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イラストレーションーおぐち

The Witch's  
House  
The Diary of Ellen

# 魔女の家

エレンの日記



# **The Witch's House: The Diary of Ellen**

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## Prologue

I heard a whistling sound. It was close by, and I heard it every time I heaved my chest. So I knew that it was not the wind, but a sound coming from me.

This room is so cold, so dark. Ah, hadn't I lied upon this cold floor in this same way before? I closed my eyes with the thought. Tears, blood, I know not which, ran down my cheeks.

A powerful wind blew in through the window.

I heard the pages of a diary on the desk flipping.

It was my diary.

A red-bound book in which everything about me was written. I could remember all of it, just as easily if it had only happened yesterday.

Though I'd never written in it, I knew what was said in that diary.

## Chapter 1 ~ Back Alley Meeting

1

**I was sick,  
so no one played with me.**

I saw a black cat catch a mouse.

It happened in an instant. All I saw was a dark shadow leaping out, and before I knew it, there was a black cat with a mouse in its mouth.

The mouse didn't even twitch - perhaps the cat had hit its vitals. As if noticing my gaze, the cat looked my way.

Her large, golden eyes were wide open.

Only moments later, the cat vanished off into the alley.

I let out a great sigh. How beautiful it was. The image of that black cat was burnt into my sight.

Such a nimble body, and with eyes like full moons. Gold like mine, true. But I had no fangs like her. And I had no freedom.

I sprawled out on my dirty bed and gazed outside. All I could do every day was look out the window into the back alley.

Why, you ask?

Because to do so was my way of life, and my duty.

The people passing through didn't notice me. And if they did, they pretended not to notice the pale girl glaring at them.

Honest people scowled as if they'd seen something taboo, and quickly departed.

Naturally. These were the slums.

Everyone is focused on living for themselves, unable to spare the time to lend others a hand.

“Ellen?”

My mother gently calling my name returned me to reality.

“Did you see something?”, she asked, placing a bucket of water down on the floor.

Perhaps she’d noticed how I looked outside with more of a gleam in my eye than usual.

I nodded slightly and opened my mouth.

“A cat...”

A voice more worn than I was expecting came out.

I coughed slightly, then continued.

“I saw this dark black cat catch a mouse.”

“Ah,” she smiled. Her loosely-wound light brown hair swayed above her collarbone.

She dipped a cloth in the bucket of water and wrung it out. She neatly folded it, then put a hand on the blanket.

“I’ll change your bandages.”

As soon as I nodded, she pulled the blanket up to my knees.

I had bandages wrapped around both my calves. There were faint splotches of red in places.

When she removed the bandages, the cracked skin discolored an awful red became evident. Mother began wiping it with expert hands.

I tried to tell her about how quickly, how elegantly the cat had caught the mouse. But as it truly had been over in mere moments, I soon ran out of things to say.

While I kept silent, mother finished wrapping my bandages and pulled the blanket back up.

She looked at my head, and as if only just noticing, said “Oh, your ribbon’s slipping.”

She reached for it. Not that I would know myself if it was slipping or not.

She smiled and gestured for me to look the other way. I obliged, turning my body toward the window.

She untied my red ribbon and began to slowly comb my long, light-purple hair. Carefully, so it wouldn’t touch the bandages on my face.

I knew not to move a muscle. I waited for her to run the comb through the entirety of my waist-length hair, from top to bottom.

It was almost like she was playing with a doll.

Every time her arms moved, a sweet scent grazed my nose.

My mother always carried an aroma like sweet confections. I would expect it was because it was her job to make such things.

She always replaced my bandages around evening. Which was roughly the time she came home. I liked the combination of her sweet smell and the slightly chilly air that set in as the sun set.

Time passed slowly.

I closed my eyes in comfort.

Just then, mother whispered.

“I’m sorry I can’t let you play outside.”

My eyes flew open.

A small electric current ran through my head. It was a sort of signal, warning me of danger, that rendered me immobile.

I had to choose the right words at times like these. The gears in my head turned to find an answer. All this in only a moment.

I replied as cheerfully as I could muster.

“It’s fine. I like playing inside the house, you know?”, I said, looking toward my mother.

She smiled and combed my hair as if nothing had happened. Once I’d confirmed her smile, I awkwardly brought a smile to my lips.

I was born sickly.

But that isn’t to say I was always confined to this dark room from birth. I couldn’t see the sky from this window, yet I knew the blueness of the sky and the smell of the grass. When I was younger, I had played outside.

Since birth, the skin on my face and legs was inflamed. There was something wrong with my joints, so it hurt even to walk.

No one knew why. Much less how to cure it. There were no decent doctors around here, nor did we have money to spend.

I recalled what the fortune teller had told us.

“This girl’s sickness is to be blamed on the wrongdoing of her ancestors. She will suffer for eternity.”

My mother shouted something, and took me by the hand out of the fortune teller’s. As we went through the alleys, her face was so pale that it seemed she was about to faint.

Ultimately, all mother could do for me was protect my skin with bandages and have me drink medicine.

I didn't know what it meant. At the time, I was just a child, who just wanted to play outside. There was pain in my legs, but not enough that I couldn't walk. My mother had allowed me to go out and play as I wished.

I could hide the bandages on my legs with a skirt, but not those on my face. Every time I moved or scratched my face, the putrid skin like crushed earthworms was plain to see through the gaps in the bandages.

Children my age found me repulsive. It wasn't a contagious illness, yet parents feared me and would not let their children near.

Some would see me and whisper at a distance. I feigned ignorance and played alone, sniffing slightly. Yet it was still better than being in a gloomy room.

When I tired of playing, I'd return home.

I'd lie down, leaving my dirty clothes and bandages as they were, and wait for mother to return.

One day, she returned from work like usual. "Did you have fun?", she asked, reaching for my dirty clothes.

I saw her hand.

I don't know why, but I was overcome with unease, and every pore seemed to sweat cold.

...Were mother's hands always so rough?

I couldn't open my mouth to ask. Just imagining asking made my legs buckle. I felt I heard a whisper - "It's your fault." I trembled.

I couldn't definitively say the roughness of her hands was entirely due to her attending to me. But there was no doubt it had an effect on her life.

At this rate, my mother would surely someday abandon me.

That was the hunch I had.

You can only be kind to people when you can afford to.

My mother said nothing. And yet without words, I saw her tightly-pursed lips blaming me, and was frightened.

No. I don't want to be abandoned.

It screamed through my body.

I believe that was when those signals started to fly in my head.

Starting the next day, I stopped going to play outside. I just obediently waited in bed for mother to return from work. I would get itchy, but refrained from scratching. I wanted to keep the time she spent tending to me to a minimum.

She thought it odd to see me do this, but only at first. Soon enough, she stopped paying it any mind.

In fact, she seemed to become kinder than usual. Perhaps only my imagination, but it didn't matter. I was much, much more terrified of losing my mother's love than of not being able to play outside.

By the time I turned seven, I was a prisoner.

I had chosen the foolish path of a prisoner, bound by the chains of bandages, given only the food of my mother's love.

"There we go."

Mother adjusted my ribbon and held up a hand mirror.

I saw in the reflection a skinny girl with face wrapped up in

bandages. Light purple hair decorated with a red ribbon. Beside me, a woman with rustling light brown hair, quietly smiling.

She hugged me from behind, and gently swung my body like a cradle.

“My dear Ellen...”

I was put at ease in my mother’s sweet aroma. I grabbed her thin arms and closed my eyes.

My mother. Mother who had loved me.

I loved her as well.

To be abandoned by my mother would be the same as death.

Because she was the only one who loved me.

If she wasn’t smiling, then neither could I. If she wasn’t loving me, I couldn’t breathe.

Like such a weakling desperate to have something to hold on to, I clung to my mother’s love.

Because these were the slums.

Just like everyone here was desperate to live, I was desperate to have her love.

“...Dammit! You gotta be shittin’ me!”

The sound of the front door violently opening told me that father had come home.

Mother and I parted in surprise. Or rather, it was she who immediately let go.

She held my hand, and the slight shaking of her own told me her nervousness.

It was a small house, so the entryway and where I slept were nearly connected. There was a big table in the middle of the room; father sat and slammed a bottle he was carrying down on it.

I didn't know what kind of job my father had. I recall he came home later than mother.

His short hair and worn clothes were always dirty with soil or whatnot.

"Gonna have to take out another loan..."

He muttered something. I knew that he wasn't talking to himself, but directing it at mother.

She talked to him questioningly.

"What about the union?"

Father just shook his head.

"Not gonna happen, they won't talk. And they knew we got nowhere else to go, so - *dammit!*"

As if angered by the memory, he kicked a nearby bucket.

Mother squeezed my hand tightly.

Time passed awkwardly. The tick, tick of the clock echoed through the room.

Father let out a big sigh, and his gaze wandered. He looked past my downturned mother into my eyes.

I was startled, and opened my mouth to say something. But in a moment, he looked away with annoyance, taking a swig of the drink he had with him.

My heart sank deep.

It was always this way.

My father didn't look at me.

He treated me like I didn't even exist.

He never said he loved me and hugged me, but he never said he hated me and scolded me. There was no doubt he was consciously aware of me. In fact, it seemed he did all he could to keep me out of his vision entirely.

I once asked my mother, "Does father hate me?" She solemnly shook her head no. "Certainly not. Your father works for you, Ellen." "Then why won't he talk to me?" She laughed a little and said, "He's just shy."

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to think that my father loved me. And when I hoped that his glances at me had meaning, I generally found myself disappointed.

My father never said my name.

He only said my mother's.

At length, he rose from the chair and approached.

His target wasn't me. It was mother.

He roughly pulled her by the hand. My hand and hers were separated, like we were lovers torn asunder.

Father dragged her into the other room - the only other room - and closed the door. Afterward, I heard the sound of a lock from inside.

And then I was left alone.

I heard a clamor through the wall. The noises became quiet, then changed to speaking voices.

This was the usual.

They would always talk where I couldn't see them.

I didn't know what they were doing. But I felt like it was something necessary for relationships between a man and a woman.

I once asked my mother when she exited, "What were you doing?" She just worriedly laughed.

At these times, I could smell something distinct from her sweet confection smell from around the back of her neck. I supposed it might have been father's smell.

While they were talking, I wasted time pointlessly looking outside and scratching away the labels on medicine bottles.

I wanted to say that I had been given some time to be free.

In truth, I was being left behind. But it made me sad to think about that.

When I got bored of scratching labels, I reached for an old doll I kept underneath my bed.

It was a doll of a blonde-haired girl. She wore a purple dress and a hat, not to mention an eerie smile.

Mother had given it to me, saying "There weren't any dolls with hair like yours, Ellen. But her clothes are the same color as your hair!"

I accepted it, feigning happiness. I didn't care what color the doll's hair was. After all, I didn't exactly like my own hair.

My hair was the same faint purple as my father's. But I would have liked it to be light brown like mother's. Maybe then, if I had hair like hers, father might deign to look at me.

I brushed the doll's hair with my hand. The golden yarn was all knotted up, making it tricky for my fingers to pass through.

I grew annoyed. I pushed my way through to force the knots out. The doll's inorganic eyes seemed to speak to me.

...“That hurts.”

Shut up. It can't hurt. You're a doll.

...“And aren't you a doll yourself?”

I was no doll.

I denied it, deep in my heart, but recalled myself as mother combed my hair.

I was perfectly still, letting her do as she liked. I just sat waiting for her to move the comb from top to bottom.

Am I a doll?

...“You are.”

Wrong.

I continued to pull away the knots in the yarn.

My eyes aren't dead like yours. My eyes can see all sorts of things, all sorts of places.

Heeheehee.

The doll giggled, its neck turned in an odd direction, and its face the same as ever.

...“Places like that back alley? And what else?”

I felt the blood rise to my face.

I immediately threw the doll. It hit a wall and landed on a pile of clothes on the floor.

I hid my head under the covers, not wanting to hear anything.

I hated being alone. It made me think too much. It made me hear too much.

I prayed for mother to come to my side soon, and shut my eyes

tight. I wasn't cold, but my body shivered. Soon enough, I fell asleep.

When I came to, mother was stroking my cheek with the palm of her hand. Her expression was hollow, but when she saw me, she smiled.

"You're awake?"

I silently nodded.

Just looking at her face calmed me.

"I'll bring you some water."

She stood up from the chair and went to the sink.

Come to think of it, it was medicine time.

I looked out the window. Night had yet to fall. It must not have been too long that I was asleep. I stared off into space as I thought, still drowsy from my nap.

My eyes casually followed my mother's back.

I wonder why? It looked to me less like she was working for my sake, and more like she was fleeing from something.

But from what?

I saw past the door of the other room. Father, who was surely still there, wouldn't drag my mother by the hand again.

Finally, my mother returned with a cup of water and a powder medicine. I slowly sat up in bed and took them.

Then, when I absentmindedly looked at mother's face, I was taken aback.

I caught my breath, as if I'd realized a staggering fact.

My mother looked incredibly beautiful.

It wasn't the structure of her face. Her hair was a mess, and she scarcely wore any makeup. She just feebly smiled. But her lower lip was red from being chewed too much, and that red felt like the only color in this dark room. Her downcast eyelashes sometimes shook with remembrance. Her gaze, breathing, clasped hands, they all seemed to have significance.

This woman is *alive*, I felt.

I gulped down the medicine. But it didn't taste bitter. My stomach had long become accustomed to bitter things.

Yet the water in the bottom of my stomach became like a writhing snake, and tried to escape out my throat.

"...Mother!"

I was going to scream, but instead called for her.

My voice trembled. I was about to cry any second.

As mother must have seen it, I was a child worried for her. She held my hand and gently hugged me.

Unable to express the feelings I had just realized, I desperately clung to her body.

Was I unable to express them? I don't know why I thought so. To be exact, I wanted to pretend I couldn't.

Even wrapped in mother's aroma, the blackness in my chest didn't go away. In fact, it only seemed to deepen.

I was flustered by this feeling I'd never felt before.

This thing born in my chest.

It was hatred.

I loathed her. My mother who made me feel that she was alive. My mother who continued to accept love from a father who wouldn't give any to me.

I was confused to feel such a brutal emotion.

How could I hate my mother, who was so kind and adoring? I sternly admonished myself.

To do away with the bitter thoughts, I clung tighter to her arm.

Even if mother is the only one who seems to have color, that's fine. As she embraces me like this, she's coloring me, too.

I am Ellen. Mother's beloved daughter. I don't need anything but that.

I desperately convinced myself that.

And yet still, hatred coiled around my leg, trying to drag me into the depths of the sea.

It even came up to my ears to whisper, so that I'd notice it.

"Do you really?"

I resisted the urge to scream, and pressed my face into mother's chest.

**2**

There was something amiss that afternoon.

I saw a dark mass in the usual back alley. It looked like a black piece of cloth, or something covered in black paint.

I had a bad feeling.

In the back of my mind came the image of the beautiful black cat who caught the mouse. Perhaps it was that black cat's corpse.

I became unable to see it as anything but a cat then, and I was unable to calm down.

Finding it unbearable, I got off the bed. Putting all my weight on my legs made me cower with intense pain. The pain in my legs shot up to my head, and tears formed in my eyes.

It hurt. But not enough that I couldn't walk.

Supporting myself with the nearby chair, I staggered to my feet.

I took a look around the room, but my shoes were nowhere to be seen.

They must have been put away. Mother figured I would never need to leave, after all. I had wanted it myself, but it still made me a little sad.

I went outside barefoot.

The sun shone down on me, almost directly overhead. The bright rays hurt my eyes.

Hand along the walls of the house, I proceeded to the back alley.

I saw the black shape at once. As I approached, it became increasingly evident it was a cat.

As I thought, it was a black cat's corpse.

The cat lay on her side on the pavement. One of her eyeballs had popped out like an overturned bowl, and above the other, her skull was cracked and bloody.

I stopped a few steps away from the cat, repunged.

I looked at her, dumbfounded by the difference from when I first saw her. I couldn't run, but neither could I get any nearer.

I was reminded of the stunning sight of her catching the mouse.

Why, and how had this happened?

Was she run over by a wagon? Or was she knocked from a high-up place to the ground?

How could such a lively creature be reduced to this awful state?

I was saddened.

I didn't so much hate whoever had done this to her. It was this town, which forced you to accept that these things just happen, which I hated.

I heard a crow above me caw. I looked up and saw it up on a tall fence, stretching its wings. It was after her flesh.

...You think I'll let you?

I approached the black cat. I felt like I couldn't leave her like this. I lifted her up in both arms, to protect her.

She was light. And stiff. The cat's body had stiffened into the position I saw her lying on the ground in.

The eyeball sticking out made it almost comically evident she would live no more, yet when I touched her... It was like she was a thing. An object. It was then I learned how when creatures die, they become mere things.

I'll return you to the earth, I vowed, carrying the thing that was once a cat.

The surrounding area was all paved. No place to bury a cat. But

there should be a park with soil nearby. Relying on memories from infancy, I walked in search of a park.

Every step I took, there was stabbing pain in my bones. And as I was walking around the pebble-covered ground barefoot, I wasn't sure how much of it was my legs themselves. I bit my lip and desperately walked.

Finally, I entered the park.

There was a large tree in the center. Its leaves were green and full of life; it felt entirely out of place in this town.

There was no play equipment worthy of calling it a park, only an empty expanse, the tree, and a bench.

An old woman dressed in rags sat on the bench, fiddling with her purse. When she noticed me, she took a look, then disinterestedly looked back at her purse.

I entered the shade of the tree. Soil extended out from the base, as if encircling it.

It looked to be a flower bed. But the flowers had all wilted, and it smelled of rotten trash. It was clearly not well attended to.

I found a spot where nothing seemed to be buried and crouched down.

I put down the cat and dug the ground.

The soil was surprisingly soft. It had a pleasant cool touch. I dug like I'd become a mole.

My arms were free.

My arms were free.

They showed few symptoms of the illness. I was grateful I could move them both freely.

Sweat ran over my bandages, making them start to slip. I rubbed my nose, getting dirt on my face. I roughly wiped it with my sleeve, messing up the bandages further.

When sweat touched the inflamed skin, it stung. I clenched my teeth and endured the pain, continuing to dig.

Once I'd dug a deep enough hole, I took a long breath.

I placed the black cat inside and carefully filled the hole.

Finally, I put my hands together and closed my eyes. I didn't know the meaning of it, but I knew that you were supposed to do this gesture for dead... "things."

I didn't hear the crow cawing anymore.

I stood up to go back home. In mere seconds, I couldn't move out of dizziness. I forcefully blinked, and managed to start walking.

I was struck with sudden fatigue as soon as I exited the shade of the tree. I felt like an entire day had passed. Yet the sun was still high in the sky, still scorching the pavement before me.

My entire body hurt, but I was greatly satisfied.

...Now, the black cat can return to the earth.

Of course, I didn't think that was what she wanted, to return to the earth. It was my own selfishness. I just didn't want to see her, that once-lively creature, lying in a cold back alley, pecked at by crows, stepped on by people.

As I walked, my mouth forming a slight smile, I passed by a middle-aged woman who gave me a strange look.

I hurried to straighten my lips. But thinking back on it, she wasn't questioning my expression, but my appearance.

I stopped and looked myself over.

My bandages were frayed, my clothes covered with strange stains from mixing blood and dirt. Both hands were all black. I looked like a child who'd escaped from a hospital and played in mud.

What would mother say?

I shivered imagining it.

I hurried home.

Suddenly, it felt like such a long distance away.

I had to get home before mother did. I had to change clothes, wash my hands and feet, and change my bandages. I had to be a child who didn't take a lot of effort.

I had completely forgotten that I was a prisoner. To have my mother's love, I had chosen to become a creature forever stuck to her bed. How could I have forgotten that? I was in a cold sweat.

Finally, I arrived home.

There was plenty of time before the sun set. I opened the front door feeling relieved, then hardened in place.

I felt like I heard the sound of the afternoon sunlight congealing.

Mother was there.

She was sitting in a chair, staring off into space.

I immediately looked at the clock.

It wasn't time for her to be home. Why?

Suddenly, I smelled something sweet. There was a basket of pastries on the table.

That's right. From time to time, very rarely, mother would get off

work early and bring home some pastries.  
...But why did it have to be today?

Noticing the front door a few seconds later, she slowly looked toward me.

It took some time before her lips opened and she spoke.

“Ellen... Where did you go?”

I hadn't seen her face look so emaciated in a long time. Something cold ran down my back.

“I b-b... buried a cat.”

“A cat?” She raised an eyebrow.

No. No, don't look at me like that.

I resisted the urge to cry and made a desperate smile.

“Yeah, a black cat died... so I went to bury it. ...I-I'm so sorry. For going outside. B-But, I, I can walk. It hurts, but I can bear it. I can walk on my own, so, so I can do a lot of things on my own now, or help out...”

I despaired as I spoke.

Because mother just stared at me with the same expression.

Hollow eyes. Fixed gaze. She was looking at my muddy clothes. My dirty soil-stained fingers. My bloody legs.

Mother looked at me as - as not Ellen, but a sickly child who would waste her time.

I realized I had done something there would be no taking back.

But even knowing her mood, I desperately spun words. The signals kept flying in my head. Next word. Next word. Make sure to pick the right word.

But I knew none of them would have any effect. And yet my mouth

would not stop moving.

Mother loved me.

But that love was kept afloat by a delicate balance. A home with nothing to spare, expensive medicines, the effort of replacing bandages.

I had just destroyed that balance.

I cursed that black cat.

No amount of respect for the dead could stop my hatred.

Why did you die today? Why did you die where I could see you?

It was undoubtedly me who had wanted to bury her. But my foolish brain couldn't help wanting to blame it on something else.

Finally, mother got out of the chair. She prepared a bucket of water and began washing my hands.

She wasn't rough about it in the least. It was as meticulous as ever.

I looked at her in desperation. She was smiling.

But I saw no trace of the mother who had said she loved me.

Signals continued to fly in my head. But like a broken clock which can only spin its hands, I could come up with nothing.

I realized I had done something there would be no taking back.

And as if to immediately prove the validity of that hunch,

mother stopped coming home.

### 3

Father was the one most disturbed by my mother's absence.

Someone from mother's work came by the house, and father just shouted and cried, refusing to talk. The coworker ended up pacifying father instead, then left.

Father, crumpled on the ground in tears as if praying to God, seemed like he wouldn't even allow me time to mourn.

Her disappearance had been very sudden.

She left no letter, said nothing, left all her belongings. She didn't take so much as a hair clip from the house.

I wasn't "sad," but rather, part of my body was consumed with a sense of emptiness.

...Surely, one would call this feeling despair.

My throat was dry, and I couldn't sleep. I had no energy to get up, or to eat anything.

But as this went on for two or three days, I considered something.

Maybe mother was just a little tired.

Maybe she just needed a break from her exhausting life with me.

Once she got some rest, she'd remember me and father who she'd deserted and hurry back home.

Because I was her dear Ellen. Because surely, I was too precious to leave behind.

That dim idea gradually became a conviction, calming me. Imagining mother coming home, I could sleep peacefully.

Of course mother will return. She'll regret ever leaving, apologize, and hug me. And wrapped up in her aroma, I would smile and forgive my mother.

That's right.

I pulled away the blanket and got out of bed.

For that, I would have to be a non-time-consuming child.

For several days, I changed my own bandages, as I'd been neglecting to do. I even endured the pain in my legs to pump water.

Copying what I'd seen, I prepared my own meals.

I imagined the best child mother could want, and would accept, and began to play that role.

Though father and I lived together, we still never said a word to each other. He would talk to objects, but he never talked to me.

Perhaps he found it eerie how I didn't cry and took it calmly.

Perhaps I should have cried like a child, and said selfish things.

But I couldn't do that then.

Too used to the situation between father and I, I couldn't break the silence myself. I was immobilized by fear that if I used tears to have his concern, I would be increasingly ignored.

Having already made my mistake, I was terribly timid.

Father was constantly at home. Perhaps he had been fired from his job.

Soon, a man I didn't know came to visit him.

Father received something from the man and paid him money.

Once he had it in hand, he seemed restless and went into the other room, and would not come out for a while.

As this kept happening, father came out of the room less and less.

The sweet smell wafting from the other room seemed to get stronger by the day.

I earnestly waited for mother's return.

I fell asleep imagining her coming home, and woke up praying that she would be stroking my cheek.

Sometimes I would wake up thinking she was there, but it was only the wind on my cheek.

The doll which I'd thrown to the wall tilted her head and looked at me.

I felt a chill. Before I could hear her laughing, I dove under the covers and covered my ears.

Once I started pumping my own water, it seemed to make my legs worse.

My hands became rough like I saw mother's hands.

I wasn't able to tie my hair very well.

We only had a few bandages and medicines left.

...Eventually, father stopped coming out of the room.

#### 4

It was in the dead of night.

I woke up feeling thirsty.

I headed for the sink with an unsteady gait. Lit faintly by the moon through the window, my room was a pale white.

Trembling from the cold, I pumped out some water, scooped it with my hands, and drank.

