? Did I catch a cold or something? My body feels very heavy. Come to think of it, the back of my throat seems a little scratchy, too...

I guess I need a good night's sleep later.

"Does this country have any inns with good amenities?" I asked Lucie, who had been in an excessively good mood since a merciless kitten attack.

"Um... Let's see, my recommendation would be that place over there. Their rooms are basically heaven, crowded with cats that you can curl up with."

"Maybe I asked the wrong question. Please show me to a more habitable inn."

"What about cats?"

"Not necessary."

“.....” After puffing up her cheeks in a sullen expression, she pointed out a different building. “In that case, the inn over there is probably good.”

After that, we continued walking around town totally normally. I got her to show me a good inn, several delicious restaurants (which were all full of cats), and various other things.

We continued our tour of the timeworn townscape, and before I realized it, the sun had set, and the sky had turned red.

I suppose we'll be heading our own ways? I thought as the tour seemed to be coming to an end, but I remembered that there was one more thing I had to get her to tell me.

“By the way, what is the third law?”

There are three laws I gotta obey, right?

“Oh, sorry. I totally forgot.”

“Please tell me. If you don't, I can't go to the inn with any peace of mind.”

And I don't want to spend the night in jail.

“Ah-ha-ha. But it's rare to even be confronted with the final law in the first place, so I don't think it'll really be a problem. Well, the third law is—”

It happened just as she opened her mouth.

The people walking through town began to stir. Their agitation rippled through the passersby like waves, and from behind me, gasps of astonishment mixed with the evening air.

When I looked around to see what had happened, I found every single resident staring in the same direction.

“Oh... It's the Divine Cat!”

“The Divine Cat has graced us with her presence!”

“How many days has it been?”

“What a statuesque build...”

“Just incredible...!”

As these comments and more spilled from their mouths, they all, without exception, began to kneel.

Lucie joined them.

“Ah...beautiful...!” She spoke in a feverish tone, sighing, and assumed the same respectful posture.

.....

...What?

All of the people had turned to face a single cat. It had glossy black fur and blue eyes.

“.....?”

But she carried herself in a way that was somehow different than the others.

Walking toward us with graceful steps, that cat had two tails growing from her behind. If I remembered correctly, that was usually not the case with most cats.

Her fur was incredibly luxuriant. She looked like she would be nice to hold.

“Lucie, why does that cat have two tails—?”

“Elaina! What are you doing? Hurry up and follow my lead!”

I didn’t even have time to question it. Lucie yanked on my robe.

“.....”

Follow your lead?

You mean kneel down to a cat?

I really don’t want to, but...

If I don’t do what you say, I might end up in jail.

“...Uhhh.” *There’s no way around it.*

Reluctantly, I put one knee down on the ground and lowered my head reverently, copying those around me.

What on earth am I doing here?

“...Um, Lucie?”

“Be quiet. You’re in front of the Divine Cat. Don’t cause any offense.”

Uh...

Don’t you think that’s a little unreasonable? I don’t understand what I could possibly do to cause offense. And just what is the Divine Cat anyway?

My mind was a storm of troubled thoughts, and I tried to squash my bewilderment and potential complaints before my mouth could get me into any trouble.

Then it happened.

“Meow.”

There was a little cry. It came from pretty close by.

Actually, it came from extremely close by.

“.....”

“Meooow.”

I realized the black cat with two tails—the Divine Cat or whatever—was standing before me. The elegant feline was staring straight into my eyes.

“*Mrrow.*”

And then, right as she swished her two tails back and forth, she suddenly pounced. Claws out, she clung to my robe.

“Huh...?” I was perplexed. What was the right thing to do?

I tried to gauge the reactions of those around me and heard voices of admiration.

“Oh...”

“To have the Divine Cat pounce on you...”

“The Divine Cat must approve of her.”

I also heard Lucie muttering, “I’m so jealous...”

I didn’t really understand what was happening, but it didn’t seem to be bad.

Come to think of it, this is my first time petting a cat, huh? Well, it has two tails, so I’m not sure if I can even call it a cat.

“...Oof.” I tucked in my knees, hunkered down on the ground, and embraced the cat who had clung to me. The cat yielded to me and curled up in my arms.