Thinking I should bring some bandages while I was at it, I opened a dresser drawer. I was surprised by its lightness, and found there

were only two or three rolls left.

In fact, the medicine I drank this morning was the last as well.

What would happen if I didn't drink my medicine? I remembered mother saying, "If you don't drink this, it'll get worse." Was it just an excuse to get me to drink the bitter medicine? Or maybe because it really had been getting worse.

...I didn't want to think about it.

I shivered, and not from the cold.

I was suffering quite enough already. Even if it got worse, things couldn't change all that much.

I was utterly exhausted.

I started to walk back to bed.

On the way, I stumbled into a wall and dropped the bandages. They rolled off toward the entryway.

As I went after them, suddenly, I noticed a faint light near the front door.

...It couldn't be.

My heart beat fast with hope.

My eyes and legs naturally turned toward the source of the light.

"Mother...?"

I felt like it had been so long since I'd heard my own voice.

I saw the shadow just as I spoke.

Mother stood at the door. She looked at me with much surprise. A lamp on a low table vaguely illuminated the scene.

You came back?

I couldn't voice the question.

I should have been overjoyed and hugging her, but I couldn't move

my feet.

Why?

It was the woman I saw before me who caused me to do so.

Mother's appearance was much more orderly, like she was a different person. Her formerly unkempt hair was neatly tied up with a barrette, and she wore an unfamiliar scarf around her neck.

With a large bag by her feet, she looked just as if she were getting ready to go out.

"Are you... going somewhere?", I plainly asked.

I wasn't pressing her for information, nor trying to make her uneasy. It was just a question that came to mind.

Mother's expression darkened. After some hesitation, she gestured to come closer, so I ran over and hugged her.

My skinny legs hurt. But wrapped up in mother's smell, I could forget the pain right away.

"Ellen..."

Mother hugged me. I could feel her trembling. She cried without making a sound.

Was she sad? If not, why? I didn't know.

But I found myself sad as well, and held mother tighter.

"I'm sorry, Ellen..."

Sorry?

In my imagination, I forgave my apologizing mother again and again. But now, I felt like she was apologizing for a different reason.

I looked at her like I didn't understand. She averted her eyes, unable to look directly at me.

The moment I saw it, my chest tightened.

Suddenly, I started to view the situation I was in objectively. My mother hadn't been coming home. She was dressed orderly. She had a large bag. And she came in the middle of night when father would be sleeping -  
I dropped my gaze.  
Mother was wearing pretty shoes.  
White shoes I'd never seen before. Father wasn't the kind of person who would buy these. We would never have enough money to spare for such expensive shoes.  
So someone besides father had bought her these shoes. And whoever it was, mother planned to leave the house with them.  
I didn't want to understand.  
My body screamed. But I could come up with no answer for the situation.  
Mother -

Mother meant to abandon me.

Mother's scent, which had given me such comfort, rapidly became something detestable.  
The mist like white milk cleared, and I noticed the night air brushed my skin. The sadness in me had vanished.  
The flame of the lamp wavered in the corner of my vision.  
Beside it, there was a small knife used for crafts.

"Get along with father, won't you?"

I doubted my ears.

What nonsense was this woman saying? I looked at her skeptically.

Father saw nothing but you, mother.  
Don't you know how much he loved you?  
Don't you know how much father doesn't love me?  
Does this woman really think father and I can get along?  
Even though he wants you so much, and loves you so much,  
are you going to just give up on accepting his love?  
And -

you're going to give up on loving me too, aren't you?

Mother slowly parted from me and elegantly wiped her tears. She had the face of a caring mother.  
But I gazed at her like she was a woman I never knew.

"Be well, Ellen."

She picked up her bag and turned to leave.

"Mother."

I stopped her at once. There was no emotion in it; in fact, it felt like someone else was saying that word.

She put her hand on the front door and hesitated for a few moments. She looked back with a face full of affection.

I hung my head, and muttered something in a voice mother couldn't hear.

She squatted down to hear me.

Then -

I stabbed her in the throat.

With the little knife nearby.

Red blood spurted out. The woman tried to scream. I didn't stop. I kept attacking her neck. Relentlessly. Again and again. At every possible angle. The woman collapsed. I shifted my grip to hold the knife underhand. I came down upon her. I bathed in the bloodspray.

I knew that the neck was weak.

Because the cat had attacked the mouse's neck, and rendered it immobile.

My arms were free.

My arms were free.

I was reminded of the black cat. The beautiful black cat that caught the mouse. Her weapon was her fangs. I thought I had no such weapon. That wasn't so. My weapon was always so close at hand.

If you won't love me, I don't need you.

If you're loved, but you won't accept it, I'll never forgive you.

I admitted it. I admitted I hated mother. And that I was jealous of her, as a woman myself, for being loved by father.

But if only mother could have kept loving me, it would have kept a lid on that hatred.

I could have loved her then.

I let go of my mother's love. From the thing I had desperately clung to.

As I swallowed her warm blood, I realized.

I could breathe. And yet I had convinced myself that if I let go, I wouldn't be able to.

In the depths of a sea of blood, I held my knee and sobbed.

That was the real me.

I was the same as the people in the back alley. I avoided looking at the things I didn't want to see. I wanted to feign ignorance. It certainly existed, but all I did was acknowledge it was there.

When I raised my tear-stained face and smiled, a hand reached for me. I took her hand. Just then, the hand became a bloody knife, and I was standing in the entryway.

The woman before me sat against the door and spoke no longer.

I couldn't move my limbs, and I felt a bubble in my throat.

I felt disgusting. I felt alive. Living shouldn't have felt this dirty.

I had learned from the mouse who had promptly gone limp. But still, had my method been wrong? ...Tell me, black cat.

Still gripping the knife tightly, I sat down on the floor.

Breaths came from the pit of my stomach. My whole body was hot with pain and fatigue, yet my head alone was peaceful.

The woman, who was my mother, was now a mass that emitted an awful odor.

Dirty.

The sight incited no particular emotion.

I looked at her feet.

The white shoes were now completely red with blood.

I gently picked up one of the shoes between my fingers and gazed at it. I would have to inform the man who bought the shoes. "I'm sorry, but you can't go together anymore."

A drop of blood dripped off the end of the shoe like a tear -

Clatter.

It came from behind. I heard a door opening from the back of the room.

I turned only my head around.

Father.

He slowly emerged from the room, looking at me.

The shoe slipped out of my fingers and fell to the floor.

What made my hand slip wasn't haste, regret, or fear.

...It was a feeling of exaltation.

A smile flowed from my mouth. I almost yelped in delight. But I stayed my beating heart to do it. To stand up and move, so father had a good view of mother's corpse.

Father's eyes wavered. He pointed to the corpse with one hand and approached. The light from the lamp clearly illuminated his emaciated body. He was like a worn husk.

His sunken eyes had a strange glow as he looked at the blood-soaked woman's face.

I was excited.

Because he might shout "Did you do this?!" Because he might raise his hand and hit me.

Because finally, I might have father's attention.

Father powerlessly kneeled beside the corpse. He held the woman's chin with a shaking hand. Once he confirmed the face, he hugged the body and began to cry like a beast.

It briefly surprised me, but he quickly turned to quieter sobbing and moaning.

I made an effort to be calm as I whispered,

“I did this.”

I told him.

I tried to hide how much I enjoyed it.

“I did this, father.”

I trembled saying the last word. I had called out that word “father” countless times in dreams, but never before had I actually said it. I was almost moved to tears.

Father looked up briefly, but his wet eyes did not look at me. They returned again to the woman’s corpse.

I had a bad feeling.

My heart had beat with expectation, but my chest filled with something else.

Father kept calling the woman’s name. As if to show my unrest, the flame of the lamp wavered.

“It was me! I did this!”

I spread out my arms. A speck of blood flew off. In my wounded right hand, there was still the knife I tightly gripped. My weapon.

But father only continued to cry, and didn’t move an inch.

My face went pale.

“Father.”

My shouting had become crying.

No matter how much I called at him, he wouldn’t even look at me.

...Why?

Why won’t you look at me? Why that woman?

Why - why must you keep proving how you don’t love me?

“Stop.”

Stop. Don't look at her. I don't want to see this.

As father's wailing grew louder, my despair increased. There was noise welling in my ears.

My teeth clattered.

My whole body shook, and I screamed

“STOP!!”

And I swung the knife down to draw the curtain on the hellish scene.

## 5

I stood in a daze.

My right arm was heavy, as if taken by a demonic spirit. Blood - who knows whose - dripped off the end of the knife, making stains on the floor.

Father collapsed on top of mother. I saw the two overlapping corpses as leaving no room for me to come between, and it irritated me.

He clung onto mother to his last moments.

Father saw nothing but mother. A life without her was too painful for him. Right. So this is for the best.

I slowly backed away. Then I noticed that the door to the other room remained half-open.

Father's room. To be exact, father and the woman who was once mother's room.

I couldn't take my eyes off the crack in the door. My heart beat fast, yet steady.

There was a sweet scent unlike mother's coming from the room. As if being pushed from behind, I opened the door with my knife-holding hand and stepped inside.

All I could hear was the creaking of the door. The room was filled with the sweet scent. Enough to make you choke.

It was very dark inside.

There was a single bed along the far wall. A candle on a table cast an unreliable light on the interior of the cramped room.

On the table were plates and bowls, as well as a thin cylindrical object. Smoke fumed out of one end, and I knew that it was a smoking pipe.

Father's, I suppose.

This was where the sweet scent came from.

I sluggishly walked to the bed. Things were scattered all over the floor, so I could trip if I wasn't careful.

I reached the bed and sat down. It was harder than my bed, and uncomfortable to sit on. Did they give the good bed to me? Thinking that made it hard to breathe.

I couldn't know for sure anymore.

I gazed at the smoke from the pipe. Soon, I felt like I saw a vision through the smoke. A smiling father, mother, and me. We looked like a happy family.

Ahh...

I sniffled.

Why did this have to happen?

The illusion of the happy family vanished, and I became aware of the two corpses in the entryway, and the knife I held in my lap.



Just then, I heard a window clatter open, and I returned to my senses.

A strong wind blew in from the window. Just then, the lit pipe fell off the table and started to scorch a piece of cloth on the floor.

A few seconds later, my brain reacted. It was going to cause a fire. I hurried to my feet.

*...It has to vanish.*

Suddenly, my thoughts stopped.

Vanish?

Why?

*...There's nothing left in this house, is there?*

I backed away from the fire, spreading and burning hotter, then sped out of the house.

In a back alley in the dead of night.

I was quickly short of breath, and couldn't even run more than two houses away.

My bare feet struck the chilly pavement.

They were dyed red with my blood, and the blood of others. Surely, I was leaving footprints. Perhaps I had been born wearing red shoes. I walked as I thought.

The knife I gripped melted into the darkness and became a part of my body.

There were no streetlights in the slums. It was the middle of the night, so there wasn't even any light from the houses.

All that illuminated me was dim moonlight. No one was around to blame me for my actions. Those who would judge me had put away the scales and slept.

On the way, I tripped and fell over in a place full of garbage. There were piles of raw trash, scrap metal, and other junk. My chest and stomach hurt, and I lied down face-first. I had no energy to get myself back up, only turning my head aside. I let out a cold white breath and was suddenly overcome with fatigue.

In my right hand, I still gripped the knife. The dirty blade dully glowed, and my exhausted fingers trembled.

“Will you die?”

The knife seemed to ask me.

I feebly shook my head.

I can't do that. Because you are my fangs. A cat can't bite its throat with its own teeth, can it?

I closed my eyes.

What would I do now? I'll wake up tomorrow, first of all. But what about the day after? Or the day after that?

Shivering in the cold, weeping from the pain in my legs, facing sleepless nights with an empty stomach, I would soon cease moving, no doubt.

And then perhaps someone would bury me.

Perhaps a kind hand would guide me to a bed in the soil.

I knew that wouldn't happen.

I buried the black cat because she was a very small, frail creature.

Because she was fleeting enough to carry in my arms.  
And I knew the cat's beautiful figure. I knew her beautiful way of life. So I wanted to embrace her.  
In my case, who would even know me? Who would have watched me? And even if they were watching, who would think I'm beautiful?  
No one would lend a hand for me. Even if someone did, I would foolishly turn it away.

I imagined myself in the place of that black cat in the alley.  
Ah... Perhaps it does suit me after all.  
I stopped thinking about it.

Just then -

"Yo."

A sudden voice dragged me back to consciousness.  
It sounded like a young boy, yet it had an oddly composed tone. I felt somehow stimulated and picked my body up.  
I looked around for the owner of the voice, but saw no one.  
"Over here, Ellen."  
The voice spoke my name as if we had long known each other.  
I looked up toward it, and found a black cat sitting up on a crumbling fence. I didn't know when it got there.

The moon floated just behind the cat, the same color as its eyes.  
Naturally, I was reminded of the black cat I had buried. Its eyes were gold like hers.

But it was different. It wasn't her. Because she was a "cat."  
The thing before me now was not a "cat." Cats can't speak like humans.

"You're a real help. I was gonna die, I was so hungry."

He licked his front paws with satisfaction. The movement was just like what a real cat would do.

I rubbed my eyes. It was no illusion.

"I..." I muttered absentmindedly.

"Did I give you something?"

Perhaps happy that I responded, the cat leapt as he spoke.

"Yep! To the tune of two tasty souls."

I raised an eyebrow at his statement.

What did he just say? Souls?

"Yeah, humans are made up of souls and bodies. Didja know?"

I shook my head slightly.

The cat cleared its throat - "A-hem!" - and spoke.

"A human consists of a soul and a body. You can't eat them while they're alive. But when they die, you can suck the soul right out and eat it. They aren't easy for us to come upon. That's why we do this, having somebody kill 'em so we can chow. Which you happened to do today, which sure saved my butt! But if you weren't there, I dunno what I'd do... Hey Ellen, what's up?"

I stood up, my feet still trembling. My face was probably as pale as the night air.

"...You ate father?"

I didn't know what these so-called souls were. But it seemed like it

was something important to a person.

And he ate it?

I felt like the oddly-shaped creature before me had tainted my father. Oddly, the woman who was once my mother didn't come to mind.

"Well, yeah, but..."

He showed the appearance of concern. But it was certainly only the appearance. He didn't actually seem concerned.

"...Ellen. Yeah, it might seem selfish that we do whatever with stuff that's out of reach for guys and gals like you. But even if I told you I didn't eat 'im, how'd you know for sure? And what does it matter to you if I ate him or not?"

The cat swung his long tail.

I couldn't say anything back.

It was just as the cat said.

The black cat looked down on me in silence. His eyes had a coldness like a doll's, and I was uneasy. I unconsciously looked away. My lips trembled from either cold or fear.

What exactly was I even talking to?

I sighed to push away the feeling of having no refuge.

I felt the pain in my legs coming back. My right arm ached with each beat of my heart. Thinking about how I was standing on cold hard pavement, I wanted to cry.

What was I going to do now?

I thought as I looked at the moon behind the black cat. The moon seemed to have turned an eerie red, as if a blood vessel were passing by.

“So hey, I want to thank you.”

“Huh?”

The cat’s slightly high voice brought me back.

“Demons like us can get souls from kids like you. And then we can give them magic as thanks. I was thinkin’ I could give you a very special spell, Ellen.”

“...”

I raised an eyebrow, not bothered to do much more.

I didn’t even feel like speaking.

“Ellen, I’m giving you a house.”

...A house.

It made my eyes open just a little bit.

The black cat seemed to notice.

“You got nowhere to go back to, yeah? Can you keep living like this? You’ll just drag your rotten legs and die in this dirty ol’ town. Kinda sucks a bunch, huh? I don’t wanna see that for you. Come with me. I welcome ya.”

The cat’s words rang pleasantly in my ears, blooming a flower in my head. A place of warmth. That’s what my cold body wanted more than anything else right now...

“It’s a fire!”

Suddenly, I heard a scream.

I turned toward it and saw flames where my house had been.

The flames rose up, parting the clouds around, incapable of being stopped, burning away with a thunderous roar.

I watched the fire in amazement.

The house which there was no going back to.  
The house that never loved me.  
Father and mother's faces came to mind. They were stained red in  
my memory, overlapping with the fire in the distance.  
My eyes hurt, and not because of the smoke.

"How 'bout it?", the black cat asked.  
I turned back to him.  
I didn't care about demon this, magic that. I just knew that if I said  
no, I would become a cold corpse in a back alley.  
...I didn't like the cold.  
So I nodded.  
It was a faint action, and probably only looked like I was lowering  
my head.  
But the cat took it as acceptance, and my senses cut out like a string  
snapping.

People came and went, hurrying to the fire or watching it from a  
distance.  
But no one noticed, off in a back alley, a girl and a black cat  
vanishing as if swallowed up by the darkness.

## Chapter 2 ~ Awakening

1

**My father and my mother  
didn't love me.**

**So I X them.  
I've been in this house ever since.**

I could see beautiful patterns.

Black curves like ivy, or like snakes, decorated the ceiling. As my eyes followed the patterns, I noticed how regulated they were. Buried in a soft bed, I gazed up at the unfamiliar ceiling.

It was just like lying in a sunny spot far below. Despite being inside, I could feel the sun. There was the faint aroma of flowers.

How comforting. I had only just awoken, yet already felt ready to fall asleep again.

But I certainly wouldn't do that.

In the corner of my thoughts, a calm part of me asked:

Where is this?

Pushed by curiosity, I reluctantly sat up in the bed.

My light purple hair fell upon the pure white sheets. Yes, rather than a dirty blanket, beautiful embroidered sheets covered my body. They were so smooth, I found it hard to escape this dreamy state of mind.

I looked around the room. It was square, with a single door. I had been sleeping on a big bed in the room's center.

It was a lovable room.

The floor covered with flower-patterned tile led me to think such. The walls were neatly lined with closets and tables, as well. Everything seemed just the right size for my height, making me think it had been prepared just for me.

The color red drew my eyes to a table, upon which I saw flowers. So that was why I could smell them despite being inside.

“Up and at ‘em?”

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice from behind and turned to face it. I squinted at the rays of light coming through the window.

There was a huge window on the milky-white wall, at the sill of which sat the black cat.

I faintly recalled the black cat’s figure, and his boyish, overly-familiar voice.

Last night. The cold back alley. Me loitering around with a knife. The black cat on the fence. The conversation we had. They came to me, then vanished. Feeling like it had been a dream and this was the continuation, I talked to the cat.

“Where is this...?”

“Told you, didn’t I? It’s your house.”

My house?

I did feel like he had said that. Going back through my memory, I found there was nothing whatsoever after nodding to the cat. I supposed I had lost consciousness just after, but how did I get here? I moved to get out of bed, then noticed I was wearing a well-tailored white blouse and a red one-piece.

When...?

Surely the black cat hadn't dressed me, had he?

This is becoming very strange, I thought. I got off the bed. My bare feet touched the polished floor. Surprisingly, I felt no pain in my legs.

Stepping on the flowery tile, I went over toward the window where the cat sat.

I touched my hand to the window. With just that action, the window opened itself up. A calming breeze blew in, stroking my long hair.

Outside, I could see many large trees, with sunlight streaming through them.

Birds chirped and tweeted. I looked skyward.

Through dense, lively leaves, I could just barely see a light blue sky.

I was deep in the forest.

What's more, this room was quite high up.

The wind was unceasing, smooth against my body. The rustling of branches sounded like a welcoming whisper.

"Welcome, Ellen. My dear witch."

Absorbed in feeling the wind, I replied a few seconds late.

"...Witch?"

"That's right. Thought I told you? I want to make you a witch."

Had he said that?

I looked at the cat doubtfully and blinked. Just then, a forelock swung into my eye.

Last night, the black cat had gone on about a lot of abnormal things about eating souls and demons, yet I felt like he had never said the word "witch."

“As for what a witch is? Well, you’ll figure it out soon enough,” he yawned, either unwilling to explain or not wanting to bother.

I didn’t want to ask much more about it, either.

In this clean forest air, I felt like any words or thoughts were positive ones.

The black cat looked rather cute then, sitting in sunlight that made his fur look gray, the wind blowing at it. Yet he had looked rather eerie last night, in the darkness, with only his eyes dubiously gleaming.

He looked me over as he spoke.

“Hmm. Y’know, you got a pretty cute face, Ellen. Just what I like.”

I looked at the cat, making my disgust plain to see.

What was he saying about this ugly face? I reached for my cheek to check for the swelling. Yet I was surprised to find my fingers touched smooth skin.

I continued to feel my cheek, with a sense of malaise I perhaps shouldn’t have felt. Not that I was hoping to be wrong.

I quickly looked around the room for something to see myself with.

I found a dresser and peered at the mirror.

I met eyes with my reflection.

She had nothing wrong with her face or legs - she was perfectly healthy.

I took a few steps back and looked over my body. I couldn’t see so much as a trace of the ugly, sore skin. The only red on my body came from my big ribbon, my one-piece, and my lips hanging half-open in shock.

“Sort of a privilege for witches,” the black cat casually said.

I couldn't take my eyes off the mirror. I touched my cheek which had always been so swollen and sore. I could hear my heart pounding.

Is this a dream? It's fine if it is. I just don't want to wake up, in that case.

Whether he knew how I was feeling or not, the black cat waved his tail, as if to clear the dreamy mist.

"Thing is, you can't leave the house. 'Cause you're a witch."

His words suddenly dragged me back to reality. The pit of my stomach felt cold, and I timidly asked.

"I... can't go outside?"

The cat tilted his head, staring vacantly.

"So what if you can't? It sure ain't a boring house, I can tell you that. C'mon, follow me."

Once he spoke, I suddenly heard the door unlock. I turned to the open door in surprise, and the black cat was already sitting there.

I quickly looked back to the windowsill. Yet though the cat had just been sitting there, he wasn't anymore.

"Now, right this way!"

He spoke from the door with his back to me. He turned his head around and whipped his tail invitingly.

I blinked a few times, then followed behind the black cat.

Outside the room was a long hallway.

Sun streamed from the windows, warming up the wooden floor.

I walked several steps behind the black cat, whose footsteps made no noise.

The hallway had pedestals placed at fixed intervals, decorated with

red flowers. They were the same as the ones in the room I'd slept in.

The flowers filled wide, pot-like vases. The petals were a color that seems appropriate to call deep crimson, folded upon each other to form the shape of each flower.

I felt the water must have been freshly replaced. The petals and stem seemed so lively, covered with dew.

I softly touched a petal, and my finger sucked up some of the water. "What're ya doin'?", the black cat stopped and said.

I hurried after him and found stairs down at the end of the hall. He cheerfully stepped down, and I followed.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door.

Opening the door, I found a large dining room with a fireplace.

Over a huge table was draped a white cloth, and upon it were two gold candle stands. Teapots and teacups were neatly arranged and illuminated by the candlelight.

The burning red candle flames sent heat through the room.

Perceiving a vivid color,, my gaze went to the corner, and yet again I found those red flowers.

"Now, take a seat."

After the black cat spoke, the chair nearest the fireplace slid itself out.

I sat in the chair as he urged me. Then the seat beside me pulled itself out as well, and the cat leapt on.

Once the cat and I were seated, a teapot on the table began shaking. Then it floated into the air, and tilted itself to pour into a teacup. A reddish-brown liquid filled the cup with a pleasing sound.

Simultaneously, a sugar cube came out of a clear bottle and fell into the cup as if sucked in. Then a waiting tea spoon stood up and stirring the cup's contents.

Once the spoon settled back in place, the table returned to silence, as if nothing had happened. I stared at the steaming cup in front of me, dumbfounded.

I was surprised, but it was nothing to scream about. My heart was oddly calm, likely because of the smell of the drink.

"Drink up," the cat urged.

I saw my face in the reflection of the drink. I took the teacup in both hands and slowly sipped it.

"Tasty..."

Warm. Sweet. It seemed to seep into my entire body. Though to be honest, before I drank it, the nice smell had overwhelmed my lungs - but that was all. I had never been so pleased by a drink before.

The black cat seemed satisfied with my reaction and spoke proudly.

"No worries about starving here. Nor freezing, 'course."

As if working in unison with the black cat's remark, the fireplace behind me lit up.

My mind was still hazy. As if taking in his words, I rolled the flavor around in my mouth.

"What is this called?"

I asked for the name of the unfamiliar drink.

"It's black tea."

"Tea..."

I looked down at the teacup which warmed my hands.

All I had ever had to drink before was impure water and diluted soup. I never even knew such a delicious drink existed.

While I was asking questions, I looked over at the flowers in the corner of the room.

“What are those flowers called?”

“Which ones?”

“Those.”

I pointed at the red flowers.

The cat spun to face them, then turned back.

“Oh, they’re roses. You didn’t know that?”

“Roses?”

Like before, I repeated the word in my mouth.

Rose. It had a wonderful sound to it.

...There’s so much I don’t know, I thought.

Everything before my eyes seemed so colorful. It was a strange feeling. Coming to know something you didn’t know. For some reason, it pleased my heart.

I was befuddled by each and every happy thing presented to me. And I also began to accept the way of life in this house.

Click.

Suddenly, a door opened that was not the one I came in through. I turned to look in surprise and saw someone coming in, pushing a kitchen wagon.

When I saw him, I nearly dropped my teacup.

He was a big man, easily over six and a half feet tall. Disturbingly, he had no head. His skin was covered with patches, stitches all over his body. He wore pitch black pants over the legs that propped up his frightfully large upper body.

“Sheesh, don’t startle her! You can’t just come in like that.”

I was able to quell my fear thanks to the black cat talking to the man carefree. The man cringed and hung his shoulders in apology, looking quite pathetic.

“This is our cook,” the cat explained, and I looked him over again. The small dirty cloth he wore over his front was an apron, I realized. It didn’t seem appropriate for the muscular giant at all.

“Food’s ready?”

The cook nodded at the cat’s question and pushed the kitchen wagon over to me.

There was a plate on the wagon with a silver cover on top. The cook courteously placed the plate and cover on the table in front of me.

He took off the silver cover. And when he did, there came to my eyes and ears -

“H-Hold on! What the hell’s this?!”

- the black cat in hysterics, and a muddy green soup.

It wasn’t just the color of the soup that was odd. The gray cutlery, too, seemed irregularly-shaped, and appeared to be fashioned from stone.

All of a sudden, a black figure leapt onto the perfectly orderly table. I stared blankly at the soup as bubbles appeared and popped in it.

“Geez! What’re you tryin’ to serve here? I told you to treat her and everything!”

The cat complained, and the cook twisted his thick neck.

“Huh? That’s weird. I thought you liked this?”

I don’t know where the voice came from, but it was low and hard to make out.

The cat’s whiskers flicked up.

“Ugh. You seriously mistook her for the last one? This guy... Just make it normal. VERY normal. Do it again!”

Craning his neck all the while, the cook collected the plate and pushed the kitchen wagon back.

The closed door echoed, and the cat spoke through a sigh.

“Man, he *would* come out with somethin’ weird... Sorry, I hope you can forgive me.”

Forgive him? I silently shook my head. My stomach was plenty satisfied with the tea, and I didn’t feel particularly hungry. I thought I might have even eaten that strange soup, but I didn’t say anything. The cat continued to mumble complaints.

“That guy’s useless, I tell ya. Last one left him behind, after all.”

...Last one?

I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“Did someone live here before me?”

“Right.”

“And... she was a witch, too?”

“Yep,” the cat nodded. Then he seemed to reminisce with eyes looking into the distance.

“Nobody’s lived in this house a long time. Really, reeeally long time.”

Was that so?

I gazed around the room.

Even if no one had lived in it, it seemed very well prepared to accept me.

I felt like the carpet in all the rooms and the tablecloth, while not brand new, must have been treated with much care and preserved

for many years. And those red flowers seemed to have just recently had the water changed, too.

I recalled the touch of the water droplets on my finger.

“So the house is real glad you’re here, too,” the cat said, leaping in place.

A house that revives itself when someone lives there. Are there such houses as that? While it absolutely wasn’t normal, it seemed like a fitting description.

As I went on thinking while drinking tea, the black cat suddenly raised his voice as if he had a great idea.

“Oh yeah, there’s a better place. Lemme show you.”

Without waiting for my reply, he jumped off the chair. I quickly drank the rest of the tea and followed.

I asked as we climbed the creaking stairs.

“Isn’t this the way we came?”

“Yup. But it’s all good.”

The black cat had opened the door we entered the dining room through, and we climbed up the stairs we’d just gone down. I was suspicious, but followed him.

At the top of the stairs, I found a hallway that felt different from the one before. I turned around and suddenly found no stairs, only a blank white wall.

“This waaay!”, the cat called from down the hall. He had traveled quite a distance while I looked away.

Was he just hasty, or did he have strange powers?

I placed my palm on the wall that had been stairs, then hurried off after the cat.

The black cat stopped in front of a thick door.

Open 'er up, his gaze said. I took the heavy gold handle and slowly pushed it.

The door opened with a comforting sense of heaviness.

Inside the room were long continuous rows of bookshelves. One row after another; I couldn't see the end of them. The walls were packed with bookshelves too, reaching as high as the ceiling.

Many open books lay on the calmingly-colored floor. They weren't shrouded in dust, but rather felt like someone had been using them until just recently.

It was a room that carried the stillness of the indoors on a rainy day. I became fond of the room at a single glance.

Perhaps picking up on this, the black cat spoke like a tour guide.

"We have lots of books here. Stories from lots of lands, stories from lots of people. Useful stories and useless ones. Our stories, and your stories."

I walked through the bookshelves like I was stepping into a labyrinth.

The shelves were neatly lined with books large and small, their covers spanning the color spectrum. And all the books seemed to be waiting for me to reach for them at any moment.

As I ran over the bindings with my finger, I felt tantalized. Before I could voice my concern, the black cat spoke at my feet.

"Ellen. Can you not read?"

I looked down at him in surprise.

He was correct.

"I'll teach you. C'mere."

He brushed his tail against my ankle and walked toward the back of the room. I followed.

In the back of the room was a long wooden desk and a chair. On the desk was light-colored paper, a capped bottle of ink, and a quill; all the implements needed to write.

I sat in the chair that pulled itself out.

“Well, let’s see, what should I teach you first...”

The cat jumped up on the desk and started to hum. He seemed to be enjoying himself more than me.

I took in the smell of the ink in the area, and found roses on the windowsill.

Those flowers again. Were they in every room?

I asked, not taking my eyes off the roses, “About the person who lived here before...”

“Hm?”

“Did they like roses?”

He followed my gaze to the roses.

“Yeah,” then turning back to me, he said “You’ll come to, too.”

“Okay,” I nodded.

In truth, I was already beginning to. I felt something coming from those roses that grabbed my heart and wouldn’t let go. I wonder why they made my heart beat fast?

I didn’t know at the time. That roses, to a witch, are like her flesh and blood. And that their vines serve as the weapons to take people’s lives.

“Let’s go with “Ellen.””

Breaking from thought, I looked at the cat.

“It’ll be your first word. Here, this is how you write your name.”

As he spoke, the quill lifted up. It touched the ink, then whirled and danced around the paper, drawing smooth letters.

“Ellen”

I looked at my name as if staring a hole in it. The quill moved into my right hand, then the force moving it was gone.

I wasn’t particularly surprised by the occurrence anymore.

I gripped the quill and wrote the letters. My hand trembled a little. Surely, I thought, because this would be a memorable first step in my learning.

In the corner of my vision, a petal fell off the rose.

## 2

I spent much time in the room of books for the next few days.

I quickly learned the alphabet. I could read simple books. The black cat told me I had a good memory.

I picked out books at random from the innumerable supply. Yet doing this, I surprisingly found books just the right difficulty for me. In reading, I immersed myself in worlds I didn’t know. Just as the cat said, there was no getting bored in this house.

As he loitered around me, he would sometimes say things I didn’t quite understand, and tell me old stories.

As I toured the house on a whim, he introduced me to the inhabitants.

Yet he didn’t seem to want much from me. If all it took was my parents’ souls to be given this life, I would have been satisfied with

that being that.

I didn't think too deeply about the black cat.

This life brought me such happiness. It's okay for me to be here, because I'm a witch, I silently told myself. I didn't question what a witch was, exactly. The black cat said nothing, so I asked nothing.

Sometimes my parents would come to mind. But I soon forgot them. I didn't need them now. I looked upon my past self coldly for desiring their love to such a degree.

All I desired was a healthy body, a warm bed, and on top of that, fulfillment of my thirst for knowledge - then I would be pleased as could be.

Thinking that, my past self seemed so pathetic.

I forgot all about the weapon I had obtained, and concentrated daily on having my eyes follow the letters.

"The form of the witch's house changes..."

"The form of the witch's house changes based upon the witch's power." That's what the book I read that day said.

Certainly, this house wasn't normal. Yes, objects moved around on their own, but also, when I wasn't looking, hallways would multiply and doors would vanish.

There were doors when I went back the way I came, and some stairs would lead to nowhere.

Was it all changing based on my - on the witch's power? I wasn't consciously using any power, but I had opened doors thinking that I wanted to rest and found them leading directly to my room, so I thought it might be so.

The house must have had rooms I had yet to see. I hadn't found this

room until today, in fact.

I closed the book and looked around.

It was a beautiful garden. The floor was covered with grass, and artificial roses were systematically placed around.

Surely there was no deep ground for it to reach into, yet in the center of the room was a single large tree with abundant leaves, spreading its roots.

Yet I knew I was inside from the high ceiling and the walls that surrounded it.

I sat on a wooden bench underneath the tree.

With my back to it, I looked up at the tree.

I felt like I'd seen a tree like this somewhere before.

I felt? I should have known.

But I pretended that I didn't.

Hollow expressions. A town of people with cloudy skies embedded in their eyes. Dirty back alleys. And... the spectacle of a burning building coming to mind, I shook my head.

I was a resident of that town no longer. I wouldn't remember anything about it. Because I was a witch. Here in this house, I was allowed to live freely.

Yes, only in this house.

The black cat said that I couldn't leave. That as a witch, I had to live here.

To begin with, I thought that was fine. Because I had freedom here. Like he had said, I never felt bored here, and I would never freeze.

But at times, I would feel lonely.

There were people living here who could talk. But I felt like they had

no heart. Toys seemingly created to tide me over.

When they listened to me, and smiled, and then became expressionless again - the emotion I felt in those moments - ahh, indeed. I am alone. The thought made a cold wind blow in my heart.

I wanted warmth. The first thing that came to mind was a human hand. A hand much like mine. A hand to hold. I wanted a human friend. That was the clear desire that came to mind next.

...I wanted a human friend.

That desire heated up my chest.

If I told the black cat, would he be able to grant my wish? I thought of him like some kind of god at the time.

I'll go talk to him.

As if to still my heart, I put the book to my chest with both hands and stood up from the bench.

I stepped through the grass, hearing it crunch beneath my feet.

Suddenly, strange plants by the wall came into sight. The plants looked like coral with many red feelers reaching skyward, and they seemed to be whispering amongst each other.

So these grasses could talk.

I spoke to them. "Good day."

The red plants' whispers stopped at once. Their feelers moved as if searching for something, or as if looking my way. After some time, the red plant in the middle spoke, I dare say as a representative.

"Good day. What do you need?"

It was a composed woman's voice. It had a certain sharpness, and carried an intellectual air.

I decided I'd try asking them.

“Do you know where the black cat is?”

“I do,” another red plant interjected.

As if to wrest back control, the middle plant grandly waved a feeler. “Simply go all the way down that hallway. You’ll find the black cat there,” it said, pointing.

Looking in that direction, I saw a stone passage.

“Thank you,” I said to them, then left. Once I did, the plants began whispering amongst each other again.

I entered the stone passage.

The cold touch of the stone floor ran through the soles of my feet. I had abruptly gone from a lawn-like floor to a stone one, after all.

The floor, walls, and ceiling of the passage were all made of stone, and it was terribly dark. The light of the torches on the wall was weak.

...It was a little scary.

Though I didn’t turn back. Because I knew that this house had no ill will against me. Because the residents of this house would surely not trouble me.

As I proceeded on, I felt my soles getting colder. It was a sensation I had forgotten. Since coming to the house, I had mostly been walking along soft carpets, and down wood-floored hallways warmed by sunlight.

And yet... I thought. The feel of this paved stone. It was disgustingly similar to something in my memory.

Yes. It was the cold back alley -

Suddenly, I heard a woman’s scream behind me, and I turned around with a start. But there was nothing there - only darkness

that had quickly returned to silence.

A cold sweat came over me. I breathed restlessly, and began to walk again.

Trying to hide my fear, I spoke.

“Black cat? Are you here?”

The question echoed hollowly in the dark corridor, the darkness seeming to suck it up. As I expected - I suppose I expected it - there was no reply.

As I walked, I found iron bars on the wall to my left.

It was a jail cell. The cells continued some rooms past that one. I looked inside, and could see nothing but darkness within. I sensed no one there. Like a patrolling guard, I continued walking down the hall.

My surroundings didn't change one bit.

Was the black cat really down here?

Just as I thought it, I stepped on something hard and stopped.

I took my foot away and looked down at the object.

When I saw it -

My heart leapt up, and I thought it was going to stop.

The torches on the wall clearly illuminated it at my feet.

That thing on the ground.

I had seen it.

...It was father's pipe.

Swallowing a scream, I backed away.

Suddenly, I heard moaning from down the hallway. A familiar voice.

My pulse quickened. When I saw the human shape in the hall, I

turned around -

“You up and at ‘em?”

...I woke up.

I was sleeping face-up in my usual bed.

I turned to the voice and saw the black cat relaxing on a chair and looking at me.

...Had I been dreaming?

My heart was still pounding.

My soles still felt cold. I could still feel the sensation of stepping on the pipe.

I took a big breath. I covered my eyes with both hands.

“I had a weird dream.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...”

I didn’t explain. I wasn’t sure how to explain. The situation I was in? Or what it made me feel?

I was relieved it was just a dream, but I found I couldn’t answer to at what point it became one. The scene of that dark hallway made me restless.

I lied down like that for a while, then the black cat spoke.

“Logic is a prerequisite to learning things, you know.”

“Huh?” I looked at the cat.

He continued at ease.

“You’ve only just learned to read. You need to study. Learn what’s right, and what’s not right. You need to read that stuff from between the lines. Of course, it’s the same when you’re talking to somebody.”

I didn't understand what he was trying to say.

I scrunched up my face. He was talking about things I didn't get again, so I didn't reply, while he continued.

"Those ladies always lie no matter what you ask 'em, so you gotta be careful."

When he said that, I broke from my silence and sat up in realization, looking at him.

Those ladies. The red plants?

Suddenly, I noticed the color of the book on the table. Wasn't that the book I had been reading?

The cold sweat seemed to return.

Was it not a dream?

"Look, it's my bad for not telling you. Though I did put those weirdos there 'cause I thought it'd help in your studies."

The black cat yawned. "So, what did you need from me?"

"..."

I had opened my mouth to ask, but his words closed it.

I had questions.

What was this house? Why was there something that belonged to father here? Who was at the end of that hallway...?

But I wondered what would happen if I asked those questions.

Those things were long over. I'd put an end to them myself.

I didn't want to think about anything I had intentionally thrown away.

Remembering I had a request for the black cat, I had my head switch gears. My cold soles were already warmed, and my heart had already calmed down considerably.

I looked the cat in the eyes and said, "I have a request."

"Hmph, what is it?"

What I found that I really wanted.

"I -"

It wasn't the cold cat's body, the ugly cook's meals, the fantasies the books provided, the residents of the house - I wanted a human. I dropped my gaze and held the edge of my sheets. Even though I was free, my body simply wasn't used to voicing my desires.

My throat finally produced it.

"...I want a friend."

I felt the room go silent at once.

I cast my eyes down, not knowing how the black cat was reacting.

When I looked up at him, curious, I found that he was looking at me with much the same expression as always, though perhaps a little astonished.

"That's easy. Just invite one," the cat readily replied.

"Invite one?"

"Yeah."

He waved his tail. "'Cause you can't leave the house. How else but to have them come to you? Your body's got magic power in it. And that power extends to the surrounding forest, too. Think of the house as the brains, and the forest as the limbs. Well, you can just give it a try."

I nodded.

My power. Was that my power as a witch?

The cat closed his eyes in example.

"Just close your eyes and imagine. Start with yourself. Then the

room, and the walls. Once you got that, start heading out. You'll pick it up quick."

I did as he said and closed my eyes.

In the darkness, I imagined myself on the bed. Then the pattern of the floor spread outward, and the rest of the room appeared. Next, I saw the house's red roof. Even though I had never seen the roof or known its color.

I was looking down on the house from directly above. It was surrounded by green trees. Colorful flowers bloomed in the garden outside. Yes, this was a house in the woods. I saw the birds flutter away, and then -

In the blink of an eye, my view flew up at incredible speed, widening.

I was looking down on the entire forest from high in the sky.

I could see everything in the forest at a glance. Where there were rabbits, sticking their heads out. Where there were nests with mother birds protecting their eggs. I could sense the breath of every living thing in the forest.

"...Ah!"

When I opened my eyes, the vision was cut, and I was back to the room. I felt like I hadn't breathed for a few minutes, so I gasped and coughed.

The black cat looked at my face with worry.

"Right. That's how it feels to use your magic. Might be a bit rough your first time. But you'll get used to it. And it'll be easier once the house is well."

What did he mean, "once the house is well"?

I thought that was odd, as tears formed in my eyes, but I didn't ask. I was stimulated by the feeling of using my powers, and I felt like I might actually be able to make a friend.

I got my breathing in order, closed my eyes again, and looked around in my vision.

Like the cat said, I quickly got used to it.

Using my powers, I could see places that weren't here.

"It's called magic viewing."

I could hear the black cat from outside the vision in my head.

It was like there was a spider web over the forest, with the house at the center. When anything touched one of the threads, it would respond as if plucked. That was the sort of power it was.

And I learned that I could freely move the things within the forest around, and even create paths. I could make paths that went around and around to the same place, getting people lost.

But for what? Why did witches have this power? I didn't think deeply on it then.

Without being taught, I learned most everything about manipulating the forest.

And then I found him.

A lone boy playing in the woods.

"Hey, I don't look weird, do I?"

"I told you, no! How many times you've asked me now?"

Standing in front of the door, I was restless. I touched the ribbon on my head again and again to make sure it wasn't slipping.

The cat let out a tired sigh. "You'll be fine. You're cute, Ellen."

"Really?"

“Yeah. Look, your friend’s here already.”

Past the door, the boy was lost in my garden.

Though it was more correct to say I got him lost there.

I gripped the front door handle. I’m meeting my first friend, I thought. I was nervous.

“Oh, right.”

The cat was going to leave, then turned back, remembering.

“You can’t go outside, alright?”

“I know,” I groaned, when suddenly the door swung open. I almost fell over, and I hurried to brace my legs.

The air from outside came inside - and I saw the boy standing in the middle of the garden.

He had scruffy chestnut-colored hair. A tanned face dotted with freckles. Dirty, patched clothes, and he held a twig in his right hand. He gazed at the colorful flowers of the garden.

He was the same boy I had seen through magic viewing.

When he saw me, his face brightened at once and he ran over.

“This garden’s awesome! This your place?”, he asked, his eyes sparkling.

His voice... It was a boyish voice, unlike the cat’s in that it has more inflection, and a bit of a lisp.

Just hearing him excited me, and I struggled to nod. He showed no timidity, curiosity bringing him inside the house.

“Your house is huge! And it smells real good, too!”

“Um -”

My voice squeaked with nervousness. I knew my face was red with embarrassment, thinking he’d find me shameful.

I cleared my throat and pressed out some words.

“Do you want to eat together? I have, um, pastries.”

Maybe it was a little too sudden.

Ignorant to my worry, his eyes went round.

“Really? Sure!”, he said with joy.

I nodded. I led him along, and he threw the twig outside before coming in.

The cat had at some point vanished, and the boy stood where he had been.

“Whoa, wow... It’s such a pretty house.” He looked around the spacious entryway.

I closed the door and turned back to him.

“I-I...”

The boy looked at me blankly.

Gripping the ends of my skirt, I managed a smile.

“I’m... Ellen. Will you... be my friend?”

The boy started coming to visit my house regularly.

Perhaps he was more after the sweet pastries and tea than he was after me. Such delicious things seemed to be rare even in the world outside the forest.

The boy felt like he’d found a secret place. Thus he wouldn’t “let it out” to anyone else, which for me was perfect.

It was exciting to feel like we were sharing a secret, and I didn’t particularly want a lot of hustle and bustle.

The boy smiled at me. He said my name. When I waved, he waved back. I became entranced in playing with him.

We bathed in the sunlight under windows, read books, and wandered the house, yet I didn't pass him by the whole time.

"What is it, Ellen?", the boy asked as I looked around for the black cat.

"Oh, nothing." It didn't make any difference if he was here or not.

So I sat down next to the boy.

He was lying down and reading an encyclopedia open on the floor.

"Hey, can you read the name of this bug?"

I read the word he pointed to. "Um, it's XXXXXXXX (the bug's name)."

"XXX...? That's a weird name."

"Yeah," I giggled.

"Ellen, can you read all the books here?", he said, looking around at all the shelves.

"Only the simple ones..."

"Huh..."

The boy rested his chin in his hands and looked down at the encyclopedia's illustrations.

I sat up, having thought of a good idea, and asked.

"Hey, do you want me to teach you to read?"

The boy thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"Nnnah. It won't do me any good bein' able to read. My dad an' my mom can't read neither. Don't need it in their work, they says.

...Hey Ellen, what does your dad do?"

"...My, father..."

The sudden nature of the question made me stop short.

"...I don't know. What he does."

Not noticing the serious tone of my voice, the boy continued to flip

through the book.

“Hmm. But you live in such a big house, so I bet you’re pretty rich. And you got all these books. ‘s nice. Would be nice to be a kid here. Ooh, cake!”

The door opened, and the cook brought in cake and tea on a tray. He was as disturbing as ever, but the boy seemed to see him as a normal person.

He waited for the cook to place the cake down, then ate it with a smile.

I smiled as well, but I was still thinking.

I knew nothing. About my father, and about the woman who was my mother. Because I’d drawn the curtain on them while still knowing nothing.

I felt my cheeks ache, and I touched them. Was it regret? Surely not. It was just loneliness. I could get along with this boy, and most kids like him, but I had no one like my parents.

I had nothing.

I was overcome with loss. I had a hole in my chest. Through which the wind blew, making me shiver.

No, but it’s fine. I have a friend now. I could look at the boy and feel relief. I could cover up the hole and feel a warm wind.

I felt a pain run up my leg. I pressed my ankle in haste. Are you okay?, the boy said with his gaze as he peered at me. I’m fine, I smiled.

I looked down to check that it was perfectly normal skin.

...Just my imagination. I wasn’t sick anymore.

Because I had become a witch, and was permitted to live here.

One night.

I slept in the bed in my room.

I wasn't sure if it was a dream, or a scene I saw with my powers. I saw the black cat sitting up on a roof. I knew it was the roof of this house, from the shape and color.

The cat silently looked up at the night sky.

Looking closer, there was a crow beside him. It was one to two times his size.

It didn't seem to be attacking him. It faced the cat and noisily cawed at him; they were apparently talking.

The cat responded with a few words. I couldn't hear what they were.

Their conversation concluded, the crow flapped its great wings and took off, vanishing into the dark sky.

The black cat returned to looking at the sky.

A strong wind blew, and the leaves of the forest rustled. Once it died down, the cat muttered.

“Better be soon...”

But I couldn't hear that muttering, and my senses sank into darkness.

### 3

That day.

It was a rather clear, windless day.

The boy came to visit in the early afternoon.

I met him in the entryway and invited him to come inside as usual, but he stopped me.

“Hey, Ellen. You wanna play outside?”

“Outside?”

I stopped with my hand still on the handle.

“I... can’t go outside.”

“Why not?”, the boy asked with honest eyes.

With my eyes swimming around, I said “Um, because, I’m sick.”

“Sick?”

The boy carefully looked me over from the red ribbon atop my head, to my one-piece, to the ends of my toes, and laughed.

“How? You’re totally healthy, Ellen. Just come out for a little bit, you’ll live.”

“.....”

I said nothing.

“There’s this HUGE bug on the log over there, and I wanna know if you know what it’s called.”

The boy innocently ran off.

...You can’t go outside.

The black cat’s voice came back to me.

Just afterward, so did the boy’s.

...Just come out for a little bit, you’ll live.

A sweet invitation.

I pursed my lips.

...Yeah. Just for a little bit.

I was already imagining playing with the boy in the garden a few seconds ahead, and put one foot forward.

And in the next moment -

Wham.

I felt like I was whacked in the head with a mallet and fell to the ground.

Suddenly, my vision blurred. I felt sluggish, like there was something big on top of me.

The boy noticed and hurried back to me.

“What’s wrong?!” He held a hand out to me after my trip.

Trip? No, I had not tripped. A sharp pain attacked my joints, rendering me unable to stand.

“U-Um, I just...”

I held my aching right eye. It ached? Why? I felt pain behind my eye, and noticed something warm leaking through my fingers.

“Eek...!”

The boy leaned back, realizing before me that it was blood.

Overreacting to his rejection, I insisted I was fine and forced a smile. The skin on my cheek heated up and crumbled.

The boy’s face went pale and he backed away. He was already quite far away - now it looked like he was about to run.

His frightened face... His eyes were like he’d seen something inhuman.

I was confused myself, but tried to deny what was happening.

“N-No, you see, this is -”

“WAAAAAHHH!!”

Before I could finish, he turned his back on me and fled. He ran desperately, almost tripping over himself.

I reached my arm out for him.

...Why? Why are you running? We'd played together. You were my friend. Why...

I couldn't manage to yell.

My hand became a claw, reaching for the shrinking boy's back.

When I saw the skin on that hand red and swollen, my eyes flew wide open.