When I gently petted her head, she made a sleepy expression and gently began to purr. I felt like I heard her say, “*Pet me more.*”

She certainly is cute.

Well, I supposed it wasn’t impossible to understand why the people of this country became so passionate about cats. That said, I didn’t feel like I was in any danger of losing my grip on logic.

“Wh-what on earth...?!”

“This is...”

“I can’t believe it...”

As I was enjoying petting the Divine Cat or whatever, I could hear the chatter rise up again. The people stood up and slowly walked toward us, swaying, to encircle me and the Divine Cat.

What? I tilted my head to the side in confusion. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lucie stand up beside me. When I looked at her, she was staring down at me with an extremely cold expression.

“...I—I can’t believe this, Elaina... What have you done...?!” she deliriously slurred and took out her wand.

“...Huh? Um...”

That was when I realized that something was amiss.

But it was already too late.

“You insolent girl!”

“To pet the Divine Cat!”

“Take your filthy hands off her!”

“You...! Do you even understand what you’re doing?!?”

The people around me were incredibly angry.

“Hang on... Um, wait, please! Just what is—?”

I started to panic, unsure of what I had done wrong. At that point, of all the things I could have done, I raised my hands.

I had let go of the Divine Cat in my arms. She fell into my lap, landing neatly on all four paws. Her claws hurt as they dug into my thighs.

That had major repercussions.

“She tossed the Divine Cat aside! Not only is she totally offensive, that’s an act unworthy of a cat lover! That means capital punishment! She’s guilty!”

The one shrieking was none other than Lucie.

“Lucie. I’m begging you. Explain to them that I didn’t know the situation
___”

“There’s no use arguing!”

Uh... She’s not listening...

Instead of explaining the situation, she struck my palms with her wand and cast a spell. My raised hands were yanked down by some unknown force and confined by magical iron shackles. They were pretty well-made, with chains connecting the tips of my fingers to the handcuffs, so I couldn’t close either hand, a feature I really could have done without.

The restraints kept me from gripping my wand.

“...Um?”

When I looked up again, there was Lucie, seething. She handed the keys to the shackles over to a soldier, glaring at me the whole time.

“All right, everyone! Let’s throw this insolent witch in jail!” she shouted, and the surrounding people agreed.

“Um... Could I talk to you for a second...?”

“All right, stand up, Elaina! If you won’t stand, I’ll drag you along with me!” She moved forward, pulling hard on the hand shackles.

“Hey...”

“Honestly...! How did someone this rude slip by when we take precautions to only allow cat lovers in?”

“.....”

It seemed that my words weren’t reaching their ears.

Something was very off about the way she was acting. It was like she was a completely different person from the one who had given me a tour of the city.

It was as if she had lost all sense of reason.

Like she was being controlled by some unknown force.

“I finally found you.”

As I was pulled along by Lucie, I imagined I heard such a voice.



I wonder how much time passed after that.

I was in a cold jail cell.

All I could see were the drab gray floor and walls—and the rusty iron bars. The outside world appeared completely submerged in darkness, and through the one small window that opened onto the cell flowed the faint light of the moon and the songs of insects.

I’m sure the moon looks beautiful tonight...but I can’t see it.

Looking up from my seated position, all I could see was a stake driven into the wall and the shackles around my hands connected to it.

I hadn’t been able to move from the wall since I’d been put in here. I had already lost all feeling in my hands.

“What’s the meaning of all this...?”

My muttered question echoed pointlessly, then dissolved into the silence.

Of course, there was no one there to answer me.

Actually, there was no one around at all. Not a soul. I had been abandoned in a jail without a single other prisoner.

Is this really happening to me? This is too much.

“...”

Well, there’s no use crying over something I can’t change.

For now, let’s try to think of a way out of this mess.

First step is getting a handle on the reality of the situation.

I can't bend my fingers, so there's no way I can grip a wand. My body is shackled to the wall, so I doubt I'll be able to ride my broom. And even supposing I could ride it, I would definitely be discovered as soon as I escaped. Plus, it would be incredibly dangerous since my hands are bound. Can't use my wand. Can't use my broom. In other words, I can't rely on magic. I'm unreliable.

Oh, it's totally over for me.

Hee-hee-hee.

".....What should I do?"

I was deep in despair.