"Aaahhh..."

At some point, the black cat had appeared next to me as I lied on the ground.

He had vanished entirely since the boy came along.

"I told you you couldn't leave the house, Ellen," he said, in a singsongy "I told you so" way.

"After all, Ellen. You were sick, weren't you?"

As if that word were a signal, my whole body shook. A familiar pain crawled up my legs and face. I felt a chill, yet the swollen areas of my skin and the backs of my eyes were horribly hot.

I looked down at my red, sore legs, then frightened at the cat.

"My sickness wasn't cured?"

"Course it wasn't. You didn't do anything."

I felt like I'd been pushed off a cliff.

I thought everything was settled when I became a witch.

When I became a witch, had I not been reborn?

"You lie."

"I don't," he said with a swing of the tail.

"You can be healthy inside the house. Because you're protected by magic. But once you leave, it wears off. And you're back to normal. Particularly since you were sick, it's really best not to go out. So

now you know.”

The black cat raised an ear.

“And now you’ve made another one run.”

“Another one”?

His phrasing made me shiver. Because it made me feel like he knew my past, and how my parents gave up on me because of my sickness.

The fleeing boy overlapped with the images of my abandoning mother and my father who never looked at me.

“But it’s alright, Ellen, you see? Even if you can’t cure your illness, a witch can’t die.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean you can live forever.”

Since he said it so casually, I didn’t immediately understand the gravity of it.

Forever?

“That’s right,” the cat answered to the voice in my heart.

“Even if you let your sickness advance, and your legs rot away, and you go blind, and your face gets so swollen you can’t even tell who you are, you can live,” he grinned, “forever. Because you’re a witch.”

His words circled around in my head, and my vision went black.

I had delighted to see myself in the mirror. Now, in my imagination, the mirror was cracked, and crumbling to pieces.

...Forever?

Would I live, still sick, forever?

If I couldn’t be cured, wouldn’t everything be the same as it had been? No, it would be even worse. To keep living with my sickness.

To not die even as it worsened. I wouldn't be able to leave that house. Would I be bound to live there - forever?

Because I was a witch.

Because I was a witch, he said.

I wanted to tear at my body, like I'd done before. But I resisted it. Because I knew it wouldn't solve anything. And because someone else was watching. And his heart would be pleased to see my emotions shifting.

I trembled face-first on the ground, and prayed that this was just a dream. But I couldn't calm my labored breathing and just let time pass.

Gradually, the impatience and sadness swirling inside me consolidated into a single emotion.

It was hatred for the black cat.

I endured the pain in my legs to stagger to my feet. Grinding my teeth hard enough I thought the back ones might break, I looked down at him.

I had meant to glare at him, but with the stinging pain in my eyes, I couldn't focus. Still, I stared down the black demon before me.

He was waiting for me to take refuge back inside.

He was waiting for me to complain and plead for help.

I wouldn't grant him that.

"Oh, c'mon, Ellen. Don't give me that look, you're embarrassing me," he said, not at all perturbed.

I took a breath before yelling at him. But I didn't yell, and instead spoke across a long breath.

"...Why would you do that?"

My voice came out lower than expected.

The black cat didn't answer.

I continued.

"What's the point?"

He said nothing.

I went on in the verge of tears.

"If this is, is how it's going to be, then I, I'd..."

"Rather just die?", he interrupted. My body shook.

I'd rather just die. I opened my mouth to agree, but only a slight breath escaped; my throat would make no sound.

The cat shrugged his shoulders.

"Weren't you cold, in that alley? You didn't have a house or anything anymore. You wanted someplace warm."

The cat spoke in his usual way. He wasn't scorning me, nor acting cocky.

"I gave you what you wanted. I wouldn't think you should hate me for that. Warm food, knowledge, friends, oh, and I'm a friend too. And a healthy body to boot. Well, or so it seems, at least."

I heard my pulse starting to pound.

"You didn't even know. But you needed to."

"Know what?"

I tried to stay strong, but my voice trembled.

"Just how unhappy you were."

I looked at the black cat with an expression of disbelief.

He paid it no heed and went on.

"A human who doesn't know warmth simply freezes to death. But one who does knows they're cold as they die. So they're unhappy. Get it? You were unhappy. But if you died like that, you'd be happy."

You should have known your unhappiness.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

I screamed, turning pale. I didn’t want to hear any more. The strain made either blood or tears flow from my right eye down my swollen cheek.

I should have known?

“That’s ridiculous...”

I felt my feeble resistance crumbling. I was dizzy, and about to faint.

I couldn’t fully understand what the black cat was saying.

But I felt I had the gist of it.

I’d learned all manner of things in this house. I had the freedom of a healthy body. The enjoyment of learning things I didn’t know. And I could play with friends. I had all kinds of possibilities.

Now that I knew all these things, the reality of my sickness, compared to the time when I knew nothing, was much more severe.

I felt like I was being made to dance on his palm. The black demon’s eyes saw through everything, forgiving nothing.

All of a sudden, I noticed I was gripping a knife materialized in my right hand.

The cat who had yet to show any movement shifted his gaze. He saw the knife and whistled.

“Just destroy everything you don’t like, eh? Nice. Nice and simple. I like the cut of your jib. But I think there’s another way.”

I screamed and swung the knife down on the black cat.

It didn’t matter where I hit. I just wanted to make the slightest dent in his carefree tone.

He didn't dodge.

The knife slipped right through his ribs, the blade sinking pleasantly deep into his organs.

He showed no pain, bulging his golden eyes up at me.

I didn't take my hand off the knife, and he didn't take his eyes off me.

"It's important that you shout "it's cold," Ellen."

Behind his usual carefree voice was a sharp coldness.

I wanted to run away right then and there, but my eyes only swam, and my body wouldn't move.

The cat nimbly leapt up and pushed me down.

He forcefully stepped on my swollen cheek with a front paw.

I screamed. The intense pain of him directly touching the nerves in my cheek rippled through my body.

The cat brought his face close to me and opened his mouth. The knife still protruded from his side.

He whispered.

"You just want to live? Live a long life? No, you have a desire. Say it, Ellen. Tell me what it is you can't bear not to have."

...He was right, but I didn't want to tell him.

I turned away. But he wouldn't let me escape, and continued to whisper.

"You weren't loved. Not by anyone. Your father didn't look at you, your mother abandoned you. Even though you weren't loved, even though you wanted to love them. Yes, because of your sickness, you weren't loved. How strange. There's no reason not to. You really should have been. Say, even that boy abandoned you when he

found out you were sick. How cruel. It's all because of your sickness. You know what you want, don't you? What you really want, from the bottom of your heart. Don't you? You can't go back to that cold, dark alley."

His every word stabbed at my heart.

I didn't want to hear it. I shouldn't have. My ears tried to filter out every word, every syllable he said.

"I..."

As I moaned, enduring the pain, I found my moaning turned to wailing.

...I knew. He didn't have to tell me.

I wasn't loved. And I wanted love. So I wanted a human friend. I longed for someone else.

But wasn't it all a lie?

Even the boy ran away when he saw the real me.

Just like mother and father.

I would forever be unloved.

Because the curse of my sickness would go on forever.

I cried, like a deserted child. Like a child realizing no one would come to pick them up, so they just kept crying.

I thought I would never have anything ever again.

With no one loving me, my spirit would rot in this house.

All because of my foolish choice.

Because I had naively accepted to become a witch.

My heart sunken into despair, I could see nothing.

There was no ray of light in the darkness.  
Just when I was about to hear nothing as well,  
I heard him whisper.

“I’ll teach you a spell to cure your illness.”

My ears rang and my hair stood up on end.  
I stopped crying and stared at the black cat. I felt the warm sunlight  
on my skin again. Come to think of it, it was still early afternoon.  
The cat stepped off my body. With a whip of his tail, my body  
returned to as it had been.

I felt the pain and unpleasantness soften. The appearance of being  
cured calmed my heart.

The black cat confirmed the hope in my eyes and spoke.

“How, you might ask? Simple.”

He wore his usual innocent expression.

“Just feed me like you did before,” he moved his mouth.

“I gave you magic because you let me eat your father and mother.  
Same thing,” moved his mouth.

“I told you there was another way, didn’t I?”, his mouth.

“That’s exactly what this house is for,” it continued to move.

“Feed me more people. And I’ll teach you a spell to cure yourself.”

The cat trotted toward me. He casually put a paw on my shoulder,  
coming near enough to my ear to eat it.

And I heard his mouth smack open as he said,

“You can have anything you desire. Because you’re a witch.”

## 4

The next day.

I sat at the dresser, looking at myself in the mirror.

The mirror glittered in the rays of the afternoon sun. Sometimes I heard birds chirping to disrupt the silence.

In the mirror was a girl who had lost her expression.

I'd woken up in bed like always. There was nothing wrong with my body. The room's peaceful air was the same as ever.

But the way I saw things had changed.

I now saw that it was fake.

I saw that inside my body, my sickness was still progressing.

A bird tapped on the window with its beak.

...To inform me that the boy was here.

I felt a sharp pain in my eyes.

I opened the front door.

Along with the smell of the garden and the slight brightness came the boy, with an anxious look on his face.

When he saw me, his face brightened.

"Whoa, Ellen! You look great!"

He sighed with relief, then faked an apologetic expression.

"Um, sorry 'bout yesterday. For just running like that. I just thought you looked like a monster or somethin'. Scared me. I guess it was jus' me."

A monster.

That word stuck in my ears.

I loosened my lips into a smile.

“Oh, please. I just tripped and got all muddy. I can’t believe you just ran away, XX (the boy’s name).”

“Really? Thought so. Just seemed weird. Man, I’m a dummy. Hahaha!”, the boy awkwardly laughed.

“Heh,” I laughed with mouth only, keeping up my smile.

It was peaceful now. The misunderstanding cleared up. We had hope to play together in the future.

I invited the boy into the house.

I shut the door, quarantining the house from the outside world. I felt like the sound carried further than usual.

“Go into that room. I’ll bring some pastries.”

I pointed at the door in front of the entrance. The gesture and words were all done unconsciously.

“Okay.”

He went into the room and shut the door. I knew that sound that would follow.

Click.

Yes. It had locked itself.

“Huh?”

I heard him noticing something amiss through the door.

“Hey, Ellen, there’s nothing here. And it got dark all of a su...? U-Uh? Ellen! Why’s it locked?!”

The boy futilely turned the handle.

He was frightened by the sudden darkness, no doubt. While I listened, I took a few steps back and squatted against the wall.

“Hm, I wonder why...”, I muttered, putting a hand to my mouth.

“Quit jokin’ around!”, the boy shouted, furiously hitting the door. The sound grabbed at my heart, making me sad.

I distantly gazed at the door. I recalled the boy as I listened to his screams and the beating at the door.

My first friend.

I liked you.

Your hands were soft and warm, like a kitten’s.

But you scratched my heart. You hit a sore spot, never to be touched. My torn heart spewed pus, and I couldn’t move.

My nose and mouth clogged up, and I couldn’t breathe. No. No, I want to breathe. Because I still don’t know.

What it’s like to love, or be loved.

*...Can I eat it?*

I heard a voice from somewhere. It sounded like a girl about my age.

You want to eat?, I answered in my heart.

*...Yeah,* the voice replied.

You can, I answered.

The next moment.

A shock like a huge elephant ramming into a wall shook the house.

My body hardened in surprise. Bits of stone fell from the ceiling.

The boy’s voice stopped.

Still feeling the reverberation, I realized what had happened.

The walls of the house had squashed the boy’s body.

How did I know?

Because it was my house. It was like a part of my body.

Like one could feel the sensation linger after crushing a grape between their fingers, my body knew everything in the house.

The house made a sound of crunching the boy's body. Of slurping his flesh. Even though I should have heard no such sounds, since the house had no teeth to bite or tongue to taste.

And yet I heard them.

Delicious, delicious, it trembled with joy. It wept with emotion. I heard the whispers from every direction, worrying me.

I heard the lock click open.

It was like a signal from the door that I could go in.

I stood up. My eyes were locked on the door in front of me. My heart beat fast. My legs naturally carried me forward. The sentiment I'd felt before killing the boy was overwritten by the curiosity before me.

I slowly reached for the handle.

Touching the cold handle, I slowly turned it.

The door soundlessly opened.

There was no atrocious scene to be found.

It was a cramped room surrounded by gray walls. There was nothing placed in there. Only, on the floor a few steps ahead, there was a red stain that had once been the boy.

A familiar red.

But I didn't keep looking at it. Because there was a more captivating color above it.

My gaze went from down to up, and I saw...

...a purple haze.

That was the first time I saw the demon's true body.  
A flexible form of mist. His face, repeatedly appearing and disappearing, seemed like one that had negotiated with numerous beasts and men. It was an abominable thing that did not seem of this world.

And yet, why...  
...did I find it so beautiful?

Clap, clap, clap.  
I heard a clapping from nowhere.  
The singular clap gradually turned to louder applause.  
Applause, applause, applause -  
The entire house was overjoyed. For the fresh blood.  
And for the birth of a new witch.

That's when I realized.

There was no running away from them.  
And I had no intention of doing so.  
The demon knew this.  
That I would satisfy his hunger to live out my own desires.  
That as a prisoner of this house, I would perform as his ideal witch.  
I was entranced by the demon.  
Yet at the same time, I entranced him.  
I would surely go on to kill innumerable humans.  
And for that, I would receive innumerable happinesses.  
Because I desired.  
Oh, I desired.

...Just that one thing, to be loved.

The applause did not die down.

Like a parent celebrating their child's independence, the house held my shoulder and cried.

The house's tears wept out of the ceilings, walls, and floors, coming toward my feet. In no time, they were climbing up my body, warming my eyelids.

Like cups overflowing, my eyes began to cry on their own.

I couldn't go back.

There was no way back.

A spider's web had been dangled in front of me in that back alley.

The demon's deceiving silver web.

This was inevitable from the moment I decided to grab it. Even if it had only been the demon's slimy, glittering drool.

Perhaps the demon understood my thoughts as well.

He respectfully bowed. Even that slight action had an overwhelming force behind it, that could destroy the forest and flip the very earth over, and it rippled against my cheek.

The demon seemed to kneel for me.

He took the back of my hand and kissed it.

A few seconds passed, which could have just as easily been eternity.

The demon whispered in a voice not a boy's, not an adult's, not a man's, not a woman's, but a beautiful voice I had never heard the likes of before.

“Welcome, Ellen. My dear witch.”

## Chapter 3 ~ Cute Little Bottle

1

I X all the friends  
who came to my house after that.

They were all eaten by the house.  
But it wasn't enough.

To begin with, I found children around my age and invited them in. They were all deceived by the sweet smell of food and my smile. All of these children were hungry. And on top of that, pure. They wanted to believe in a dream, that happiness would come upon them alone.

Though such a thing would never conveniently appear before them, their childish hearts easily accepted the comforting allure. Just the way I had.

The house itself used what it knew to kill my friends with ease, and it did so in a variety of ways.

I didn't need to do anything. Only reach out an inviting hand.

Crushing them between the walls was the simplest way. From time to time a lucky child would escape and run down the hall, but a knife from nowhere would quickly take care of them. The house had always had such traps in place.

Because this was a witch's house. A house created by demons to devour humans. It was no surprise at all that it would be filled with deadly implements.

Every time the house ate a person, it voiced its gratitude - thank you, thank you - and I was embarrassed of my past self for failing to carry out my job as a witch.

Regret? Guilt? I felt no such things.

Because I wanted to be cured.

Because I wanted someone who would love me.

By merely piling up the pebbles before me, I could have my wishes granted. Anyone given that offer would have chosen the same. I picked them up, and I stacked.

Yet they weren't pebbles, but white bones. People's round skulls. Perhaps the big question was whether these were on the level of pebbles, or if they had indeed been a person's life.

Human souls, for now, were currency.

Money with which a witch can buy spells from a demon.

Just as I exchanged the souls of father and mother for the spell of this house, I needed more souls to receive things from the demon.

I had to continue working not only for the cure the demon promised, but for medicine to slow the progression of my sickness.

When I stepped outside that day, I saw my fingertips splotched with red. Even though there had never been symptoms of my sickness there before.

It was because I had stopped drinking my medicine since I came here. I trembled with fear. I didn't want it to get any worse. I clung to the demon's medicines. Even if I didn't know how much they helped to slow it.

When the house ate a person, my body flushed up with heat, and I

felt the soul being taken to the demon.

I didn't know any exact numbers, but I was recompensed for feeding him humans.

With medicine to slow my sickness, for the time being.

The remainder, so to speak, went toward offerings to the demon to grant my wish.

"Not really an offering. 's just a transaction."

I turned to the thick voice, and a black crow settled on the open window's sill.

"Heya," the crow greeted, flapping open its wings.

I looked at him with arms folded and a look of disgust.

"Just leave the medicine and go."

"Ooo, scary. Kid's got no respect, no respect. Hey, what's with you?", the crow spat at the black cat down on the floor.

"Sheesh. I'd advise against trying to make her angry," he angrily replied, but he made no implication that the crow was a nuisance. It felt as if the cat and the crow were long-time acquaintances.

"I heard ya. Good doin' business. Smell ya!"

The crow flapped his wings a few times, then took off from the window. I shut it firmly with irritation. Though I needed not touch it directly; the things of this house moved as I willed.

"You don't like him?"

"Nope. He's just so noisy," I coldly said.

The cat scratched his nose with a sigh.

I bought my medicine from another demon, distinct from the black cat.

I just called him the crow demon.

The black cat had no name, either.

Demons, having no defined form, evidently possessed animal corpses to do their work.

And just as they had different tastes in animals, they gave witches different kinds of magic. The black cat didn't seem to know any medicinal spells, so I relied on the crow.

I asked as I put the medicine in a cupboard.

“Does that crow have a witch, too?”

“Well...”

“Well? You don't know?”

“Nah. Because I'm only interested in you, Ellen.”

“...”

“You listening?”

I ignored the cat and went on with my work.

Did the crow have a witch of his own? If he did, that meant there was someone else living much like I was.

But that thought alone didn't interest me. Nor did I feel any fellowship with a fellow witch.

Because she would have chosen the path of working for a demon to fulfill her desires, as well. What good would it do for me to intrude into someone else's life, as she carried her own separate emotions?

Simply by their connection to a demon, witches lived in their own worlds. To impede upon that would cause nothing but trouble. At least in my case.

I thought about the link between demons and witches.

Did demons use witches for their own purposes? Or did witches use

demons for their own purposes?

I felt both were accurate. It was a transaction, like the crow said. Because it seemed that demons couldn't kill humans on their own power.

I visited the room of books looking for information on demons. I couldn't find much of interest.

"Could you be hiding them?", I asked the black cat.

"Well, I never," he replied, walking gracefully and spinning his tail.

Whenever I picked up a book in this house, I was provided a book at about the right difficulty for me to read. Which meant that I wasn't allowed to read books I shouldn't be yet.

The next book I reached for was about the black cat's magic. I sat in a random chair and read.

All of the black cat demon's spells were twisted things.

A spell to make people see illusions, a spell to peer into a person's heart, a spell to control someone's body...

I would have thought that simply destroying a person's body would be enough to eat their souls.

Yet the black cat seemed interested in instilling fear, something that was quite apparent from this house of deadly traps.

"Why do you only know spells like these?"

"Hmm. I guess I just like that kind of thing. And..."

"And?"

"They're tastier that way."

"Really?"

"Yep. So good luck."

Good luck, he says.

What a layabout. Still, I trembled slightly.

Because there was no doubt. He knew that I was going to enjoy using these spells. A witch, use a demon for her own purposes? Absolutely not. That's not the position a witch is in.

I no longer even attempted to befriend the people I invited to the house. It was simply unproductive.

Because no one loved me in my sickness. I could put up a temporary illusion, but once my true appearance came out, they ran in fear.

And everyone had homes to go back to, so they wouldn't stay. It was easy to make them submit, but that wasn't real.

If only I could mold their hearts, then I would gather lots of them, and I would make it real. That was all.

Every time a person died, the roses around the house seemed to multiply.

I plucked a petal and looked at it in my palm.

Perhaps these red flowers were made from blood, and not metaphorically so.

I could see patterns like blood vessels in this very petal. And they were nearly identical to the veins I could see in my hand.

My life as a witch began favorably.

Though it wasn't too different from what I had been doing. I drank tea, read books, and gazed outside.

Only from time to time, I would invite a human who had come to the first into the house.

I wandered the house without any sense of restriction.

Every time I passed a mirror, I checked my reflection. The girl there appeared very healthy.

But I couldn't smile from deep down.

I asked.

"Hey, how much longer?"

"Not yet. It's not nearly enough," the black cat answered.

## 2

Many days and nights passed.

As the seasons changed, so did the forest, the flowers in the garden wilting and blooming anew. The twinkling stars overhead changed not in alignment, only in position.

Time passed slowly but surely.

...And yet my body remained a seven-year-old's.

I realized this anew this one day when I killed a human and saw their memory.

That adult human had been a child that, long ago, I let escape on a whim.

Enough time had passed for a child to become an adult. I compared my own body to the fully matured corpse at my feet.

I hadn't grown an inch. What's more, my hair and nails hadn't grown either.

It was like time had stopped for me. And yet the curse of my sickness proceeded inside me.

Witches don't die, the black cat had said. I faintly wondered if this

was what it meant to live forever, smelling the aroma of a newly-bloomed rose.

I had lived here a long time and learned many things, but my seven-year-old brain forgot much.

...Perhaps I should keep a diary.

An open book full of blank pages appeared on the desk before me.

A red-bound book.

What to write? Without even thinking about it, the feather pen began moving on its own, smoothly writing things down.

Ah. So I don't even need to write. Because it seemed the diary was already writing things I couldn't even remember - the house knew more about me than I did.

In that way, even my current thoughts would compose words on the pages.

I left the diary behind, to be written in as the house's magic chose, and departed.

All kinds of people came to the forest.

Playing children.

Rendezvousing lovers.

Adults passing through to hunt or do business.

And in addition, some adults came to search for their children, or to investigate the forest.

I manipulated the forest with much expertise. I looked down over the whole forest from high up in the sky with magic viewing. I cleared a path like a winding thread to lead people to my house.

Growing bored of the house's traps, I played with the black cat's

magic. Sometimes I would involve myself.

They tilted their gaze. That was fine. Rose vines coiled around their necks. Hard as metal, they forcefully dug into their flesh. Just before their head popped off, they'd look at me and say - "Witch."

Some people fretted, some were angry, some insulted.

I wasn't bothered by such things. Because even the greatest events of their entire lives were, to me, a frame of my everyday life.

I gazed at them with chin in hands as if watching a play. Their curses went straight through my ears.

But suddenly, I had a thought.

About how they called me a witch.

Could it be that I was known?

"Hm? You did that on purpose, didn't you?", the black cat said, looking at a puddle of blood on the floor.

On purpose?

"Yeah. Sometimes you let the people who come here flee. Obviously rumor's gonna spread then."

Ah. Perhaps he was right.

There were times when siblings or lovers became lost here, and I killed only one of the pair, letting the other flee. And it wasn't a one-time occurrence.

I don't particularly know what I was thinking in those moments, but thinking back on it, it was true.

Perhaps I wanted to be known.

For my existence to be. And that I lived deep in the forest.

Perhaps I hated living unknown to anyone. I was lonely. I wanted everyone to come play.

“Really?”

The black cat smiled with a mouth dripping with red.

I replied with a smile to the same degree as his.

Yes. I wanted friends. Friends who would die for me. It was like a game of tag - though I was the only one who was it.

And I heard somewhere another rose blooming.

Whenever a child wearing expensive garments or accessories came, I would steal them and try them on myself.

I spun in front of the mirror. Well? Does it suit me? The black cat always just said I was cute, which was boring.

So I quickly grew tired of it, and stuffed the things away in a closet.

The demon’s medicine was mixed into tea or pastries so it could flow through my body.

Like a daily ritual, I sank into the red sofa and waited. When the time came, a sweet medicine appeared on the table before me.

Today, it was strawberry shortcake.

I stuck my fork through the strawberry on top and watched the juice flow out.

I should say that I didn’t exactly enjoy killing people. I killed them in brutal ways, but I didn’t like to do so.

I only did it because it pleased the demon.

Absolutely, he loved to see people suffer. He delighted eating souls soaked in despair.

No. I don’t want to die, not here, not now. Help me. Souls that died with those thoughts tasted very delicious, he said.

I couldn’t distinguish those tastes myself (I didn’t have any desire to

taste them), but he complimented me for the better ones. Simply put, they were more profitable.

That was why I came to kill people in those ways.

The house knew it too. It chose the most awful methods. Had the witch who lived here before me come up with them?

I had no interest in it, myself. I grew used to the smell of guts, but that was all.

Lately I had been cutting off people's wrists to collect, but only as ingredients to make medicine. I had no particular interest in dissecting people.

The cook assisted me in this. Though he was a bit lacking in the head department (in both senses), and sometimes nearly cut me by mistake.

I wondered why such a person was even here, but I supposed the previous witch had wanted his cooking expertise.

He could cook anything. Unfortunately, I had little interest in cuisine and only ate cake and pastries, so he may have been a little bored.

So, no. I didn't like to kill people.

Because, look at it this way. There are humans who kill pigs, aren't there? They do it to eat, but they don't enjoy what they're doing. It's the same thing.

"Who the heck are you talking to?", the black cat asked, sitting beside me as I ate my cake.

Who, indeed. To someone reading this diary, no doubt.

I drew letters in the air with the end of my fork.

"Are you writing a diary?"

Right. Though it's not me who's writing, but the house.

"Well, huh. Can I read it?"

I didn't answer, pushing a piece of cake into my mouth.

Of course, I would be lying to say I didn't like the sense of elation when the house ate a human.

But that was to be expected. It brought about a reaction in my body, but there was nothing I could do about it. ...Hey, cat, why are you smiling?

I became very familiar with the crow demon.

I noticed him at the window, calling "Heya." The crow's thick, ear-piercing voice couldn't be good for my heart.

It annoyed me how I could know everything else about the forest, but not the crow. On that thought, I couldn't know where the black cat was either. Perhaps all demons were that way.

And when it came to the ungraspable, there was also the clocks of the house.

As much as the house changed form, the clocks remained in the same positions, faithfully carrying out time's march regardless of my will.

It was just like a heartbeat. Invariant to the owner's consciousness, it would not be budged from its fixed rhythm. It was the house's pulse -

The crow poking my cheek brought me back to reality. He seemed to be done carrying in his medicines.

In order to determine the medicine I needed, the crow demon needed to look inside my body.

"You're like a doctor," I told him. "Eh," he said.

“Well then, can’t you cure my illness?”, I asked, and “Only the cat can do that,” he said.

“Hmph.”

I was a little let down, and looked at the crow with suspicion.

From the way he said it, it may have been that he *did* have such an ability, but he was leaving the duty of curing me to the black cat.

But asking a demon further about such things wouldn’t get me anywhere.

I swallowed my suspicion and asked something else.

“Isn’t it a bit strange how you eat people, yet have the power to cure them?”

The crow laughed. “Lemme put it in your terms. You’d have a problem if a pig got sick, yeah?”

Feeling I’d hit upon something, I raised an eyebrow. “Is it a problem for demons if humans are sick?”

The crow opened his big mouth and said “Not so much. But it is if we wanna play,” then crudely laughed.

His dirty voice and speech made my face scrunch up.

“Us.” Was that the crow and the black cat?

I felt unpleasant thinking that these demons had their hands in everything.

I put my teacup up to my mouth, then realized.

...Wait. If a pig...

Wasn’t that what I’d written in my diary earlier?

“Could it be... Do you peep in people’s diaries?”

“Whoop!” The crow fled out the window in a seemingly intentional haste.

Why, you... I chased him to the window, but could go no further.

“Hey! No teasing Ellen.”

The black cat appeared from somewhere and leapt onto the roof with the crow.

The crow glared at him and spoke in an intimidating voice.

“I didn’t do nothin’. You’re so damn protective. Buzz off.”

“W-What?!”

The cat and crow began to fight on the roof, though the crow was solely on the offensive. The black cat flicked his whiskers, prompting with his eyes. Help me, Ellen, they said.

I watched for a while, and soon sighed loud enough for them to hear, then left the room.

“H-Hey, Ellen, don’t ignore me!”, the cat pathetically said behind me. I heard the crow laughing as he flew away.

The cat jumped down into the room and followed me. One of his ears had been taken off in the fight.

“Boy, you’re mean. Why didn’t you help me?”

“You can just get a new one, can’t you?”, I grinned.

Even if the black cat’s body was wounded, he had a stock of replacement cat corpses.

“But I wanted to be saved by you, Ellen.”

“...”

“You listening?”

I ignored him and walked away.

...Why had I not helped you?

Surely you knew that. I didn’t want my body to stay outside for any amount of time. If I so much as stuck my hand out the window, the

magic would wear off, and the skin would start to swell.

But I didn't say it.

I pursed my trembling lips.

Because I was a witch. A witch couldn't say such pathetic things. If I started to whine, you would abandon me. Well, though I didn't think he actually would.

I walked down the hall, not looking back, as the black cat followed. Soon enough, he was up on my shoulder, saying trifling things.

How foolish. It was a farce.

Muttering that to myself, I ignored what he said. Even though I was completely in the grasp of demons, I acted like I lived alone.

Because I knew he liked that. That was what the demon sought in a witch.

When I opened the door, out came the cook, carrying a knife.

His giant body ugly and patch-filled, wielding a knife dripping dark red blood, he asked in a stupid tone of voice.

"How long should I keep collecting pig hands?"

Hm.

I shrugged my shoulders.

...You'll have to ask him.

I asked.

"Hey, how much longer?"

"Still not enough," the black cat answered.

Outside the forest, the land went through many rulers.  
I heard many rumors about wars starting and ending.  
Perhaps decades had passed since I came to this house.  
Or maybe it was centuries.  
I didn't know an exact number. As I never aged, I felt I had no need to keep track of time.

“A witch lives in the forest, and she takes away those who get lost there.”  
That was the rumor that spread.

Outside the forest, secret efforts were made to try and kill me.  
Some who visited came explicitly to kill me.  
But I did not panic. Because they would all be my friends. Because every time one came along, they could satisfy the demon's appetite.  
Their deaths instilled fear and sorrow in the ones who remained, and it summoned new humans to the house.  
As the demon surely knew, I enjoyed this chain of occurrences myself.

I looked down on the garden from a second floor window.  
It was fully covered with red roses in bloom.  
When I first arrived here, only seasonal flowers bloomed. But with each human killed, the roses increasing in number could no longer be contained only in the house, but now went outside to encircle it, blooming in the garden.

I softly put a finger against the glass.

My beloved roses. I wanted to leap right into that red bedding. I lamented not being able to do so.

A black shadow flew across the sky, and I looked up.

That noisy black bird's cry.

...The demon was here to sell his medicine.

I started putting the medicines from the crow in a special food storage.

As the demon's medicines increased in number and type, they couldn't just fit in cupboards anymore.

In addition to the medicines that stopped the advance of my sickness, there were those which did damage to the body - those were for the black cat's interests.

I left the medicine room and stood in a long hallway.

I didn't want people to get anywhere near. I had worked for those medicines, and it would be awful if someone were to destroy them.

Water settled in the center of the hall, flowing in a shallow river.

...I wondered where it came from. Well, perfect.

I pulled out a few hairs and dropped them in the river. The clear water suddenly turned purple, bubbling and emitting an odd heat.

"Yikes! What're you doing?", the black cat asked, intrigued.

I gave up on trying to drive him away.

I grabbed him under his front legs and lifted him up.

And I smiled at him, as if he were unbearably cute.

"...Ellen?"

He looked up at me, his legs dangling.

I was smiling as usual, so he returned it, but it seemed somehow

awkward.

...Suddenly, my face returned to normal, and I threw the cat into the river.

“Wha?! I knew it -”

Splash.

By the time he finished yelling, or maybe before, his body dissolved in the poison water with a pleasing sound, leaving no trace.

Only bubbles came up to the surface where he had fallen in. There wasn't even a bone left. I snorted my nose at the smell.

That should do.

I slipped away through the wall.

A purple haze, the demon's true form, circled around my shoulder, but I pretended to ignore it.

I wandered the house.

It had gotten much bigger than when I first arrived.

I passed by the dining room. Handless residents were having a meal around the long table.

Next, I peered into the marble hall. Residents with uncertain forms were playing piano, while others pulled up chairs to listen.

They were living as they pleased

...Those residents of the witch's house.

They seemed to have no purpose. The things they said had no meaning. I could no longer laugh among them.

I passed them by, and vanished into the darkness of the hall.

I am Ellen.

But just who is Ellen?

When was it that I wanted to claw at my sick skin?

Before I became a witch. I could remember it like it was a picture. In a dirty room, looking into smoke and crying. When I remembered that smell, it became hard to breathe.

How pitiable I was back then. But I was happy. Because I could just wallow in sorrow.

The trouble was when I thought about what would come next.

If a future of being loved, a path were set out for me, could I just not think about anything?

I wanted it at any cost. But that was no good.

The cry of my heart, the thing my soul desired, beat against my chest.

I obeyed my soul.

Just as the demon indicated I would.

I found my heartbeat slowing down, and instead, I started to hear the heartbeats of others. The people who were eaten by this house with faces of terror.

Ah. This is how it should be.

In a trance, I reached a rose vine out. Around their necks, sucking all the blood. Their hearts became my nourishment. Their death wails my lullaby, fulfilling my desires.

To be loved. That was my desire.

But just what is love?

Kind hands to wrap around me?

A carefree face to smile at me?

I wanted to cry the more I thought about it.

I had learned many things, living in this house for so long. Many things had come into my possession, I felt.

But none of it left anything inside me. It just passed through my body and vanished.

What I wanted was something warm that would always stay in my body. Something that fulfilled me. I didn't know what it was.

Because I had yet to obtain it.

I lived to have my desire granted. I carried it in my chest with the utmost care, like a bird protecting its eggs.

I felt like, in my time living here, the entity Ellen had gradually disappeared.

...I was the witch named Ellen.

That came to feel more appropriate.

As I walked around the room of books in thought, a book titled with my name appeared.

"Ellen," it read.

That was quick.

I took it and flipped through the pages. But nothing had yet been written in it.

"Well, what do you know," came a low voice. I looked by my feet.

There sat a black cat with a different face from before.

Ah. So you've gone into a new corpse already. I lifted an eyebrow instead of greeting him.

I put the book back and asked.

"Are there any books about the witch who lived here before?"

“Hmm. Might be,” he said, playing dumb.

It wasn't payback for dropping him in the poison water earlier. He was always vague and unwilling to answer when it came to the previous witch.

That witch must have been distant past for him. Would the time come that I would be as well? I couldn't imagine it at the moment.

I looked up at a tall bookshelf.

I couldn't possibly read all the books in here.

They seemed to be constantly multiplying and lessening.

Where were they stocked from? Perhaps the knowledge of the people who died here took the form of books.

Someone's history. A telling of someone's way of life. That was wonderful. What was tragedy for them became comedy for the reader.

But...

Since they were all people fed to the house, they all had the same ending.

“Isn't it boring how they all end the same way?”, the black cat asked me.

“I wouldn't say so. It's all about how you get there. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“Everybody dies at the end.”

So I said, but after realizing that I wasn't included in that, I cast my eyes down.

I was surprised at how much it disturbed me. I was still being dragged into the fact of never dying.

I wished he wouldn't notice my unrest. Ahh, but of course he

would. He laughed at me - I was too scared to look at him.  
Tsk. I escaped through a gap in the bookshelves.  
And as I wandered as if looking for another topic, I found a boy sitting in the corner of the room.

At some point, a boy had taken up residence in the room of books. I wasn't sure if it was entirely right to call him a boy, as his chestnut hair fully covered his face, making it impossible to see. He would order the bookshelves, open up books on the floor, and mutter things to himself. I felt like I'd heard his voice before. I couldn't particularly remember the voices of everyone I'd played with, and they all seemed to blend together. But just looking at his kitten-soft hair seemed to calm my heart.

At times, I would overhear him talking to himself when I came in. I sat in a chair some distance away and gazed at him with my chin in my hands.

He didn't seem to notice my presence. He was so focused on what he was doing, he didn't even look my way.

Around him were encyclopedias and storybooks. Can you not read?

Do you want me to teach you?

I shook my head. No, surely he didn't care for that.

Hold on. Why did I know that?

...I couldn't remember.

I put a hand to my forehead and thought. But my blank memories remained so, and no clues came to mind.

After thinking for a while, I gave up, got out of the chair, and left the room.

I visited the room with the big tree.

I didn't see the red plants around anymore.

Apparently, because they had frightened me, the black cat moved the ladies somewhere else, somewhere dark.

They were hardly evil, though.

It was a bit of a pity, but with those curiously-shaped plants gone, the garden scenery seemed improved.

Instead of their feelers along the walls, there were now rose hedges.

Passing by those hedges, I proceeded to the stone passage.

The cold touch of the stone ran through my soles.

...When was it I walked along here in fear? It didn't matter. It was just a dark hallway.

I looked down as I walked and recalled how I was always barefoot.

Why was it I had so few memories of wearing shoes? Because I had no need to wear them? In truth, I had bad memories associated with shoes, particularly red shoes - but at the time, I had forgotten.

As I walked, I saw lines of iron bars to my left.

I looked through the bars and thought about the residents of the house.

They were the remnants of souls the house had eaten.

In a sense, the demon's leftovers. Like breadcrumbs or apple cores, they took form and stayed in the house.

So when the demon ate people, they didn't die in the house; they came to live as its residents.

At that point in my thoughts, I stopped in front of a cell.

I turned a heavy gaze toward the bars.  
In the back of the cell was a man with one arm chained.  
I couldn't quite see his face.

Because I didn't remember father's face very well.

Father leaned, sitting down, on the back wall. His bones were clearly visible through his sickly skin, and he looked very worn-away.

He said nothing. I didn't want to ask him anything. He hid his breathing and sat like a statue.

I grabbed the bars with both hands. I had no desire to shake them or call for him. I just felt like I needed to do it to keep my feelings in check.

I found it hard to breathe. My chest heated up. I tightened my grip on the bars.

Suddenly, I noticed something at my feet.

...Father's pipe.

I picked it up and stared.

The thing father had used to dream. Because he had this, he didn't look at me. Perhaps that was how I wanted to see it.

I gently held the pipe in my palm. Gently. I didn't think of crushing it.

And yet the pipe shattered, vanishing like bits of sand.

I stared at my empty palm for a while, finally looking back into the cell, then preparing to go back the way I'd come.

Then, before I could take a step, I stopped.

There was another cell next to father's.

A woman's room, with a sweet smell different from father's

The interior of the cell was pitch black. The door was firmly shut and showed no sign of opening. I had no intention to, either.

The more I smelled that sweet aroma, the more a bitter taste spread in my heart.

Just being in front of the cell threw my heart into disarray, and I quickly took off.

Back in the room with the great tree, the black cat was sitting on the bench underneath with tea.

It was about medicine time, I suppose.

I sat down next to him without saying anything. Placing the teacup and saucer on my lap, I drank the tea.

I leaned back on the bench and looked up at the high wall.

The flames of the torches on the wall swayed. A long forelock fell into my eyes, and I knit my brows.

I really was living for a longer time than I should have been.

What was happening to my body? Even if I was drinking the medicines to still my sickness, as the crow demon told me.

To what extent was it stopped? Had the ugly swelling of my face and legs spread to my entire body?

If the magic of the house wore off, or if I went outside, I could see for myself.

I shivered at that point.

...No. I don't want to see that. I don't need to.

I could leave the house when I was healthy. Once the demon

granted my wish, I could.

My fingers trembled waiting for the demon's medicine.

"We have a guest."

I turned to the black cat's voice, but he wasn't sitting there anymore.

It was a sign that a human had come. He would always vanish when I was with a human.

I closed my eyes and surveyed.

I didn't need to concentrate. I could see the human coming into the house in the time it took to blink.

...Sigh. Won't someone different come?

I was tired of the humans who came without fear.

I was seemingly an enemy that had to be defeated. I was likely the target of someone's vengeance. Everyone came to the forest to kill me.

And to kill this witch, they brought all kinds of unique weapons as they set foot in the forest.

I didn't need to invite them. They just came right in. The demon had his mouth open, like a great gate for them to pass into one after another.

They all had their determination, their firm resolve, but once they entered, that was the end for them. They were eaten alive. What a joke.

Why did they say they wanted to kill me?

Why was it thought that I should be killed?

I decided to ask the brain of the person coming to attack me.

And I found that yes, I was evil. I had killed innocent people, thus

evil. I had killed many, thus evil. So I had to be killed.

Hmph. I thought about what I'd done. And about what I was going to do. Yes, from your point of view, perhaps it was so.

But in my eyes, you are evil. Because you're impeding upon my wish. You won't allow it to come true.

Evil, because I kill innocent people? Aren't you trying to kill me? Then how are you not evil?

Hm? God told you so?

...What a pain.

I spoke as I strangled them with rose vines.

I know. Evil is just a word you say to people doing things you don't like. That's all it is.

And you just decide what kind of person deserves to be killed as you please.

Yet you want to give a reason for it, don't you? You want to label everything as good or evil?

But it's only humans who do those idiotic things.

All other creatures, when they want to kill, just kill. And not only so they can eat. Cats even kill bugs for fun.

They don't need a reason for everything. They want to do it, so they just do it.

I'm the same as them, killing because I want to kill. What makes you any different? You only want to kill me because you want to.

Yes, go on and believe in your god.

But he's not going to save you. If I was going to receive divine punishment for doing what you say is evil, I would have been struck

by lightning long ago.

Here's what I think. God dropped us down here to suffer. To live our lives clinging to him and begging for help. So we'd never forget to pray to him.

And thus you and I have both suffered.

Hey, are you listening? I squatted down to talk to them, but their body was already motionless.

"You're talkative today."

The black cat poked his head out of a rose bush.

"I guess," I said, tilting my head.

"But you won't talk much with me."

"What would I need to talk to you about?"

"I dunno. Anything?"

"If anything is fine, then not talking at all must be fine, too."

I promptly terminated the conversation and left.

"Hey, wait!"

The black cat leapt out of the bush and followed.

I visited the stone passage again.

I went down the path and stopped in front of father's cell.

The pipe, which had broken and left no trace, was now back to normal in father's hand.

A faint smell wafted out into the hallway. He calmly smoked, leaning against the wall. The sight made me a little sad.

From the neighboring cell, I thought I heard a woman's laughter.

I did not visit there again.

I walked along the stone, biting my lip.

Perhaps because it was important that I treat my memories with care.

Perhaps because I had a pitiable past.

...I couldn't remember.

Not my feelings on my parents. Nor the boy in the room of books. When I tried to remember those past feelings in detail, I felt my head hurting.

I could read my diary to remember, but by the time I'd turned the next page, I'd already forgotten.

"Can't be that big a deal if you can't remember, can it?"

The black cat was suddenly there coiling around my feet.

"Don't have to think about all that stuff. You're a witch. You eat people and have your wishes granted."

Right.

He was right.

I nodded at the demon's whisper and raised my head.

I am Ellen. The witch of the forest. The one who will cure her illness, and become one who is loved.

But just who was I to honestly smile saying that?

In the corner of the room of books, the book titled "Ellen" emitted a faint light and began to fill with words.

The witch asked.

“Hey, how much longer?”

“A little more,” the demon answered.

#### 4

Until that day, I had not gone outside the house.

Of course, neither had the magic of the witch’s house left me.

Not because I wouldn’t be able to move freely.

But because I didn’t want to see my true form.

I couldn’t imagine how much it would wound my heart to see how much my sickness had advanced.

Even with the demon’s medicines, it would not be completely stopped. There was no doubt my original body was becoming uglier by the day.

I was too terrified of it to check. Just remembering the sore red skin brought me to tears.

So then why did I go outside?

I was careless, no doubt.

It was early morning, and a white mist shrouded the forest.

A man holding a long sword came to the house.

I invited the man up to my room. His sword must have been somehow special. He sliced me with it, and I went flying out the window.

...The house’s magic wears off when the witch leaves it.

As I fell, time seemed to slow down. I saw a flying crow stop. I

thought I heard the black cat yelling.

I landed safely in the roses of the garden, but remained collapsed on the ground, having no energy to get back up.

The magic surrounding me vanished.

It was like having all your clothes ripped off and being thrown onto snow.

The man leapt down from the window after me.

He was flustered to see me writhing. He was watching me carefully with his sword at the ready all the while, yet he seemed surprised.

I was just as much so. The sore red skin, cracked like earth, spread all over my body. The flesh had rotten on my lower legs, and white bone showed through. A chill climbed up my back, and my throat was dry.

Impossible. Was this me?

The roses covered me as if protecting my body, but without my magic, it was pointless. Only able to crawl along the ground, I must have appeared to the man as an swollen, ugly girl indeed.

The sight of my sick self reminded me of the past.

My father who didn't look at me. My mother who abandoned me. And the people who ran from me. My crumbling skin, the proof of my lack of love.

I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to let this man see it. I gripped the ground with red arms like twigs. Something hot rose to my eye.

The all-red girl in the man's sights began to cry.

I didn't expect to garner any sympathy by crying. I knew that this man would never be thrown off by such a thing.

I just cried from sheer sorrow. I cried thinking how cruel this man was.

The man brandished his sword, assured of victory.

I squinted at the bright light off the blade.

Why are you getting in my way? Why are you being cruel to me? Reminding me of painful things. All when I'm sick. When I'm suffering. You people should just exist to be eaten by me.

...You should just die for me.

The man swung his sword down, and my head flew off. My vision flipped upside down.

But even then, it was futile.

I don't really remember what happened after that.

When I woke up, I was lying face-up in bed in my room.

The walls of the room were a faint orange, and out the open window, I saw that it was evening.

I checked my neck and found no seam. Still, I couldn't think of what had happened as a dream.

Um. What was I doing?

Indeed, the man had cut my head off. But I had no memory of the demon reattaching it.

Though that I was sleeping here meant that I had again used the magic of the house to return to my room.

"That was rough," I heard the black cat casually say.

I tried to get up, but my body was stiffened with pain.

Pain? Why? Like my head was splitting. And not just that. I felt a tingling pain and heat in my legs under the blankets.

I shouldn't have felt any bodily pain under the protection of the

magic.

First of all, I demanded the demon's medicine. I was quickly given a steaming cup of tea.

I drank it down in one gulp and took a breath. But my heart was still restless. I felt very bad.

I pressed against my temples and tried to remember what I'd been doing, then the black cat spoke.

"The guy went home."

"Went home?"

"He thought he'd killed you. Don't you remember?"

I looked up in thought.

Right. I drove him away with some kind of spell. But what kind? I couldn't remember. Surely I shouldn't have been so easily forgetting a spell I'd just used.

"Now that he's left, seems nobody's gonna come near for a while."

"Why?"

"Why? Didn't you make it that way?"

"I don't remember that."

The black cat laughed low.

"Yeesh, how can you do anything when you don't even think?"

Saying that wasn't going to help me remember. I wasn't sure if I should get angry or laugh.

Anyway, if I drove him away, then it didn't matter.

I was exhausted. I waited for the pain to recede, lying on my side and wrapped in the blanket.

But it was strange.

As long as I waited, it wouldn't go away. My whole body was hot,

and I had a headache. I still felt like I was lying outside with my sore skin exposed.

It was odd. Why? Surely not because I had my head cut off. As much as a witch's body is wounded, it should be able to go back to normal.

I faced up and looked at the patterns on the ceiling.

My vision blurred, and the beautiful patterns looked like dancing snakes. It amused me. Yet it didn't inspire a smile, but rather nausea.

I felt like my tongue was being pushed from the back of my throat. I couldn't bear it and sat up.

I curled up and started coughing. I grabbed the sheets with sweaty hands.

...Sweat? I looked at my palm.

I had no need to sweat under the effects of the magic. Why - why was my body falling apart?

For a few days afterward, I groaned in my bed.

I didn't know if the demon's medicines were working. The one time when I wanted him to check on me, the crow demon didn't come.

I remembered when I saw my true self, and my swollen red skin. Remembering that made my heart go cold.

Perhaps I had lost a part of my heart then. Perhaps when I was shown my true body, the thing I'd looked away from, my spirit was shaved away, and my sickness worsened.

As much as a witch's body is wounded, it can go back to normal.

...But what if it's the heart that's wounded?

I felt like this idea had an air of truth. I opened my eyes slightly.

It was afternoon, and lukewarm sunlight streamed in.

I was sweating in bed. My hair stuck to my ceramic-like forehead.

As healthy as I looked, on the inside I was a rotting mess.

“Hey.”

My mouth moved before I could think. I didn’t check where the black cat was and just asked.

“Witches can’t die... was a lie, wasn’t it?”

No response came. But I thought of the silence as response enough.

I was sure the cat heard me.

I went on incoherently.

“I feel like I’ve seen myself about to disappear. That time, I felt like I was being taken away. ...If I go on feeling like that, I’ll be done for, I thought. It must be a lie that it could go on like that forever.”

“Well.”

I heard the cat’s voice. His shadow was on my face all of a sudden.

He sat by my pillow, looking down at me.

“Is that your desire, for it to be that way?”

My desire? That I would rather die? That this suffering should just end?

Ridiculous.

I tried to snort at him, but it just came out as a strange breath.

“You won’t die because you don’t really think you want to.”

I thought a while and looked at him.

...For a witch to die, she just needs to want to?

I hadn’t known that for centuries. Perhaps now I had my hand on a secret door. I forgave the black cat for it.

“I can die?”

“You can. But there’s one requirement.”

After he said this, a small bottle appeared out of nowhere before me.

“To despair. That is what it takes for a witch to die.”

I looked at the little candy-colored glass bottle.