It would be nice if I could solve this with money, huh? I wonder how that would go. I guess it would depend on negotiations. That said, I should have run away the moment I was surrounded.

For some reason, even after I had started to suspect they wanted to throw me in jail, I hadn't been able to deal with the situation with my usual cool demeanor.

I wonder why? I'm really not doing so hot today.

Did I catch a cold?

My throat hurts, my eyes burn, and I keep sneezing. My body is kind of itchy all over. I don't get it. What in the world is going on?

I don't seem to have a fever, though.

I suspected that the real reason I had lost my composure was whatever strange illness I had contracted.

Well, knowing that now doesn't exactly do me a lot of good.

"...Sigh."

That's when it happened.

Something obscured the moonlight.

"Well, Madam Witch. How's jail treating you?" called out a voice in the cell that was now even darker than before. It was calming and feminine—one that may or may not have been familiar.

I looked around but couldn't see anyone.

"Over here, Madam Witch."

Just when I thought I heard the voice again, the moonlight returned. From above—from the window, something dropped down, and then...

"Meow."

The cat approached, meowing cutely as she swished her two tails back

and forth.

“You’re...”

“Good evening.”

There in front of me was the being who the people of this country revered above all others.

The Divine Cat, or whatever they called her.

And she was talking.

.....

This cat could talk, even though she was quietly purring in my arms when I needed her most.

She was looking like a cat that swallowed the canary.





The cat looked up at me.

“I finally found you. I was waiting desperately for a human like you.”
Then she tilted her head. “You don’t feel like discussing this with me?”

In this situation, you mean?

“You say ‘discuss’... I take it to mean there is some reason why I would want to listen to anything you have to say. Is there a considerable benefit you might be able to offer?”

“Naturally. I shall get you out of this place. That is the benefit to you. In exchange, you shall accept my one demand.”

“Oh-ho! And that would be?”

“I want you to get me out of this country.”

“Achoo! ...So my benefit is a side effect of your demand?”

“I am the only one who can rescue you from this place.”

“.....”

“Likewise, you are the only one who can rescue me from this land. In other words, our interests align.”

I didn’t understand what she was saying at all. “Um... Would you explain it from the beginning?”

“Oh. So you’re willing to help?”

“Depends on the reasons,” I said. “Carrying the most sacred creature in the country out of said country without knowing anything isn’t exactly something I want to do.”

I’d like to avoid making any more enemies than I have already.

“...Hmm,” the Divine Cat said, casting her eyes downward as if giving it a bit of thought. “Very well, as you wish. I shall tell you the story from the very beginning. The history of this country before the great collapse is long, several hundred years—”

“If you could summarize just the parts that’re relevant to me, that would be great.”

“Hmph... You’re a whiny one.” The cat sighed and began to speak like she was recounting a great legend.

“Then I shall tell you. Well, to put it simply, this country came into being

because of me."

This was the story of the archaic country.

Apparently, elderly cats with lingering attachments to this world could be reborn as magical spirit cats with two tails on rare occasions.

And she was one of them.

About forty years earlier, she had been born in this country as a house cat. That was back when the place still had contact with the outside world. The cat spent her whole life there, loved by people.

However, after about fifteen years, that all ended.

An epidemic spread through the country.

The people of the city died. Her owner was no exception and succumbed to this illness.

In just a few years, the prosperous land was almost uninhabited.

In that country, now desolate and forgotten, she had continued living quietly with her fellow cats.

They had no desire to go explore the outside. They couldn't help but feel as though their home would disappear forever into the forest if they left.

She waited, hoping with all her heart that new people would come and that the country would flourish again. She waited and waited.

Under excruciatingly rare situations, someone would visit their domain, but they would just kidnap a few of her fellow strays or stay only a few days and then leave. There was no one who seemed likely to settle down here.

She continued to hold out, hoping for new arrivals.

After about twenty years had passed since her birth, she lost the ability to move.

It seemed her time had come at last—and she understood this somehow.

At the very least, she had wanted to feel the love of a human one last time. Humbly, with that one regret in mind, she resigned herself to death.

Or so she thought.

The following day, she awoke as usual. She hadn't died. And stranger than that, her body felt light, as if it had never suffered under the cruel hand of aging.

What on earth had happened?

When she got up, she realized that her tail had split into two. And the

mouth that until then had only been able to issue meows had suddenly gained the ability to speak words—human words.