“What’s this?”

“Your despair.”

I slowly sat up, unable to take my eyes off the little bottle. A little bottle with a cute design, like one for perfume, sat on my bed.

This could kill me?

I took the bottle with some suspicion, and some fear.

I had a slight expectation.

I had never seen the bottle before. But the color and design suggested a certain person.

I brought it up to my nose.

When I smelled the faint sweet scent, my suspicions were confirmed.

I looked at the cat in surprise. His eyes were wide open.

I felt angry.

Anger? At what?

At the fact that this had the power to kill me? Or at the cat who saw through everything?

I let out a drawn-out breath, to calm my high-strung feelings.

I hadn’t done such an animalistic action in a long time. I felt I was acting more human lately. And that was surely a sign of weakness.

I didn’t want to say it. I didn’t want to give it form.

But - my gaze returned to the bottle.

The bottle contained mother's sweet aroma.

The aroma that always surrounded my pastry-making mother. The aroma that wafted from her short-cut nails. The aroma that comforted me as she held me to her chest. The aroma of that woman who bewildered father.

Mother was the key to killing me. Don't laugh at me. I was still reeling from the fact of my mother abandoning me. I couldn't accept it.

I had completely buried mother away. There was no calmly smiling mother in my memories. I had torn apart the picture of my mother and smeared it with bloody paint.

So I didn't think that this would have killed me.

But I didn't think the black cat was lying.

My hands sweat.

I put a hand on the cap, and loosened it a little. Did it slip because of my sweaty hands? Did I wanted to test if this could really kill me? I didn't know. It was all done unconsciously. The cap came off slightly.

And just after -

The moment when the sweet scent may or may not have reached my nose.

I saw the reaper's great scythe face its blade at me and come down to my neck. Literally, truly. I saw the sharp blade in the darkness

come sideways at me. I could quickly imagine it taking my head off. My blood went cold, and I hurried to tighten the lid. I tightened it as much as I could and threw it.

The bottle hit the wall, made a sound, and fell to the ground. Despite its apparent delicacy, the bottle did not break, but rolled pleasantly.

With each roll, light reflected off the design, and I thought it looked pretty - but I felt absolutely awful.

That was certainly a premonition of death. The man who had lopped my head off felt like child's play.

That was the end of everything. My vanishing. The bottle told me that without mercy.

I didn't want to die.

I still hadn't had my wish granted. I still wasn't loved by anyone. I still didn't love anyone...

After seeing death before me, sticking to life seemed much more attractive.

My body wanted to scream, but the black cat cut it off.

"Geez, you didn't have to throw it."

He mumbled a complaint and got off the bed to pick the bottle up. Carrying it in his mouth, he dropped it back on my bed.

I lay collapsed in bed, devoid of energy.

Instead of screaming, I cried.

Or rather, the tears came out on their own.

They ran down my cheek and wet the pillow. Soon the water went through the bed to the floor, spreading across the house.

The house knew I was crying, and cradled my body. The house was

my ally, as ever. The only part of it that wasn't was before me: the black cat.

My heart seemed to gradually calm down by crying.

The cat looked down on me.

The candy-colored bottle shined glossy by his feet.

"Will you die?", he asked, as if asking "Will you eat?"

"I won't," I smiled.

My eyes wet with tears, it might have looked like I was crying with joy. Perhaps I was actually happy.

It eased my heart considerably to know that I could die anytime.

The demon was remarkably conscientious, I felt. Because some people wouldn't choose to die.

To him, it didn't seem to matter if I died or not.

Because he was grinning. Drooling as he looked down on me.

Ah, yes. He was a demon, after all. Even my soul was just another meal to him.

I remembered that now.

Gripping the bottle tightly, I got out of bed.

My wounded body was heavy, but my heart was light.

I left the room and went down some flights of stairs. Down, down. I arrived at the path to the medicine room.

The poison water running down the hallway was now clear.

My feet splashed through the water which came up to my ankles. It wasn't cold or hot, just room temperature water. Surely, the tears I'd wept washed the poison away. A silly thought.

I pushed open the heavy door and entered the medicine room. There was an extra shelf. A shelf just for this bottle, I suppose. I put the bottle in the shelf and closed the door. I saw myself reflected in the glass. The black cat sat on my right shoulder. I gave him a sidelong glance.

...Despairing is the key to a witch dying.

Why hadn't he told me before? Did he think it would break my heart? Was it because I didn't ask? Don't tell me we had lived together long enough that we'd actually deepened our trust.

I didn't know. It was futile to try and understand what he was thinking. I had figured that out long ago.

I spoke with clear annoyance at how he'd kept something from me all this time.

"I hate you, you know."

"Really? I like you."

On the way back from the medicine room.

I walked barefoot through the river of tears that flowed down the hallway. The black cat followed a few steps behind.

I asked him without turning around.

"...Did the person who lived here before die?"

Now that I knew even witches could die, I was curious.

The witch who had lived in this house.

I'd just sort of imagined she became happy, but it was possible, even likely that she died without her wish being granted.

The cat had never spoken of the previous witch before, but now that the truth about witches dying was revealed, he seemed willing

to answer.

“She’s alive,” he readily said.

I was relieved. That answer alone satisfied me, but the cat went on.

“She just, you know... quit.”

Quit what?

I turned my head around and asked with my eyes.

“Killing people with the house.”

My expression didn’t change.

But he could still tell I was interested. Leaving a gap to stress the importance, he spoke.

“She was taken by the ecstasy of killing people with the house, and couldn’t part from it. Not that she had any desire to in the first place. But maybe that was a bad thing. I didn’t hate her either, but it got out of hand. I granted her wish. Because she said she wanted to be here forever. So she was delighted you came to the house. With a witch like you here, she could be reborn too. ...Haven’t you realized? She’s pretty fond of you. I was a little worried you might end up like her too, but I was wrong.”

“...She -”

I stopped and turned up to look at the tall ceiling.

I thought back on the house. The house that was my magic, a part of my body, which kindly, and sometimes with a mind of its own, watched over me.

I pursed my lips and said:

“She became the spell.”

“Yeah.”

The black cat waved his tail with satisfaction.

I thought I heard, from somewhere, the laughter of an innocent girl who was not me.

I stopped asking how much longer.

## 5

Peace came upon the forest.

It seemed strange to say it.

As the black cat said, fewer people came into the forest after the man who cut off my head left.

It had seemed so busy outside the forest before, but now no one told rumors of me.

Instead, the rumor that the witch had been killed spread.

No humans came into the forest who were specifically after me.

There were hunters and businessmen, playing children, and occasionally people just passing through or getting lost.

As I dozed off, I ate them on a whim. Only dozing. I couldn't get a decent sleep.

Since my sickness worsened, I started to hear a ringing in my ears. I couldn't sleep a wink.

Even under the protection of the witch's house, I was sleeping in bed all the time. When I couldn't be bothered to return to bed, I sometimes slept in the cold hallways.

Such was how I waited for prey.

The crow demon said it would be difficult to stop my sickness from

advancing further.

Perhaps because my heart had been wounded.

I was effectively the patient of a doctor who had given up on me. I wasn't particularly depressed. I'd long known I had a sickness that couldn't be cured.

Is that right, I laughed.

The eyes the crow looked at me with then... I don't know if they were sympathetic or tired. He had his usual bad attitude, left the medicine, and departed.

I didn't shut the window right away, absentmindedly staring at the feathers he left dancing around the room.

When would this house have its fill?

When would the black cat give me the spell to cure my sickness?

I stopped thinking about those things.

Because it was something I would reach as long as I didn't give up.

Someone screamed at my ear. Needles stabbed the back of my eyes. My feet looked like a beast's fangs had bit them, my toes like they'd been chewed away at by rats.

Don't struggle so much anymore. It's annoying. Maybe it does hurt.

Or maybe it's not really a pain in my body. It's just my wounded heart showing me a dream.

I really wanted to scream. I wanted to sob.

But what point was a scream no one heard? What point were tears no one saw?

My vision blurred and doubled. The ceiling spun.

When I reached out, I felt someone pulling me into a world of dreams. But it was only an illusion, and my arm fell like a puppet

whose strings were cut.  
I lied there and sank into a sea of agony.

As I sank into my bed, I thought on when I first arrived.  
Those eyes that wanted to sleep, enveloped in the sunlight.  
The forest air hadn't changed in all that time.  
But the times had changed greatly.  
People's clothes had gotten very orderly and clean. There were hardly as many starved children as they had been long ago.  
Rather than people who hunted animals with bows, there were now people who hunted with these long tubes.  
Could something like that be used as a weapon?

As I thought that, a hunter aimed one at a bird, and with a loud sound, it fell to the ground.  
Wow... amazing. What an interesting weapon. Show that to me.  
I made some wild rabbits appear, and had them chase the hunter.  
They ate him, and I felt a little better. I sat up and carefully inspected the weapon.  
It was apparently called a "gun." A small bullet flew out of the end of the pipe, destroying the body of the prey.  
Hmm, I said, and pointed it at the black cat. The cat leapt up in surprise.  
I giggled. Just a joke.  
After laughing for the first time in a while, the room returned to silence, and I sank into bed again.

This house didn't move. Its stomach was filled with human bones, too heavy to move.

I was the same. I felt a weight on my whole body; I wanted to sink to the bottom of the sea.

Yet this house still wanted to eat, demanding more, more, more. Very well. I closed my eyes and surveyed.

Both now when I was stuck to my bed, and before when I'd wandered it freely, the house invariably felt like a prison.

And I was its prisoner.

My arms and legs were bound by thorny rose vines. I couldn't move.

But I was the one who'd wanted it.

I longed to be bound by the chains of bandages instead, in some other house I felt I'd lived in.

Perhaps I preferred that. Perhaps I found it easier to give up and be bound down.

But I was different now.

While I was a prisoner, I was also a jailer. I could keep imprisoning myself, or I could escape.

The same vines that restricted my body were also my weapon against intruders.

It was all about my own intention.

I was a beast in the darkness. My eyes glowing the same color as the full moon, my fangs bared. I stood on top of a pile of corpses, my mouth and hands red.

A noose hung on my neck, prepared for my execution at any time. But the rope was loose, and upon closer inspection, it was merely a black cat's tail.

Who knows how much time passed after that.  
There came countless springs, summers, autumns, and winters.

The world of the forest was peaceful.

I mostly just slept in bed.

I opened my mouth like a carnivore, waiting for prey to come. When someone did come, I'd shut my mouth closed and gnaw on them. Once I'd gotten all the nutrients I could, I'd open my mouth again.

It was another such day I trapped my prey and closed my mouth. And then the black cat, prying it back open, spoke.

“Congratulations, Ellen. I'll give you the spell.”

I slowly opened my eyes.

I had them closed for so long, my eyelids were stuck, and did not open quickly.

Where was I? I wasn't using magic viewing. This was my room. And looking at my face, shining in the sunlight, was a black cat with beautiful fur.

“I'll give you the spell to cure your sickness.”

The words reached my ears a few seconds late.

Cure my sickness.

When I understood those words, happy bells rang in my head. I saw the afternoon sunlight as gold dust falling around me.

“This spell, you see...”

The cat's words sounded like a hymn.

The light visibly returned to my hollow eyes.

My gleaming gold eyes saw through the cat far into the distance. It took a bit of magic. I left the house, through the garden of roses, through the forest. The green trees rustled in the wind.

...And then I found her.

A lone girl with golden braids.

## Chapter 4 ~ A Girl Who Was Loved

Then a girl came over to play.  
A cute girl with golden braids.

...Don't go too deep into the forest.  
That's what my father had always told me.  
All the adults in the village said the same thing, so it seemed like a platitude said to children who wanted to play in the forest.  
The wind blew, making my skirt and golden braids sway.  
Holding the hair out of my eyes, I looked up. Through gaps in the green branches above my head, I could just barely see the blue sky.  
It was a hot summer afternoon.  
And there I was, in the forest.

There was a great forest near the village I lived in.  
The forest, which was bountiful year-round, was very useful for the villagers. I liked to pick flowers there myself, and it was a familiar playground to me.  
I stepped on the twigs with my leather shoes.  
I walked the forest with a hazy feeling.  
I'm going to play in the forest, I casually said. At my back, father said it again.  
Don't go too deep into the forest.  
He said it just as casually, I felt. I let it slip through my ears as usual.  
But for some odd reason, his words seemed to clutch at my chest today.  
I was thirteen now.  
Do you really think I'd get lost in the forest, dad?

My father, a hunter, was always going into the forest. There were adults who went looking for wild plants, too.

It wasn't like they couldn't go deep in the forest. Why tell us we can't go? There seemed to be no reason at all.

Such was my thought as I walked along, going deeper than I usually did.

I hesitated slightly, but I knew my way back. I kept walking.

There was tall grass all around, probably because people rarely went this way.

I soon grew tired and sat down on a moderately-sized fallen tree.

There were little white flowers around the tree. As I gazed at the lovely flowers, I thought.

They had the same name as me - Viola.

Though I didn't see them often, as this wasn't their season.

I loved flowers. Just looking at them seemed to make time pass in a blink.

A pleasant wind blew at my hair. Just sitting there in the wind made me feel like I was a flower myself.

A perfectly calm forest.

It made my eyes droop shut.

...And then -

Rustle.

I nearly leapt up in surprise at the noise from the thicket behind me. As I turned around, my father's words filled my head again.

What would I do if it were a beast? But there couldn't be beasts in such shallow forest.

Wiping away a cold sweat, I saw...

Meeoh.

A black cat, meowing in a very low voice.

It looked at me with gold eyes, swinging its long tail.

After my breath stopped for a moment, I took a deep sigh.

"Whew..."

I giggled, laughing at my silliness.

"Come here."

I squatted and beckoned to it. The cat curtly turned its back to me, so I hurried to my feet.

I thought it was running away, but it wasn't so. It walked slowly within my sight, turning back to me and meowing again.

I stood there and blinked.

Was it saying to follow...?

It seemed strange to think, but that was how it seemed.

I didn't think the cat was inviting me into a world of dreams or anything like that, but my feet naturally followed it.

It stepped into a thicket, taking a path I didn't know.

Perhaps at this rate, I would be going deep into the forest...

I hesitated. But only for a moment. My haste at losing sight of the black cat led me to jump into the thicket.

I walked behind the black cat. Past the thicket were paths barely wide enough for a person to walk along.

After a while of walking up and down slight inclines, an open area came into sight.

It was a little flower garden.

Red bell-shaped flowers and blue flowers bloomed in a mixture.

Who knew such a place was here? I delighted upon seeing the flowers. I squatted down to pick one, and the black cat meowed to call me.

When I looked up, I saw it sitting between a gap in the trees, looking my way. It seemed the path went on.

The cat didn't wait for me to stand and went deeper.

"W-Wait!" I raised my voice, but knew it wouldn't stop the cat. I hurried to my feet and reluctantly left the flower garden behind.

I followed the black cat between the trees.

And there appeared before me -

"Wow..."

A great garden teeming with red roses.

A sigh slipped out my mouth.

There was a single path ahead of me, as if adorned by the roses around it. And there were all kinds of flowers, not just roses.

At the end of the path was a great mansion.

I felt like I really had been taken to a world of dreams.

I followed the cat up to the mansion.

I looked up at the two-story building. A red roof sat atop dark stone walls. There were flowers decorating the windows. The house stood as if concealed by the trees surrounding it.

The cat slid through the front door of the house. Had it already been open? The door didn't close, but remained slightly ajar.

As if pushed by the aroma of the roses, as if invited in by the cat, I opened the front door.

“Good day...”

I timidly said. No reply came. I took one step on the pink carpet.

The house was somewhat dark. There were red roses atop polished desks. It didn't seem to be abandoned.

Suddenly, a shadow crossed my vision.

My body stiffened in surprise. It was the black cat.

I sighed.

“Gosh, don't scare me...”

The black cat looked me in the eye and teasingly swung its tail, then proceeded down a passage.

I followed it.

I passed through numerous rooms. Walking through a kitchen, I noticed a heated pot boiling. Yet I saw no one around.

Thinking it strange, I followed the cat up some stairs.

On the second floor, there was a long hallway. Bright light came through the windows, illuminating the roses.

There was just one door at the end of the hall. The black cat stopped in front of the door, folded its legs, and looked up at me.

Open it, it seemed to be saying.

Was someone waiting for me in there?

I took the handle with unease, and a little bit of anticipation, and pushed the door open.

It was a small room.

Light dimly came through the window on the opposite wall, shining

on a bed in the room's center.

The black cat leapt up from my feet to the windowsill. And as if to say its tour was complete, it sat there and relaxed.

Holding my hands together over the front of my stomach, I slowly walked on the flower-patterned floor.

There was a little girl sleeping in the bed.

I went around to the side of the bed, stepping quietly. When I saw the girl's face, my linked hands unconsciously went to my mouth.

The girl had long purple hair and worn a red ribbon. But the girl's face was nearly covered in bandages. The bandages had dark black splotches, and the uncovered parts showed bits of the swollen red skin underneath.

The veins could clearly be seen on her skinny neck; no doubt the body concealed by the sheets was thin and bony.

I only didn't think to run away at the sight because of her beautiful, glossy, purple hair.

Slam.

Suddenly I heard the door shut, and I turned around. I thought someone was coming in, but I was wrong. The unclosed door had just swung closed.

I was relieved, and looked back at the girl on the bed.

And I caught my breath.

The girl opened her eyes and looked up at me.

Perhaps the sound had woken her. She slowly blinked. She turned to face me with gold eyes decorated with long eyelashes.

"Who're you, miss...?"

The girl whispered in a voice like bells, yet slightly dry. Perhaps that

was because she'd just woken up, or because she hadn't spoken in a long time. It could be either.

I panicked. It wasn't only guilt for coming into the house uninvited. I was also made nervous looking into her eyes.

I couldn't look away and answered.

"I... I'm Viola."

"Viola..."

The girl repeated my name in her mouth as if to confirm it.

Her lips were cracked, and she looked very pale.

After some time, the girl asked.

"You're not scared?"

"I'm not scared."

I quickly replied, but trembled at the end.

Never mind that her skin was covered with bandages; what I saw that wasn't covered made it easy to imagine what they hid.

It was clear she wasn't in a normal condition. But the girl lying on her side before me was just a girl.

It would be easy to avert my eyes in disgust. But I felt too sorry for her to do so.

As if to prove the truth of my words, I kneeled on the floor, putting myself on eye level with her. Her head followed my movement. In so doing, her purple hair swept down.

I smiled for her, and she lifted her lips into a relieved smile as well.

The seeming pain of her movement made my own heart hurt.

Did she have terrible burns? Or did she have a disease that affected her skin?

Without my asking, the girl spoke as if reading my thoughts.

"I'm... sick," she said, looking away from me.

"I'm sleeping here because I'm sick. I've always been here. You're the first one to visit me besides the doctor, miss Viola. So... I was surprised."

It was a voice on the verge of fading away.

I thought I had to say something. But I didn't know what to say.

She reached a hand from the sheets. Each and every finger was carefully wrapped with bandages.

Her trembling hand reached for me. I took it as if accepting something important.

"I'm... Ellen. Will..."

Looking from hand to shoulder to neck, I was met with her - Ellen's tears.

"Will you be my friend?"

There was no chance I wouldn't nod.

The sick girl - Ellen, seemed to be confined to this house in the forest.

People who attended to her lived in the house with her. Not family, it seemed. From the way she spoke, she didn't seem very fond of them.

She seemed to be in particularly poor condition that day, so we just talked a little, then I went home.

When I promised I would come visit her again, her eyes sparkled and she smiled.

I went down the hallway, and down to the first floor.

The pot in the kitchen that was boiling before had stopped.  
So there was someone here. Perhaps the doctor she spoke of.  
I looked around for a person, but I couldn't find anyone.  
"Pardon me," I said to no one in particular, and went out the front door.

I walked through the rose garden, and in no time found a familiar path. Looking back, I saw nothing, only green forest.  
Had that house really been there?  
Had that girl really been there?  
That was how I came to think.  
I left the forest onto a flat, traveled road. The sun was setting, and the distant fields and village roofs were dyed orange.  
Oh, no. It was the time when father returned from work. I hurried home. My mother had passed early in my life, so it was up to me to prepare dinner.

As I made dinner, I recalled Ellen's house.  
The garden of deep red roses. The mansion surrounded by trees.  
The bedridden girl who lived there as if in secret.  
She was certainly not from around here. I'd never seen anyone with gold eyes around. Her light purple hair was rare as well.  
Perhaps she moved here from a distant land. Perhaps to cure her sickness, she came to the forest with its clean air.  
But it was astounding to me that such a big house would be prepared for such a small girl.  
Perhaps she was the daughter of someone rich and famous abroad.  
A princess, even.  
A dog barking outside returned me to my senses. Father was home.

I went to the front door to greet him.

## 2

The next afternoon.

I ate lunch, and washed the cutlery. I dried the washing, and took a breath. My chores for the day done, I left for the forest.

Because I promised I'd come visit her again. I felt somewhere in my heart that yesterday had been a dream, so in part, I also wanted to confirm that.

I walked the familiar forest path and headed for her house.

Though I'd only walked the path once, I didn't get lost at all, arriving at the garden of red and blue flowers.

Exiting the thicket, I saw the rose garden and red mansion. The same thing I had seen yesterday.

No, it hadn't been a dream.

I turned the handle. The door wasn't locked.

Was it left open for me? Actually, it wasn't locked yesterday, either. Perhaps it was so the black cat could come through.

That seemed unsafe. Perhaps people coming in at all was very rare.

"Viola!"

When I opened the door, Ellen quietly shouted at the sight of my face.

The girl who had yesterday been bedridden now sat up in bed, her back resting against a big pillow.

She seemed more well than yesterday.

There were a few unfinished books around her bed, and a round

table beside it with a steaming teacup.

“You came back... I’m so glad.”

Ellen narrowed her eyes to look at me. What kind of expression was this? My chest was pounding.

Though her face was covered with bandages, the gesture helped me to see her as no different from a normal girl.

I pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down.

Again, I had seen no one on the way to Ellen’s room.

But seeing her bandages freshly replaced and the tea on the table, I was sure there were someone tending to her in the house.

There were two cups of tea.

Seeing me notice it, Ellen spoke.

“That’s for you, Viola.”

Had the person caring for her prepared it for me?

“Can I?”

She nodded yes.

“Thank you.”

I took the teacup.

The white cup was decorated with flowery line patterns, and looked very expensive. A big difference from the dull cups at my house.

Ellen slowly reached for her tea. It was such a small hand, and it trembled. I even found myself thinking “finally” when she at last grabbed the cup of tea.

Ellen smiled, noticing my concerned gaze. I smiled too, feeling a little shy.

As I drank, I looked around the room.

The white walls had not a stain on them. The furniture was gorgeous. Little shelves were packed with colorfully-bound books. Expensive vases held beautiful roses.

I looked at her ribbon and one-piece. The fabric was so high-quality, I was almost jealous.

This girl must be quite loved, I convinced myself. For I believed the money spent on her must be equal to the affection she received.

As before, the black cat slept at the windowsill, collecting the rays of the sun on its black body.

“Is that kitty yours?”, I asked.

Ellen inclined her head.

“Hmm... Not really. He just sticks around.”

“Really?”, I replied, finding it unexpected.

Meoow, the cat went as if replying.

I felt like he was saying “That’s not true,” and I laughed.

There were now two empty teacups on the table.

I heard a bird flying off very near the room. Was there a nest there?

I looked out the window in thought, then back to Ellen.

“Hey, Ellen. You didn’t always live here, right?”

“Yeah,” she nodded.

Her hands were neatly folded on the sheets.

“I came here a long time ago. ...How’d you know?”

“Because of your unusual eye color.”

She blinked them. Then she smiled, as if remembering.

“Oh yeah. I read that in a book, once.”

She took one of the books beside the bed and opened it.

“There aren’t any people with gold eyes here, right? Let’s see...”

Look, here it is.”

I took the book from Ellen and looked at the indicated page. Indeed, it talked about the history of people’s eye colors in the region.

But I was surprised by how small the words were, tightly-packed on the page.

Just reading it made my head hurt. Could a girl younger than me really read such a difficult book?

I asked, not taking my eyes off the words.

“Ellen, can you read books like this?”

“Yeah. I can’t go outside, so reading is about all I can do...”

Hearing Ellen’s voice suddenly droop, I looked up. She was hanging her head.

She didn’t just read because she liked to.

“You can’t go outside?”

“Yeah.”

Ellen looked up with realization.

“I-It’s not contagious or anything. But my legs... it hurts to move them.”

I followed Ellen’s gaze to her legs. Though I couldn’t tell their condition, hidden by the sheets.

“I see...”

That was all I could say. Hoping to change the topic, I asked cheerfully.

“Hey, Ellen, how long have you been here?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know. I was just... here. I used to live somewhere else,

but... I don't really remember."

"What about your father and mother?"

She shook her head again.

"I used to live with them. But... I haven't seen them since coming here."

I couldn't immediately believe her.

They prepared such a wonderful house for her, yet wouldn't come to see her?

But her face told me everything. I grew sad, and was desperate to uplift her.

I chose my words carefully and was cheery.

"I'm sure they're busy with work."

Ellen looked at me.

"Work?"

"Yeah," I nodded, looking around at the furniture in the room.

"I mean, they have such a big house for you to live in. That must take a lot of money. And there's the cost of medicine, too. They must be too busy working for you to see you often, Ellen."

"Hmm..."

Ellen lowered her gaze, thinking.

She rubbed her bandaged fingers together.

"...They're working... for me?"

"Right!"

One more push.

"It's all for you, Ellen. My father's always coming home late because of work, too."

"I see..."

Ellen thought, her head still lowered.

Soon, I saw the sparkle return to her eyes.

She looked up, took the book from me, and clapped it shut. I was a little surprised at the sound. Her gloomy face already gone, she looked at me and smiled.

“Hey, Viola, your eyes are green, right?”

I faltered at the sudden and obvious question.

“Huh? Yeah.”

“Your hair’s sparkly like the sun, and your eyes are like glossy leaves. It’s so pretty. Can I see them closer?”

I laughed nervously at the suddenly cheerful Ellen. But it was much better than seeing her gloomy.

“My eyes aren’t that interesting...”

“No, they’re really pretty. Show me.”

I shyly brought my face close to Ellen. She played with the ribbon in my braid with her little hands, looking into my face.

We stared at each other up close. I wasn’t sure if I was seeing blood vessels passing through her gold eyes because of her sickness, but they emitted a strange color.

Looking at them so close, I felt like I would be sucked in. Ellen’s eyes were far prettier than mine.

From her body came a smell unique to sick people, a smell of medicine.

Her words - “I can’t leave” - flickered in my mind.

**There’s someone who loves you.  
It made me happy to know that.**

That night, at dinner.

Father and I sat across from each other and ate.

I was staring off into space, thinking about Ellen.

“Something good happen today?”, father asked suspiciously.

I had apparently been beaming without even being aware.

“N-No, nothing...?”

“Hmm.”

After my curt answer, he didn’t say much more.

Father put a cut of meat in his mouth.

“It’s fine to go play, but don’t go too deep in the forest.”

My hands stopped in the middle of tearing some bread, then I nodded after a little bit of thought.

Ellen’s house was *in* the forest.

But it didn’t seem like part of the deep forest that father was concerned about. I could reach it rather quickly, without getting lost.

On the other hand, “deep in the forest” seemed to describe Ellen’s house perfectly.

I felt a little awkward and went on eating, not looking father in the eye.

### 3

Early morning of another day.

“Going out already?”

Father spoke to me as I squatted in the front garden, tying my shoes.

I turned around and saw father was about to leave, too.

“Yeah.”

I stood up and straightened my skirt.

“Hey, you’ve got a string loose.”

Father reached for my waist, but I moved away as if escaping.

“It’s fine, I can get it myself.”

He silently shrugged his shoulders. I retied the ribbon around my waist and ran off.

“Be careful!”, he shouted from behind.

He didn’t have to be that loud.

I curled my fists tight. I was too embarrassed to reply.

I ran into the forest.

In the shadow of the trees, I was liberated from the midsummer sunlight.

I caught my breath and wiped the sweat from my brow.

I had gotten very accustomed to going to Ellen’s house.

I felt like I was visiting a boy’s house in secret. Except she was a girl, a fair bit younger than me.

It was like a secret house. Standing there all alone, unknown to anyone. No one but me knew this place. No one knew her.

Only I had the ticket to the world of dreams. It excited me.

Ellen was a strange girl.

I was never that good at talking to people. I preferred to let someone else talk and listen attentively.

And yet when I was with her, I found the words came out smoothly.

I was just talking about trivial matters like what I had to eat today, or what happened in the village, but it all seemed fresh to her. She

seemed to greatly enjoy listening to me.

Depending on her condition, she could be talkative or silent. The way her cat-like eyes spun from place to place as she spoke was very cute.

She knew all sorts of things.

Flowers effective for treating burns, plants effective for hurting throats.

When I told her she was really useful, she just laughed, “all I do is read.”

Sometimes she was able to perfectly guess the weather, to my surprise.

“I’m exhausted... I’m going to nap.”

It was a day where the warm sunlight invited drowsiness.

Ellen talked with me for a bit, then said this. I nodded and helped her pull up the sheets. She thanked me, and sank into the bed.

A while later, she breathed quietly, fallen deep into sleep.

I leaned back in my chair, hearing it squeak. I closed my eyes as well.

Far away, I heard birds chirp.

This was a house in the forest. The air from the window was comforting. There was no chatter of people, no bustling noise.

Surely, living in a place like this would cure your sickness.

So I thought. But I opened my eyes and looked at her.

Was Ellen getting any better?

I thought about asking her, but I didn’t want to ask about her sickness.

Because I couldn’t do anything about it just by asking. Because she

no doubt wanted to talk about other things.

I ended up falling asleep, too. I woke up with the cool air brushing my cheek.

I noticed there was a blanket over my knees. I was surprised to see Ellen's face very close to me. She had her hand on my lap.

"Oh, did I wake you?"

She looked me in the eye and shyly laughed.

"I thought you might be cold... Ehehe."

Ellen was out of bed, and leaned against me with one knee up.

A leg protruded from her skirt. Its thinness made me shiver; it was like it didn't have any meat on it.

Her bandages had come a little loose while getting out of bed, and I could see dark red skin.

Maybe it was just my eyes, but it seemed like bone was sticking out in places.

There were fresh red stains from her movement left around the floor.

It was the first time I'd actually seen her legs.

"Ellen! Your legs..."

"I'm fine. I can handle this much."

She smiled, but the smile seemed forced, and her hands gripped me tightly.

It reminded me how she'd said it hurt to move.

She couldn't walk in this condition. She wasn't fine. The sweat on her brow proved it.

And yet she got out of bed to put a blanket on me? Just for me? So I

wouldn't be cold?

It was so heartbreaking, I had the urge to hug her. But at the same time, I was troubled by the sight of her terrifying sickness.

"I can handle the cold fine. You really shouldn't push yourself, Ellen."

"...Okay."

Ultimately, all I could do was help Ellen get back in bed.

I couldn't look right at her red legs. They smelled like antiseptic mixed with blood, which made me nauseous.

I put Ellen in bed and pulled the covers over her.

She lied down and smiled in place of a verbal thanks. I feebly smiled back. There were still red spots on the sheets in the corner of my vision.

My sights wandered, and I looked to the window.

The sunlight came directly sideways into the room. It seemed much time had passed while I slept. The cool air made me shiver.

"You should get back before it's dark," Ellen said.

"Yeah," I nodded.

After a brief pause, I stood up from the chair.

I walked to the door, and before leaving, I turned to Ellen.

"See you," I said, waving.

There was too much glare from the light coming behind her to see her expression.

I was disturbed, perceiving it as if she had no face. Why did such a thing even come to mind?

After waving to her, I left the room.

I walked down the hallway as usual, and went down the stairs. The creaking of the floor echoed far.

I walked with a hand to my forehead.

The image of Ellen's red legs wouldn't leave the back of my mind.

She was sick. I had completely forgotten, only looking at her face which acted healthy.

As I went through the kitchen with no sign of anyone, anxiety filled me.

Why did the person caring for her never show themselves to me?

Yet they provided tea for me, and they let me come in.

Did they not want to touch her? Did they not even want to meet someone who had touched her?

I took the hand off my forehead as if taken aback, and looked at my palm. After staring at it a while, I shook my head to drive away my foolish thoughts.

It wasn't contagious. Ellen told me so.

There was surely someone beside her, tending to her. They touched her, and wrapped her bandages, and gave her medicine.

She should be fine.

Perhaps I was affected by that smell earlier. I didn't like myself for thinking about these things.

Creeeak.

Suddenly, I heard a door creaking, and I turned to face it. The black cat poked his face out from the wooden door.

"Oh, it's just you, kitty...", I said out loud.

I acted like I hadn't been surprised. The black cat looked at me. He usually greeted me with a low meow, but today he said nothing.

He stared me down, the black cat. His gold eyes seemed to match Ellen's, startling me.

Wanting to get out of there right away, I ran for the front door. I went outside as if my whole body were leaping out.

It was dark out, and the roses looked darker in the low light. Walking through the rose garden, I looked back at the house. It was nothing. It was just Ellen's house, which I'd grown so used to. So then why did the gray walls seem so oppressive, as if they were going to crush me? Maybe it was just the shadow of the windows. The wind rustled, fanning up my heart. I shook the building anxiety in my head away and ran. To home, quickly.

With all my might, I ran through the garden and down the forest path.

Finally, I arrived home, and father was already there. "You're late," he quietly said. When he saw my face, his eyes sharpened.

"What's wrong, Viola?"

I looked up at father, catching my breath.

I must have looked like I was about to cry.

**When the magic of the witch's house fades,  
I'll meet you in my true form.**

**You're so kind.**

**I'm sure you'll sympathize, won't you?**

**4**

The next day.

I wasn't able to go to Ellen's house.

I sat on my bed, holding my knees.

What was I afraid of? The house deep in the woods? How it felt like someone was lurking there? The roses in the garden that bloomed only for her? Her disgusting, swollen legs?

The sky was cloudy, reflecting my heart. As if finally giving me an excuse not to go to the forest, rain began to fall.

I watched the rain for a while, then finally, as if now relieved, roughly closed the curtains.

I lied in bed and closed my eyes.

I didn't know if it was a dream or my imagination.

The image of bedridden Ellen came into my head.

It was Ellen after I'd given up on going to her house.

All alone in her room, Ellen waited for me to come.

I hadn't yesterday since it was rainy. But it was clear today, so I'd probably come, she thought.

So she waited. But day after day passed, and I didn't come.

Ellen worried that maybe something had happened to me.

But after waiting days, a week, a month. I still did not come.

Soon, Ellen realized I'd abandoned her.

I see, Ellen smiled, defeated. And she quietly sobbed to herself.

I woke up with a start.

I trembled. It wasn't from fear. It was from shock, realizing the fact of how I was hurting her.

I got out of bed.

I flew out of my room, out of the house.

The rain wasn't much, but it hadn't stopped. Still, I ran along the

wet ground.

“Viola?!”

Father, who was adjusting a hunting rifle inside the house, called after me in surprise. But I didn't turn around.

I ran, soaked by the rain. As I ran, I recalled what Ellen said when we first met.

You're not scared?, she asked.

She said that because she had seen people who feared her appearance.

Until now, she had been feared. All people kept their distance. Every time it happened, she despaired.

I told her I wasn't scared. Perhaps I was the only one who lent her a hand.

...I was a fool.

To think I would fear Ellen's sickness even now.

I bit my lip, filled with embarrassment and the desire to apologize to Ellen.

I don't remember how I got to her house that day.

While running, I suddenly found myself in the garden of red and blue flowers. By the time I reached the rose garden, the rain had stopped.

The soaked petals took in the after-rain sunlight, glistening.

It was so beautiful, the depression I'd felt in this garden yesterday seemed like a lie.

When I opened the front door, the warm air kept inside leaked out.

I took in the scent, and my tension seemed to evaporate.

I climbed the stairs and opened the door to her room.

Ellen looked up in surprise.

“Viola?”

When I saw her face, the fog in my heart was cleared at once. My sunken mood returned to normal, and I sat in the chair beside her.

Ellen looked at my wet clothes with worry.

“Why? Even though it was raining...”

“Well... um...”

I wasn't sure how to express what I was feeling. I felt it was different from apology or embarrassment.

I couldn't enunciate it well, but thinking it was how I really felt, I said:

“Because I missed you, Ellen.”

Ellen's eyes rounded in surprise. But soon, she smiled like a blooming flower.

Ahh. Look at that smile.

Because I'm her friend.

Because I'm the only one she has.

That was when I vowed:

No matter what happens, I'll be with her.

The black cat sat by the window as usual, gazing outside the house.

Outside was a spider web, in which a butterfly was caught.

A beautiful butterfly with golden wings.

## 5

It continued all through the summer after that.

On sunny days, I would visit Ellen's house. On rainy days, I would look out the window in the direction of the forest.

No matter how many times I came by, I never met the person who cared for her. It was truly a mystery how we never even bumped into each other.

Did they hide when I came? She didn't seem to like her doctor very much, so she didn't pay it much mind.

As far as I knew, her parents had showed no signs of visiting. Though I was sure she'd be overjoyed if they did.

If I weren't around, Ellen would truly be alone.

Every time I saw her, my feelings for her strengthened.

I started to see that Ellen's body was getting no better since when we first met, only worse.

Lately she was unable to even get out of bed, often bedridden all day. Those beautiful, wide-open eyes were downcast. Even her eyesight seemed to be getting worse.

What would I do when she wasn't able to read anymore - no, worse than that, when she lost even the light?

She was fine before I started visiting. Was it because I started visiting?

Maybe she pushed herself to talk to me, and that made it worsen.

"That's definitely not true," Ellen said.

"So please, don't say you won't come visit," she said on the verge of tears.

My eyes widened slightly in surprise. I whispered kindly to calm her.

"I won't."

Ellen smiled, very much relieved by my assurance.

That smile pained my heart.

She could have cried. She could have wailed.

But this small girl always stubbornly smiled at me. She beared the pain of her sickness.

Something, either pus or blood, started forming in her eyes. I wiped it with a handkerchief, wanting to cry.

What more would be taken from Ellen? Would even the light?

I loathed her sickness from the bottom of my heart. At the same time, I knew there was nothing I could do - I was drained thinking of it like an opponent I couldn't even fight against.

That sense of loss invited a quiet sadness in me. Heartbreak welled up from deep in my chest, came to my throat, and pushed itself out as words.

"If only I could take your place..."

I muttered to myself.

The words carried through the air and came back to my ears.

...Yes. If only I could take Ellen's place.

If only she could go out and play instead of me. To run around freely in the sun, surrounded by flowers. While I could smile in bed and sleep in the meantime.

Suddenly, I heard a rustling of clothes, and looked up. She was holding out her hand to me.

I took it. It was cold. Surprised by its coldness, I put both hands around it.

She looked at me and smiled with her eyes.

I don't know why it startled me.

She hadn't said anything. She just looked at me. Somehow, it didn't feel like I was being looked at by a girl younger than me.

"...Ellen?"

I asked it also in a sense of "what's wrong?" Because I thought she might not be narrowing her eyes in a smile, but because she was moments from losing consciousness.

I must have looked worried.

Ellen smiled in her usual way, then said "Thank you."

Her smile relieved me.

She quietly said, "You're so kind, Viola."

Wondering what she meant, I thought back on what I'd said.

...If only I could take your place.

The words had sort of just spilled out, but it wasn't a lie. I smiled and held her hand tighter.

Her eyes began to cloud up at once. I thought I'd grabbed too hard and loosened my grip.

But her expression didn't change, and I knew something else was making her eyes water.

She stared with distant eyes and said incomprehensibly:

"It's like a dream that you'd be friends with little old me..."

She slowly blinked. It pushed a big tear out of her eye, soon soaked up by the bandages wrapped around her face.

The scene seemed to grab at my chest. I took her hand and made her look at me.

"Don't talk like you're "little old me." You're sick, Ellen, but that's not all you are. That doesn't make you any different from other

children.”

“...Viola...”

She knit her brows.

“So don’t speak so little of yourself. I think you’re kind for being my friend too, Ellen. And I’m sure you’ll get better soon. One day you’ll be able to walk and play outside.”

Ellen listened to my every word. Then she shook her head. It was very slight.

“No.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because I’m going to die soon.”

The words froze the pit of my stomach.

Die? Ellen? Die, as in go away? No. As in stop moving.

My hands gripping hers trembled.

My pulse quickened. My throat was dry, and I couldn’t speak well.

“...Why do you... say that...?”

Contrary to me, she was calm.

“The doctor said so. He said I’d die soon. Like he knew for sure. And he sounded happy. Why did he sound so happy? But I know why. I... Once I die, the doctor won’t have to bother with me anymore. He won’t have to begrudgingly replace my bandages, do all my... all the things he goes through for me anymore.”

Her words didn’t seem to have any emotion in them.

I shook my head, looking at Ellen in disbelief. I was filled with hate for the doctor who would say such heartless things to a sick child, and pity for the girl who gave up and accepted it all.

She went on.

“...My father and my mother wish I’d just go away, too. So they’ll be happy when I’m dead.”

“What are you saying?!”

I nearly screamed. She looked at me in surprise. I felt awkward seeing it and reflexively lowered my head. But I raised it again, pulling myself together, and bit my lip.

“That’s not true. It’s not. Happy you’re dead... they couldn’t be. I don’t know your father and mother, Ellen, but... there’s no way they could be happy their own daughter died. ...They don’t want you to die, they want you to live... That’s why they’re having you get better here, isn’t it? They put you in this house so you’d get better, right?”

I looked at her face, hoping for her expression to change the slightest bit. But she just gave a little smile.

It was a face that had given up on everything. She didn’t seem to be looking at me, but through me into the distance.

“So my father and mother won’t come see me, will they? They won’t come because I’m sick. They won’t look at me. They’ll abandon me. ...They didn’t put me here for my sake. They’re...”

Perhaps growing more pained as she spoke, she sucked up some saliva, then continued.

“Hiding me.”

It was a low voice.

Hiding her.

I felt that carried many meanings.

“Because... The adults in the village all know me. But they pretend

they don't, and hide me in the forest."

Everyone knows Ellen?

That unexpected comment stirred my heart.

"...You didn't know me either, did you, Viola?"

It was true.

I closed my mouth as if it had been punched.

I had never even heard of a house in the forest.

Hold on. Father's voice came back to my mind. Don't go deep into the forest, he always told me. Was it to keep this girl hidden?

There was a ringing in my ears.

...A troublesome sick child. Yet they couldn't just abandon her. So they isolated her deep in the forest, where people would never see her.

The villagers were paid to keep it secret. I could feel myself tracing the adults' thought process.

Then, was father among them?

An unpleasant feeling spread through my whole body.

As if guessing my thoughts, she looked at me with upturned eyes.

"...Your father isn't at fault, Viola. Because I'm just a sick girl. Everyone's afraid of me. They think it might be contagious. ...I wouldn't want to be with such a girl. I wouldn't want her around. ...I just want to hide her away."

"Don't say that," I pleaded, holding her hand tighter.

I didn't say it out of pity.

I just didn't want to hear any more. About how my father, with the other villagers, might have worked together to hide her. But I didn't realize that was the real reason.

I was confused.

On the other hand, Ellen was calm.

She had thought about things more than I realized. Living alone for so long, she had come to understand some things, and she had come to accept being alone.

I did what I could to clear father from my mind.

For now, I had to think only about her.

“If that’s true... Even if everyone is looking away from you, Ellen, and wishes you’d just die... I’d be sad. I’d be so sad if you died, Ellen.”

That was the undiluted truth.

My honest feelings, bubbling up from the bottom of my heart.

“Hm...”

She cast her eyes down and nodded slightly.

Perhaps my feelings had come through; I felt the dark mist in her eyes parting.

“You know...”

Ellen mumbled. It didn’t sound gloomy, but rather was in her usual cute tone.

“Even if I can’t leave here, and... even if no one notices me. Even if no one plays with me. ...And even if I’m not cured...”

Ellen looked at me.

With her usual honest eyes.

“Just having you here is enough for me, Viola.”

“Ellen...”

I felt like I’d been saved by those words. I knew my eyes were radiating a little light.

Suddenly, Ellen wrinkled her eyebrows and scrunched her face. As I wondered what she was doing, she sat up.

And then, as if falling over, she feebly hugged me. It really was lacking in energy, so I caught and firmly hugged her in return.

I felt her silky hair and her temperature. Her fingertips were very cold, but her chest still warm.

Ellen buried her face in my neck like a child clinging to her mother. And her whole body trembling, she whispered.

“I love you, Viola.”

Those words vibrated not in my ear, but my bones, shaking my very core. The backs of my eyes warmed up, and instead of replying, I held her shoulder.

What an honest girl.

I love you too, Ellen.

But why couldn't I voice it directly? Maybe I was embarrassed. Or maybe I was still concerned about father.

At any rate, while I couldn't say it, it didn't change that I did love her. So instead, I continued to tenderly hug her.

I smelled medicine, blood, and pus, but I wasn't scared. Because it was all Ellen.

She accepted the short remainder of her life, but I couldn't. What would I do?

She was crying, I felt. Just without showing it.

It was always this way.

She was always desperate to endure it. She'd never bother me with her wailing. She kept the tragedy going on in her little body all

within that body.

...Oh, God.

I closed my eyes tight. I felt a tear come out and roll down my cheek.

If only I could take just a fraction of this girl's pain.

If only I could share half that pain and walk with her.

The adults before Ellen who encouraged her death. What horrible people they must be.

Ellen's parents. They might have already abandoned her entirely.

She tried to act like she had given up, but she must have loved them unbearably.

If only they just came to visit. Just a hug would save this girl's heart.

Why could they not even do that for her?

I felt an estrangement from the world of adults.

I wasn't sure if it was strong enough to call hatred.

Perhaps it was closer to disappointment.

I felt like adults were on the other side of a high wall from us.

And only we knew the truth.

We trembled holding each other. We thought of each other and cried.

This space between the chair and bed was my and Ellen's sacred place, never to be intruded upon.

Meeoh.

As if breaking up the moment, the black cat meowed low.

**I hate...**

women who don't know they're loved.

I hate...

women who won't accept when they're loved.

I...

On the way home that day.

I thought I left Ellen's house with time to spare, but by the time I exited the forest, the sun had fully set.

Hoot, hoot, came the voice of distant birds.

I didn't feel the night path, which I usually found eerie, was at all scary. I felt my heart had gotten stronger.

My chest hurt when I'd hugged her. Why? I felt like there'd been a hole poked in my chest.

When I got home, father was leaning against the door, looking scared.

Since I'd started going to Ellen's house, there had been many days I'd come home late. It seemed to be reaching father's limits.

When I saw his face, her words came to mind.

...The villagers are hiding me.

Welling up with bitterness, I didn't look at his face.

"Hey! Viola!"

I ignored father and forced my way inside.

A silent dinner table.

The food father prepared had gone cold.

There was only the sound of clinking cutlery and munching bread.

Father was first to break the silence.

“You’ve been coming home late.”

“ ... ”

“Where are you going?”

“ ... ”

I didn’t want to tell him about Ellen. I opened my heavy mouth and said the name of another girl I was friends with.

“XXXX’s place.”

“XXXX said she didn’t know anything.”

I promptly looked up.

“Did you ask?”

My face probably showed disdain. My father briefly faltered, then frowned as if saying “fine, then.”

I felt my face heat up.

It wasn’t because my lie had been seen through. It just embarrassed me imagining my father going to my friend’s house and asking.

He was so over-protective. That embarrassment gradually turned to irritation.

Father asked again.

“Where are you going?”

“To visit someone.”

“Then who?”

My words were momentarily caught, and I hesitated whether I should say it. Finally, I spat it out.

“A girl named Ellen.”

After saying it, I quickly looked for a change in father’s expression. He lowered his eyebrows and thought.

“Ellen...? Is there such a girl?”

I was disappointed.

So he didn't know?

But I soon braced myself.

Because maybe he was just pretending he didn't know.

Maybe the villagers had forgotten even the sick child's name in an attempt to hide her.

I was staring at him, so he gave me a weird look.

"What is it?"

It seemed somehow antagonistic, and I felt unpleasant.

Though that was only because I was looking at my father with suspicion.

"Father, are you hiding something?"

"Hiding what?"

"Everyone in the village is hiding something, aren't they?"

Father put down his spoon and was silent. Had he thought of something? Or maybe he hadn't, and was thinking.

The silence only lasted seconds, but it felt like eternity.

"What're you talking about, Viola? Why would that be?"

Father finally said with a sigh.

He looked a little concerned.

So was I. About the fact I couldn't believe father. I hated this feeling. I wanted to cry. But if I did, I couldn't speak.

I thought back on Ellen, and endured it.

I asked at father and asked.

"Then why do you say not to go deep into the forest?"

"Well, because..."

Father seemed taken aback, lazily scratching his hairy chin.

“... ..Because it’s dangerous. The roads aren’t clear, there are beasts... Of course it’s dangerous.”

I felt something hidden in the gaps of his words.

As I stayed silent, father suddenly sharpened his eyes.

“Could it be you’re going deep into the forest? Is that where that girl’s house is?”

My shoulders stiffened. Because I thought I was the one blaming him. Suddenly being blamed myself, I was bewildered.

“Hey! Viola! ...Is it true?”

Well, it was. But why was he mad? Surely, then, the villagers were hiding her. They didn’t say that warning out of concern for me, but to hide that sick child - were they afraid the children would figure that out?

Still staring at father, I shook my head.

“I’m not going there. Ellen’s house is...”

I looked down.

“Near the forest,” I lied.

“I see...”

Father looked like he wanted to say something more. But he didn’t push me any further. Maybe he paid heed to me, or maybe it was too troublesome.