She had two of the things her fellow cats all had only one of. And she could talk. It was incredible. Even as she tilted her head in confusion at this curious turn, she boasted to her fellow cats right away.

Ever since that day, the environment surrounding her had been considerably changed.

The people who came to visit stopped leaving.

For example, there were merchants who had planned to stay just a few days to rest, the travelers who lost their way and finally ended up here, the immigrants who had been chased from their homes.

Slowly but surely, the number of people grew, and none seemed inclined to leave the country. And they showered her and the other cats with more love than any of the previous visitors had.

Indeed, this turn of events seemed to be due to her second tail.

Both she and her fellow cats realized that. In fact, just by lightly stroking her, most people became inclined to pour out an excess of love onto the cats.

And there was no way they wouldn't use this to their advantage. There was no need to hold back. If the country was to flourish again, there would be nothing to regret, they thought.

After her life as an ordinary cat ended, the human population steadily increased. Most of the people who visited the country by chance ended up settling down there.

In exceedingly uncommon cases, there were people who did not fall for the Divine Cat's new powers. From her observations, it seemed that she had no effect on people who naturally disliked cats.

A long time passed, and the people who were captivated by her gradually restored the country. They built a new gate and, before she knew it, had begun to worship her—the cat with two tails—as the Divine Cat.

Basking in the love of so many people, she continued to live in the country.

Twenty years had passed since her rebirth.

“The human population has grown too large. If it continues at this pace, the country is going to burst. Everything will fall to ruin again. And that's

why I must leave,” she said.

That was the main reason she had to exit the country.

“Do you understand the situation now?” the Divine Cat asked, tilting her head.

“.....” I remained there in front of her, tears pooling in my eyes.

“Oh, are you crying for my sake? What a sweet girl.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to cry, but the tears just won’t stop.”

“Hmph. I was joking anyway. I knew that. Because, you see, that is the mark of someone who is not suited to cats. You’ve been out of sorts ever since you arrived in this country, right? For example, your body is itchy, your eyes burn, your nose is running, your throat hurts, and you’re generally not feeling well. And—”

“Achoo!”

“...And you’re sneezing. Like that.”

“That’s right.” I nodded and sniffled. Because I had never come into direct contact with cats, or rather, because I had never touched a cat in the first place, I myself hadn’t known that I had such a nature.

I guess I’ll be avoiding cats from now on, huh?

“Well, how about it? Would you like to cooperate with me?”

She pressed me a second time. Her blue eyes peering into mine. I got the sense that she was making an appeal with her eyes—*I told you the circumstances, so cooperate already.*

“.....” I looked up, trying to escape her piercing gaze, and caught a glimpse of my shackles. “You are a cat, right? How do you plan to get these off me?”

At these words, she opened her eyes wide for a moment.

“Hmm-hmm. I have an idea for those. Wait right here,” she said in excitement, immediately turning and slipping between the iron bars of the jail to leave.

I didn’t have anything to do while I waited, so I stretched out my legs and killed time by tapping my heels on the floor. I had been in the same position this whole time, so it was just the right amount of stretch.

“Can’t you wait quietly?”

After a short while, she returned. She was holding a key ring in her mouth.

When she had suggested that she had an idea, I'd suspected she must have some extraordinary secret plan in motion, but it seemed she had simply stolen the keys. It was a bit anticlimactic, to be honest.

She passed through the bars exactly the way she had gone out, then walked over to me, jumped, and began to claw her way up my body.

She had her claws out, as usual, so it was moderately painful.

"We'll carry out the plan tomorrow afternoon. I want you take me out of the country while kicking up a big fuss."

Having arrived at my shoulders, she leaped onto my pointy hat, jangling the bunch of keys. I could feel her weight pressing down on me from above.

"Shouldn't we go now? I think if we leave at this moment, it'd be easier to make a clean getaway."

"We can't. We must spread the word that I have left the country. If we don't, there will be people who would continue to believe in me, not knowing I had gone. We need to make sure they all know I'm gone for good and, on top of that, that I am bequeathing the country to those who stay. That's why I need you to make a scene."

"...But I'll be a criminal if I do that."

"You're already a criminal. What a silly thing to say."

"Don't you know? Not all crimes are the same."

"If you make a run for it, then it'll be fine."

"That's a criminal's way of thinking..."

As the iron keys knocked each other on top of my head to make an unpleasant jangling noise, she let out a bored snort.

"Then I suppose I am a criminal, having tricked a great many humans. Do the same rules apply to cats, I wonder?"

"...." I smiled at her self-deprecating response. "I know a dumb person who once said that committing a crime isn't your problem as long as you run away."

".....They must be a very strange individual."

"Yeah, they're pretty strange."

Clank! From atop my head came the sound of opening locks.



I passed the time one way or another.

I spent the night in jail and waited until the afternoon before forcefully busting out and emerging outside. I was meant to kick up a big fuss, to make a really memorable scene, but I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I purposely flew low and slow so it would be easy for soldiers and civilians to chase me down.

There were tears spilling from my eyes, swept away by the wind. This long chase must have triggered my body's sensitivity further.

“Crap...! I can’t catch up with her at all!”

“Hey! Close the gate! Under no circumstances should she be let out!”

“Rescue the Divine Cat, no matter what!”

As we zoomed through the city that was roiling with chaos, we heard the shouts of the people as they leaped at us, but of course, none could catch me.

My chest was burning, my eyes were swollen, and at some point, the itchiness had turned into pain. However, even in my debilitated state, I was still a witch.

There was no way they were going to catch me.

“Good, good. Keep going, but a little more carefully if you can.” From where she sat in my arms, the Divine Cat could not help but add a little unwarranted criticism to her words of praise.

“They’ll catch us if I fly safely, you know!”

“What are you saying? We’ll be at the gate soon, right? Just try to hold out until then.”

“It’s just hard, you know. I mean—” I broke off midsentence.

“Elaina! I misjudged you! Though I felt a lot of contempt for you yesterday!”

Lucie had come after us. She zoomed down from above.

Straddling her broom and gripping her wand, she blocked my way forward. As if to protect the closed gate.

“.....”

So you finally showed up, huh? I just knew you’d come to get in my way. There’s no reason you wouldn’t come for the country’s most important resident.

She turned her wand on me. “Being insolent to the Divine Cat *and* breaking out of jail? What were you thinking?! I will never forgive you! This calls for capital punishment! You’re guilty as charged!”

Then she waved her wand.

As if responding to her words and movements, the ground directly below Lucie shone bright white. The light around her feet formed a circle, making an unpleasant rumbling noise as if it was boiling, and then, from directly behind her, seven pillars of water flew toward me.

“...!”

I swerved on my broom to avoid them, when I realized that they were not just waterspouts. Like seven living creatures, the water pillars writhed and twisted—and began to chase after me.

Just like snakes.

The more I dodged, the more they moved to surround me. If I flew my broom upward, the barrage came from all directions. If I snaked along the ground, they would coil themselves around and chase after me.

I darted around, like a small bug, and looked at Lucie. Operating her wand from atop her broom, she was glaring at me intensely.

The attacks will stop if I take her wand away, right? I mean, without it, a witch is just an ordinary person. Nothing to fear. Well, I guess that goes for me, too.

“Um, Lucie? I’m holding the Divine Cat, you know. Are you sure you should be attacking me?”

“Shut up! Die!”

“.....”

I glanced down at the Divine Cat. “She doesn’t seem to be one for conversation,” she said in a carefree tone.

I ignored her and continued dodging Lucie’s attacks, when she spoke to me again.

“Are you really just going to keep defending?”

“Both of my hands are occupied, you know! But don’t worry. I have an idea.” I took my broom higher. High enough that we could look down on Lucie, but not so high up that we would die if we fell.

“Oh? From the way you’re talking, I suppose you have quite the secret plan.”

“Yes. Very much so.”

While flying around and around, dodging the water serpents that continued to pursue us, I made my preparations.

Well, I mostly mean that I grabbed the Divine Cat with one hand.

“Please don’t claw at me.”

It’ll hurt.

“...Huh?” Her eyes opened wide, and she stretched all four legs all the way out.

By the time the Divine Cat realized what I was planning, the plan was already under way.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!” She left my arms and slowly fell, screaming the whole way.

What I had done was very simple.

I’m not sure if I could really call this a secret plan since all I did was throw her overboard.

And if you thought it was anticlimactic, think again. The effect on the people of the country was astounding.

“What? A-ah! The Divine Cat!”

In that instant, Lucie eased up her attacks in a panic below me.

That is exactly what I had hoped would happen. I immediately sent my broom into a nosedive. I pulled out my wand with my free hand and, brandishing it in Lucie’s direction, fired off several spells in an instant before putting away the wand.

I had shot blasts of powerful wind magic. They flew directly for Lucie, spinning and looping like tornados and churning up the earth below.

“Divine Ca—Huh?”

Her hand, outstretched to grab hold of the falling Divine Cat, missed the falling feline, just as the full force of my counterattack slammed into her.

Tossed about in the wild vortex of wind, spinning ’round and ’round, Lucie was blown away. *Bang!* The solid iron gate brought her to a stop.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

I flew below the Divine Cat, who was flailing her legs in the air while screaming. The straw head of my broom brushed the ground as I grasped the falling deity tightly in one arm.

Her small heart was pounding very fast.

“...I—I thought I was going to die!”

“But it all worked out, right?”

“In hindsight!”

“That’s true for most everything.”

After casting a glance toward the gate and confirming that Lucie was

unconscious—her eyes were rolled back—I landed my broom.

The people of the country crowded around us, either wearing dumbfounded expressions or still showing hostility.

I made my best attempt at a villainous expression. “Well, everyone, the strongest witch in your country lost to me easily. Are there any other challengers?”

A commotion spread through the crowd, but not a single person stepped forward. *Prudent, very prudent.*

“I think I’ll be taking my leave now. Go ahead and open the gate. Otherwise, I do something to this cute cat—Well, you understand, right?”

I shot a glare at the gatekeeper, whose shoulders hitched in surprise in a way that was perceptible even beneath his exaggerated armor, and he began to open the gate in a panic.

Slowly, I began to see the world outside.

“Hey, what is this? I’m going outside, too. There’s no sense in using me as a hostage.” From where she sat in my hand, the Divine Cat raised her objections.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a secret plan this time, too.”

“I no longer trust those.”

“I won’t throw you or anything this time. Relax.”

When the gate was completely open, I started walking. On high alert to everything around me, I moved carefully, one step at a time.

In the end, the people didn’t do anything to me, allowing me to step over Lucie and exit the country.

When I turned around, I saw them wearing expressions of grief. There were people screaming abuse at me—“*Demon!*” and “*You can’t be serious!*” Other people were bawling their eyes out.

“.....”

After staring at them for a moment—

“Well then, we’ll be taking our leave.”

I got on my broom just like that.

As far as my secret plan, I had simply chosen to lie.

I hadn’t decided on any particular destination. I just flew off to wherever I felt like, at full speed, holding a black cat under my arm.

Fast enough that no one could follow.

Behind me, the agonizing cries of the people lamenting their stolen deity

grew faint.



And so we had managed to escape.

I can't really remember how long we flew.

We made our way through thick woods, over plains blanketed in green, and finally arrived at a gloomy forest.

There were no humans in sight and no civilization nearby.

"We should be all right, coming this far out."

We had traveled quite a distance.

When I looked up, I could just barely make out the sky, stained red by the sunset.

"You saved me."

Jumping down from my arms, the Divine Cat stood on the ground.

I rubbed my tingling, aching arm and wiped my eyes. "What are you planning to do now?"

"Nothing. I'm just going to live a quiet life. Without human contact."

"....."

"And what will you do, Elaina?"

"I plan to quietly continue my travels. Without feline contact."

"That's a good idea. Please do so." She snorted, and I turned around abruptly and perched on my broom.

"I hope we'll meet again—Oh, you know, I never asked for your name."

"I have no name."

"Even though you were a pet?"

"Remember, I've died once, so I have no name," she said.

"...In that case, would you let me hear your old one?"

"....."

After hesitating for a moment, she quietly opened her mouth and spoke a single word, giving me her name.

It was completely unremarkable, a common name, and yet very lovely.

I grinned at her. "It's a nice name."

"But there will never be anyone who will call me that again."

Then she smiled and turned her two tails toward me, looking back at me

over her shoulder.

“I’m off. I’m glad you are the one I met at the end.” She darted off, deep into the forest.

And I flew away on my broom.

Wiping my itchy eyes and rubbing my scratchy throat, I flew toward the setting sun.

Once I was free of the forest, a meadow painted by the light of the setting sun greeted me. The wind blew over the rippling blades of grass.



Let’s talk about what happened one month and a few days after that.

I had received a summons from a certain country...and because I had been foolish enough to promise to return, I had come back to the region.

It wasn’t for any major reason, but since I was in the area, I made my way to the village where I had first learned about the country overrun with cats.

Well, I could have done without another visit, that’s for sure.

“Hello there! *Meow!*”

“.....”

“Miss Traveler! Welcomeow! This is the village where cats and country folk live in harmony! Take your time and enjoy! *Meow!*”

“.....”

There was something strange about her voice. The village itself had changed a bit. Where before there had been not a single cat or other animal, now I could see cats scattered about.

...Wait.

More importantly, first of all...

“What are *you* doing, Lucie?”

“.....Don’t ask. Please.”

The person who had come out to greet me in front of the village was none other than the Fair Weather Witch herself. She was clad in a robe, exactly as when I had encountered her in the other country, but this time, in place of her pointy hat, she had on a headband decorated with cat ears. It was amazing how poorly the getup suited her. To be honest, it was pitiful. I couldn’t hold back tears in the face of this tragic reality.

Lucie stroked her head lightly.

“Elaina, I wanted to thank you for what you did a month ago. It really opened my eyes. It seems that, for some reason, I was acting strange while I was in that country.”

“Is that so?” *You’re acting pretty strange now, too, but...* I did her the favor of not saying that. “What happened after I left?”

“Everyone left. Weirdly enough, everyone’s love of cats just kind of evaporated after the Divine Cat was kidnapped, you know. There were even some people who came out wondering whether their souls might have been manipulated by the cat with two tails.”

Which means...

“So now that country doesn’t exist anymore?”

She shook her head slowly at my inquiry. “No. There were plenty of cat lovers and people who truly didn’t have any other place to live, and they’ve got things working again now. I’ve even heard they’re marketing themselves as a country where you can live together with cats, and the tourist traffic is gradually picking up again.”

“So you decided to imitate that country, and now this place is like that, too?”

“.....They were cute, so I brought several cats back with me. But the villagers were extremely taken with their cuteness...”

“Enough to affect their sense of reason, huh?”

“Seriously...” And then, after a brief silence, Lucie clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Oh, wait here for a minute, Elaina.”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

She dashed off in a hurry and went into a house somewhere. Not even a minute passed before she came back out, carefully carrying a wooden box in both hands.

“Elaina! Look at this; look!”

With extreme excitement, she tilted it toward me.

When I peered inside, I saw several cats. A mother cat with pure-white fur. Three kittens with mixed black-and-white fur. And one kitten that was jet-black.

.....

“Not even a month has passed since these darlings were born. Aren’t they so cute?”

Most of the cats in the box looked at me for just a moment, as if they were annoyed with the disturbance, and went back to sleep right away. But one was very lively, much more than the others.

It was the kitten with blue eyes and black fur that looked like it would be nice to hold. It got up and stretched its legs, trying to get out of the box.

“This one is very lively, isn’t it?”

I praised it half-heartedly, and Lucie smiled, looking very happy. “Right? Would you like to pet it?”

“No, I’m fine.” *It’s not in my nature, you see.* “Have you given them names?”

“The kittens don’t have names yet. That’s why I’d like you to name them, Elaina.”

“.....” I stared at the newborn black cat. “I’ll do it, but I’ll only name one.”

“Which one?”

“This one.”

The black cat cried, “*Meow.*”

“Its name will be—”

Then I told her the perfect name for the black cat in front of me.

It was completely unremarkable, a common name, and yet very lovely.



EPILOGUE

Clouds floated across the boundless blue sky, casting shadows onto the plains below.

There was one patch of land that was the most ideal temperature, shielding exposure from the direct sun, where a single tree stood beneath the clouds, top swaying in the cool air.

The leaves stirred in the breeze, rustling before taking flight from the single tree on the plain and drifting through the air. Spinning around as if dancing, the leaves whirled around a certain witch before finally scattering.

“...Hmm.”

After lightly touching her cheek where the leaves had caressed her, that witch looked up at the tree.

Her long, sleek ashen hair swayed in the breeze as she soared on her broom. This young woman was a witch and a traveler. She was clad in a black robe and a pointy hat, and upon her breast was a star-shaped brooch that served as proof of her witchhood.

She tilted her head quizzically as she gazed up at the tree.

“...Hmm?”

She had a memory of this tree, standing with an air of composure, surrounded by small grasses and flowers. Landing her broom beneath its branches, she recalled when and where she had seen it before.

“This is where I took shelter from the rain.”

She remembered this view. It had rained in the middle of her travels, so she had settled down on this spot for a short while.

Somehow or other, it seemed she had returned.

Recalling the scenery as it had appeared the last time, the witch let her mouth form a little smile.

And then, perched atop her broom, she gently rose into the sky. Before her stretched an expanse of pale greens and deep blues.

It was beautiful.

It was ordinary scenery, the kind that was common anywhere.

But it was enchanting.

“.....”

But the witch did not stop like last time. This time, it wasn’t raining. She

had no reason to linger.

As a witch and as a traveler, she delighted in traversing this beautiful landscape more than simply gazing at it.

She walked around beneath the tree, thinking about where she should head next. But that quickly grew tiresome, and she left to return to the sunshine.

The plants below her glittered, swaying in the sunlight, as if to greet the traveling witch.

The wind blew tenderly, as if to caress her.

The ordinary landscape kindly greeted the witch, as always—as if inviting her to the places she had not yet seen in the wide world.

“...I wonder what kind of place the next country will be,” she mumbled to no one in particular.

She didn’t know the answer, but she was eager to find out.

With a heart jumping from excitement, the witch continued her journey.

Who was she?

She was me.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. Or maybe I should say, “Good to see you again.” My name is Jougi Shiraishi.

Recently, I’ve become a full-fledged member of society. When I was small, I pictured all grown adults as perfect human beings. But, well, when I tried to become a cog in the wheel of society, even though it was awash in amazing people, I myself was unable to become one of them. People don’t always go through a dramatic personal change just by experiencing a shift of circumstances, and now I earnestly think that I will remain who I am, even as an adult—at least, until I have a change of heart.

Speaking of which (?), thank you for purchasing Volume 2 of *Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina*.

Just as in Volume 1, she went around meeting people, weaving stories with them before parting ways...but if that’s all there ever is to the plot, it wouldn’t be very interesting! I was worried that might be the case, so I decided to change the plan for Volume 2. And since Elaina is constantly flying through forests, I decided to give it more of a seasonal touch. As a result, poor Elaina endured traveling through both snow country and the desert in a single volume.

Also, when I showed my manuscript to my editor, it turned out to be packed with dark stories. It could have been because I was writing this volume right around when I was preparing for my first year as a full-fledged member of society, or maybe because my apprehensions about this new lifestyle were on the rise. Or it could have been because I had reached the peak of my dissatisfaction with the world at large.

And because my manuscript was overly dark, my editor expressed concern for me: “Jougi, have you fallen to the dark side? Are you all right?”

I’m all right. I’m feeling very well, in fact. By the way, the story that was too dark was revised to be a tiny bit milder, and I meant for it to be included

as one of the chapters in this book, but then it was cast down into hell (meaning it was rejected).

Now then, on to the acknowledgments.

To my editor, M. Thank you for saving me before I descended into the dark side. May the force be with you.

To Azure, thank you for continuing to draw adorable images and characters as you did for Volume 1... Princess Chocolat's cuteness is especially dangerous. Like I almost fell in love. But she's gay. Tough luck for me.

Finally, to everyone who had a part in the publication of this book, and to all the readers who have been kind enough to read all the way to the end of this empty afterward, thank you all very much.

...I've got a few lines left over, so I'll give you some spoilers for the next volume (assuming it gets printed).

Some guy named Jougi Shiraishi from the present day is reborn in another world. However, he is neither gifted with convenient special abilities nor surrounded by beautiful women. Since he had only lived in modern civilization, he has no specialized knowledge, and no one else speaks his language anyway. For all these reasons, he starves to death in a matter of days. I'll depict a course of events along those lines. Of course, the essential parts of a person don't change just because their environment shifts. I'm planning to make that the punch line.

That's a lie, of course. Well then, if there's another volume, I'll see you there!

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