I wish he’d just tell me. But I was glad it didn’t turn into an argument. It seemed contradictory that I was satisfied with that.

Tick, tock, the clock quietly resounded.

Without saying anything to each other, a warm air flowed between us. Yet today, it was a little strained.

I didn’t feel like eating anymore and got out of my chair, turning to

my room.

“...Hey, Viola!”

I hesitated briefly when he called me. But I didn't turn around, went into my room, and locked the door.

I heard father sigh, now alone at the dinner table, through the door.

I stumbled to my bed and collapsed on it.

I thought back on what I'd said.

...It's fine. Ellen's house is near the forest.

I'd lied.

My chest ached with guilt.

The truth was, it was in the forest. And maybe it'd be more accurate to say it was deep in the forest.

But I didn't say it.

I was scared of him knowing the truth.

I didn't want to see father's reaction to being told where her house really was. Maybe he had been kept from speaking about her. Maybe he would have desperately kept me from going there.

Ellen said she was going to die very soon. She told me she loved me. I was all she had. I didn't want to stop going to see her, or to be stopped from going.

I thought my father was scary when he condemned me. Yet he was always so kind. I wanted to believe him. But he didn't understand.

I held my pillow tight and pushed my nose into it.

I'm sorry, Ellen. I wasn't brave enough to say it. I couldn't confirm that you existed.

I couldn't even say it to father. I don't have the courage to condemn the villagers.

But that's why - that's why I'll be with you to the end. Beside you, always being your friend. I won't let you be lonely. Determined to do so, the guilt of my lie seemed to fade. I stopped grabbing my pillow so tightly, and fell asleep.

## 6

The next morning.

I woke up after father left for work.

I was accustomed to waking up alone in the morning, but I felt down, likely because of our fight yesterday.

Looking out the window, the sky was bright and cloudless. Just the opposite of how I felt. I leaned on the window sill, thinking I might get some cheer from the sun's rays.

I thought about yesterday.

When father got home, I would have to talk to him again, properly this time.

...About Ellen.

I wouldn't talk to all the villagers, but I would talk to father. Maybe we could even go visit her together.

Since father was such a good person, maybe he'd just been swept away by all the others talking about hiding away a sick child. He couldn't stand up to them, and was just forced to accept it.

Yes, that must be it.

Like a leaf opening up as it bathed in the sun, I gradually regained my cheerfulness.

As I prepared to leave for Ellen's house, I noticed a letter on the

desk.

I picked it up.

It was a letter from father.

He must have written it last night, or else this morning.

I casually opened it up - then stopped. I folded it up and held it to my chest. Maybe there were things written there I didn't want to know.

I heard my heart beat fast with unease.

I thought myself pathetic for thinking just bathing in the sun would grant me courage.

I'll read it later, I thought, stuffing it in the pocket of my skirt and leaving the house.

In the forest.

I walked along with a basket, picking flowers.

They were to make her happy. I picked flowers with bright, strong colors, so even her worsening eyes could see them. Nice-smelling ones were good, too.

Her house was filled with nothing but roses, so I had no doubt even ordinary flowers would make her delight.

In no time, the basket was filled with brilliant flowers.

As I left the garden to head for Ellen's house -

"Oww!"

My eye pricked with pain, and I covered it with my hand. It seemed a bug or something had flown at me.

Boy, how unlucky.

I walked the path, rubbing my eye.

After passing the garden of blue and red flowers, my feet stopped.

In the middle of the path surrounded by trees, the black cat sat looking at me.

He seemed like he was trying to block my way. Just as I was thinking how rarely I saw him outside -

“Yo.”

The cat spoke in a boyish voice.

The wind blew between the black cat and I.

I found myself looking around to make sure there was no one there.

Then I looked at the cat again.

Yo? Did this black cat just say “yo”?

As I said nothing out of utter surprise, the cat adorably tilted his head and spoke again.

“Thanks for being friends with Ellen.”

The voice was unmistakably coming from the cat.

“But y’know, I’m a better friend to her than you.”

Then the black cat stuck out his chest slightly with a chuckle.

I pulled myself together, and lifting up the arm on which the basket hung, I timidly muttered:

“Kitty... You can talk?”

“Yep,” the cat flatly replied, swinging his long tail in a wide arc.

“Because she uses magic.”

“Magic?”

“Yes, magic.”

I was taken aback by the word reminiscent of fairy tales. But, oddly, it didn’t strike me as that unusual.

This cat could talk thanks to Ellen’s magic?

Thinking back on it, it was this cat who invited me to the house. She wanted a friend. Perhaps the cat heard her plea and brought me to her.

The image of Ellen and the black cat talking in her room came to mind. It seemed more fantastical than it did eerie.

My face beamed pleasantly.

The black cat tilted his head sharply, perhaps not expecting that response.

“You aren’t surprised?”

I nodded.

“...What a strange kid.”

“Hmph.”

The black cat snorted with boredom. Then he spoke cheerfully.

“Why did you get along so well with Ellen?”

“Why...?”

Confused by the question, the next words came before I could prepare a reply.

“‘Cause you felt sorry for her?”

“Huh?”

The wind whistled between the black cat and I.

“‘Cause you could look down on sick Ellen, so weak and dirty. That’s why you got on with her, isn’t it? So you could pity her and be reassured of your own health? You liked feeling superior, like you were her only friend?”

A bad wind blew, rustling my skirt.

I opened my lips at once. But I couldn’t get the words out right

away. My head heated up, as if the black cat's words were invading my brain, and I panicked.

I spoke with resistance.

"...That's not true. I mean, yes, I felt sorry for her at first. But before long, I really ended up being Ellen's friend."

"Hmm."

Despite sitting lower than me, the black cat lightly raised his chin as if looking down on me.

"Were you taught you had to be kind to weaklings?"

"I just thought that myself."

"Hmph. Well, all right."

Then he was silent.

What was with this black cat?

I looked at him with wide eyes.

This cat wasn't a kind friend. The picture I'd painted earlier, of him and Ellen talking pleasantly, vanished like an illusion.

I felt like the air in the forest had changed drastically.

I thought I'd ignore the cat and pass him by. But for some reason, I couldn't move my legs.

"She's going to die today."

"Huh?"

"Definitely, today."

The black cat seemed to observe me, then one of his ears flicked up.

"Oh? That's odd. Did you just feel relieved?"

I was given a start.

“I did not!”

“Hmph.”

The black cat fixed his gaze on me. Those gold eyes seemed to be peering into my heart.

I looked away. Had I really been relieved to hear she would die? That couldn't be.

“I said Ellen could use magic, right?”

The black cat looked at me and repeated, to confirm it.

“She has a spell to cure her sickness, you know. Actually, it's a spell that can switch her body with yours.”

My heart jumped.

Switch her body?

I didn't understand.

“With magic, her body and your healthy body can change places. That way, she can be healthy.”

His words quickened my pulse.

That.

That was...

I shook my head. That was impossible. That there could be such magic, that Ellen would use it. Because if she did - ...Wouldn't I die?

“Don't joke with me!”, I squeaked out.

Just yesterday I had thought, if only I could take her place. But it wasn't a will to condemn myself to death that made me think it.

Sweat formed on my forehead.

The black cat ignored me and continued.

“Right about now, she’s gouging out her eyes and cutting off her legs. Know why? So that after you switch bodies, you’ll be able to die in despair.”

Disgusted by the black cat’s words, I furrowed my brow. Would Ellen...? Why?

“She wouldn’t do that.”

“Do what?”, the cat said with a head tilt.

He looked at me with round eyes.

“Use a spell to switch bodies with you? Stick her fingers in her eyes and tear her eyeballs out? Hum to herself as she cut off her rotten legs? Want you to despair?”

I held my chest tight, wanting to throw up. Stop it, stop it. That’s disgusting. What am I supposed to say back?

The black cat seemed to greatly enjoy the sight. He closed his eyes and spoke elegantly.

“I can see it now. Ellen in her room, with bandages wrapped around her eyes. My eyes have gotten much worse, she says. With the pretty sheets covering them, you don’t notice she’s missing her legs. And there’s a strange smell in the room. It smells like rust. You know it’s the smell of blood. But because of that, you scrunch up your face and don’t run away. Because you’re Ellen’s friend. You can’t just leave her and run as she suffers. In fact, just the opposite. You came today so you could be beside her as she suffered.”

I covered my mouth with my hands at once. I felt bile rising up to my throat.

The black cat’s words relentlessly stirred up my organs. They

wormed their way into my brain, making horrible images.  
How could he say it so undeniably?  
He said it like he'd seen the scene.  
I couldn't even stand up. I put my hand on a nearby tree.

"What do you think, seeing Ellen on the verge of death like that? Do you feel sorry? Or disgusted?"

As if fighting against his waves of anxiety, I yelled, almost screamed at the black cat.

"I don't think anything! Ellen is just Ellen!"

"Why are you yelling? At the end of your rope?"

I heard a giggling from somewhere. Who was it? Who could it be? It wasn't the cat, was it?

I opened my eyes and looked at him.

I couldn't stop crying. Strange. It was just a fly that hit my eye, but it hurt terribly.

The black cat casually continued.

"Ellen says, in that condition... That she wants to borrow your body for just a day."

I held my eye feeling a stabbing pain, like a stake was driven into it.

"It's her final wish. Yes, she says, just one day."

The cat clearly pronounced the "one day" part.

I wanted to look away, but I couldn't.

He went on.

I felt like there might have been the tiniest speck of pathos in his voice.

"Say, you loved Ellen, didn't you? You really loved her? It wasn't just

pity?”

“You really weren’t scared of her sickness?”

“You believed her? Was sure she wouldn’t lie. Thought a girl younger than you wouldn’t trick you.”

“Your father told you not to go deep into the forest. Didn’t know any girl named Ellen. Are you sure you should be believing Ellen, not him?”

“She lived honestly. You couldn’t be honest. That’s all there is to it.”

“Thing is, you can’t go back now. You’ve already traded bodies.”

“After all -”

“After all, aren’t you talking to me now?”

The black cat smiled.

Though surely, a cat couldn’t smile. The sides of his mouth lifted up, baring his sharp fangs and pink gums.

That moment.

My vision lurched, and as if freezing from the toes up, I lost the sensation in my legs.

A strong wind blew through the trees, and their rustling came down

on me like sneering laughter.

Waves of scorn. And I was there in the middle of the whirlpool.

My eyes hurt. So, so much pain. I couldn't stop the tears. I wasn't even granted breath.

In my fading consciousness, I saw it.

Ellen lying in bed.

With bandages wrapped around both eyes.

I sat in the usual chair beside her, gently holding her little hands.

Her light purple lips moved faintly.

A heartbreaking voice that gripped my chest reached my ears shortly after.

“For just one day... I want to borrow your body.”

Yes. When that happened...

I dropped the basket I was holding, and the flowers spilled out.

## Chapter 5 ~ Ellen

I love you with my all.  
Your fingers, voice, eyes, I love with my entire body.

I don't need my eyes anymore.  
I don't even need my legs.

I can just see with your eyes.  
I can just run with your legs.

So please, give it to me.  
All of you, to me.

### 1

The moment that “spell” was used, the entire forest was shrouded in darkness.

A powerful wind blew, and birds took off in surprise. Sleeping beasts woke up with a start, looking around cautiously in all directions. Because they didn't know where the air of unrest was coming from.

Among them, only one, a child, with eyes like glass, faced the correct direction.

The wise beast child knew.

That this forest was under someone's control. An entity in a realm far above even the brown bear. That it observed this great forest, and intervened. And that they beasts were little more than toys in that entity's palm.

The child saw the red roofed house - the house where the witch lived.

That was the place from which this unrest came.

Now, some sort of change was occurring with the master of the forest.

A great, unprecedented change.

It knew not what it was. Perhaps this had something to do with the life of the master.

In fact, for that reason, there was no grief. Even if the master died, they beasts would simply go on living in the forest.

The beast child's mother saw her unlucky child and sharply howled.

That was when it happened.

A lightning-like flash of light spread through the entire forest.

Only for a moment. Only for a moment did the white light take vision from the beasts, then promptly was gone. And with it also left the black fog of unease.

The forest regained its afternoon brightness as if nothing had happened.

The birds and beasts were relieved, and began to move.

...But the beast child did not.

A calm wind blew through the forest. It was somehow different from that which had always blown; it seemed to carry a sorrowful tone.

The beast child felt it with its eyes and ears, its entire body. But it was meaningless, as it had no way to express the emotion.

Again, its mother howled.  
The child followed its mother, vanishing into the trees.

Had the beast child the means to express itself, perhaps this is what it would have said.  
Now, one tragedy has ended - and another begun.

## 2

The white light filled my head.  
As the light gradually faded...  
...I slowly opened my eyes.

I heard the wind rustling the leaves of the trees.  
It was very calming.  
And I didn't think so because this was a house deep in the forest.  
There was no longer a noisy ringing deep in my ears.  
There was no longer a headache assaulting my temples.  
It was completely silent.  
I heard only the breathing and pulse of my body.  
I could see.  
That alone told me it was not my body.  
I was still sitting in the chair, fallen over the bed.  
I moved my eyes around to look at my body.  
There were no bandages on my hands. I could delicately move even my fingertips. My legs were both there. Touching the ground. There were not bandages around my feet, but leather shoes.  
I slowly got myself up, and a golden braid swayed at my shoulders.

...Unmistakably, it was Viola's body.  
The spell had worked.

I could tell my cheeks were heating up. I held them with both hands and yelled.

"Aah...! Wow...! Thank you! Thank you, Viola! Look, look at me! I'm in your body!"

I looked at the girl lying down.

Lying on the bed, I - Viola, rather, was still unconscious.

Bandages were wrapped around both eyes. The pale lips opened slightly, taking shallow breaths. The long purple hair lay strewn across the bed. One of the little hands reached toward me.

The hand I'd been holding hers with a moment ago.

I could still feel the sensation in my hand.

Reacting to my voice, Viola's eyebrows moved slightly. Finally regaining consciousness, a moan came out of her mouth.

"Ugh... ahh..."

"Viola!"

Viola turned her head toward the source of my voice. Then her face cruelly warped itself into an attempt at a smile.

Suddenly, she held her forehead like she'd been punched, and began to scream.

"Aaaaah! - G-GAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

"Hey, hey, Viola! Look! Look, it's me! I'm in your body, Viola! Wow, this is great. It feels so light being in a body that doesn't hurt."

I stood up from the chair and spun around, making the skirt flutter.

"Aaagh... hah... hh..."

“Oh, sorry. You can’t see, can you?”

I softly touched Viola’s forehead. My hand was rudely pushed away. She couldn’t properly respond to the pain of the body. She pushed the hand away so weakly, it was like being brushed by an angel’s feather.

“...Ah!”

As if only just realizing, I put a hand to my mouth and gasped. I whispered in concern.

“...Viola, does it hurt? Ohh, I bet it does. Sorry, just wait, okay? I’ll get you some medicine to stop the pain.”

“...P-plea... se...”, Viola said as if about to cry, catching her breath. Looking at her, I went to the cupboard. I opened the drawer and quickly found the medicine. But I purposefully took my time rummaging around.

Viola gripped the sheets, desperately trying to endure the pain. Ahh, it was so comical, so darling.

Soon, I heard a hasty rustling of clothes.

“E-Ellen, m... m-my legs...”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“Ah...”

When I pretended not to hear, Viola swallowed and asked nothing more.

What happened to my legs? Boy. Did she only just notice they were gone?

How stupid was she?

After taking enough of my sweet time, I grabbed the medicine and

returned to the bedside table.

I filled the cup with water from a pitcher.

The sound of pouring water seemed to alleviate just a fraction of Viola's tension.

Then I dropped a grain of the candy-like medicine in the cup. It dissolved in an instant.

The water remained the same clear color.

But this medicine wouldn't stop the pain.

"Here you go, Viola. You'll feel better if you drink this."

I handed her the cup, gently putting her hands around it.

Viola thanked me, and drank the medicine all at once.

I heard her throat gulp. Just a moment later, the cup danced into the air.

The moment the contents spilled out onto the floor -

"Ahahahahahahhahhah!! You drank it! *You drank it!* AHAHAHAHA  
HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

I yelled, as if unable to hold in my laughter.

Viola stuck out her tongue and held her throat with both hands. She trembled and panted in a hoarse voice.

She didn't seem to understand what happened. Blood spilled out from the gaps in the bandages around her eyes.

After laughing a while, I wiped away the blood and spoke.

"...Ahahah. You see, that was a throat-burning medicine."

Viola faced me with her whole body.

Why?, she seemed to ask.

So I answered.

“...Don’t you see? I don’t want to hear my own screams.”

“... ..”

Viola still desperately held her throat.

She had stopped wanting to scream and gotten quiet, but her breathing was rough.

Like a wild animal’s.

I looked at Viola somewhat coldly.

“Does it hurt? ...Hey, does it hurt? All over, right? That’s how my body’s always felt. Didn’t you know?”

“... ..”

“Oh, but I guess I don’t know the pain in your throat now. Ah, but that’s right. Since your throat hurts so much, you can forget the pain of the sickness, can’t you? Just for a little while, but it will stop *that* pain... heh. Hahahaha.”

I laughed like I’d just thought of a funny joke.

She faintly trembled. Soon, she started to struggle. I figure that was all she could do to distract from the pain.

Because of her struggling, blood began to pour from the stumps of her legs. Oh, my. The bed was stained with a sea of blood in no time.

Her body, only an upper half, tumbled out of bed onto the floor.

I backed away at once.

This clean skirt being stained with blood would be no good, no good at all.

The thing at my feet gripped the floor with both hands, seemingly desperate to retain consciousness.

A miserable whistling breath repeated. She didn’t even seem to

know where I was.

“What a strange creature,” I thought of the thing that had once been my body.

Her nose bled, perhaps hit when she fell to the floor.

Viola frantically tried to push some words out of her ruined throat.

Hearing her repeat the same thing over and over, I cautiously listened.

“Gi... i... ... ba...”

...Give it back.

Perhaps that was what she was saying.

When I heard it, my eyebrows raised.

I felt like I’d long been awaiting those words.

Like I’d wanted to hear them for so long.

Becoming ill-tempered, I asked.

“...Give it back? Weren’t you going to lend it to me for a day?”

Viola’s body hardened at once, and she shook her head. Firmly so.

Like she was apologizing from the bottom of her heart.

I put my hands on my hips.

Viola crawled toward my feet.

Tilting my head only slightly, furrowing my brows, I looked down at her. Or perhaps looking down *on* her was more accurate.

“No way. I promised it’d just be a day. ...Could it be you were lying?”

I knew she hadn’t lied.

But I made sure to ask.

Viola clenched her teeth, and I heard them grind. Drool came

between the gaps, mixing with the bloody nose. Her bloody tears stained the bandages red.

“Ha.”

A laugh came out at that idiotic face.

I held my skirt and squatted down. With a gentle hand, I brushed aside the hair over her ear. I put my lips close.

And to make my sorrow at being betrayed clear, I slowly and carefully spoke in a whisper.

“...You’re awful, Viola. If that’s how it’ll be, then I won’t give it back. ...I’ll borrow this body forever.”

Viola’s body stiffened. The air stilled, and I could tell the sense of crisis that her trembling body said she felt.

But now?

...It was too late.

I laughed. Laughter welled up in me. It couldn’t be stopped. Ahh, that’s no good. Viola wouldn’t laugh like this. I held my cheeks and stood up.

“If it was that important to you, you shouldn’t have given it up so easily!! AHAHA HAHA HA HA HA, HAHA, HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHA HA, HEEEEHEE, HEE HEE HEE HEE, AHAHAAA, HEEHEE, HAHAHAHAAA!”

Viola raised a scream she couldn’t voice and reached a hand for me. I easily leapt out of the way; the painless body was as light as a feather.

Her hand forcefully bumped into the chair, knocking it over.

In so doing, the bandages over her eyes fell away.  
The black, gouged eyes opened wide.

Those eyes. Their total blackness. They were a symbol of despair.

If a person who knew nothing saw those eyes, they might be unable to move from terror. They might imagine their soul being sucked into those open black voids.

But I felt no such thing within me.

They were just eyesockets.

I fled the room, laughing.

I ran like the wind down the hallway.

The rose vases I passed were dropping red petals.

I ran down the wooden stairs.

There was no sound in the quiet house but my pleasant footsteps and lively breaths.

I ran. I could run.

Run on my own legs.

This body was no illusion. My legs stepped on the floor. My hands pushed open the doors. My shoulders cut through the wind. My hair swayed. My eyes took in the light. It was all real, and all mine.

I passed through the kitchen, the dining room, all the familiar rooms, and reached the entryway in no time.

I softly put my hand to the front door.

With a slight pause, I pushed it wide open.

...In a moment.

The wind blew, lifting up my hair and skirt.

The smell of grass pierced into the back of my nose.  
The red rose garden came into my eyes.  
My children, which I had before only gazed at from inside.

As if drawn by the powerful colors, I took one step outside.  
Perhaps I should have hesitated to take that step.  
The moment my foot stepped onto the ground, I remembered.  
I remembered my body, for as soon as I went outside the house,  
the magic would fade, and it would crumble.

But I wonder...

I stood with both feet on the ground.  
There was no impact like being punched in the head. No heat like  
my skin was melting. The body of this human named Viola was  
separate from the house, existed apart from it.  
The backs of my eyes warmed.  
Tears which accompanied no pain fell down my cheeks.  
The roses sparkled in the light of the sun, and I felt they applauded  
me.  
Come to think of it, when I came to the house, I heard applause as  
well.  
Then, it was welcoming applause. Celebrating that I had become a  
witch. And now, it was farewell.  
My eyelids closed, and I saw memories that remained with this  
body.

I knew everything. How I had love in my future, in both directions.  
What lied ahead for this body. I knew it in an instant. And it was

mine. ...This beloved body.

I held my shoulders as if hugging myself. I wanted to kiss myself. I did so on my left shoulder.

I heard birds taking off and looked up.

I squinted at the strong sunlight.

I didn't know what the birds were saying anymore.

I laughed, and ran as if chasing the birds in flight.

A happy wind blew at my back.

Running, running. I left the garden surrounded by roses.

...I could see my diary.

I had no magic left. I should have just been a normal human now.

But I could see my room clearly.

My diary was upon on the desk. The feather pen smoothly wrote words on its own.

The final entry in my diary.

My final words.

I didn't X her.

Because she saved me  
from my sickness.

So I made her my "friend."

In the end,  
she saved me.  
She switched bodies with me.

Because she was so kind.  
Because she wouldn't betray me.

Poor her.  
Poor her.

She saved me.  
Saved me from my sickness.

I'm sorry, okay? Thank you, Viola.

I'll live your share.  
I'll give your share of love to your father.

So please, forgive me.

## Epilogue

I heard a whistling sound. It was close by, and I heard it every time I heaved my chest. So I knew that it was not the wind, but a sound coming from me.

On the little path to Ellen's house.

The black cat had told me things I never wanted to hear.

After his words made me lose consciousness at the end of the conversation, I woke up on a cold floor.

It was pitch black before me. I could see nothing.

I could only hear my labored breathing.

I had no feeling beneath my thighs, and I remembered that it was because there were no legs there.

In the depths of my ears, I heard the voice of the black cat I'd just heard, and "my" laughter.

"Mine"?

Yes.

I heard my laughter. As my body laughed, I heard it leave the room and run down the hallway.

I was Viola. A thirteen-year-old girl.

I lived in a rural village with my father, a hunter.

But now, my body was Ellen.

A sick witch who had lived longer than she should have.

...And here I was after switching bodies with her.

Ellen's memories, all the things she'd seen, were in her body.

On a whim, she had her magic compose it in her diary.  
Her life in the slums. Her bedridden days. Her parents who didn't love her. The back alley she ran into after killing them both. Her meeting with a demon, and the house she was taken to. The days she spent after becoming a witch.  
All the way up to receiving a spell to cure her sickness, finding me, and switching bodies with me.

At that time...

I visited with a basket of flowers, and saw Ellen breathing laboriously.

Bandages were wrapped around both eyes.

I let go of the basket and ran over.

I gripped her hand, and listened carefully to each faint syllable out of her little lips.

Thinking on it now, I can't exactly remember what we said to each other. I'm unable to.

After a word or two...

She said she could use magic.

And she said that she wanted to borrow my body, just for a day.

I felt so sorry for her, I lent her my body.

...And yet.

Ellen ran, leaving me behind.

She had me drink a medicine that burned my throat, and said she'd borrow my body forever.

Her betrayal echoed in my ears.

Her words pierced my chest and gouged the meat out of my heart.

My body was hot like a fire had been lit. I sobbed in terrible sorrow.  
I thought of you as my friend.

Why?

*...Why, you ask?*

I heard the voice of the black cat.

*Are you still saying that?*

*Surely you know.*

Was it the black cat?

No.

The moment I realized that voice wasn't his, suddenly a cutting pain ran through my throat, making me cough.

It was like something sharp had been stabbed in there and was twisting around.

...Tell the truth, or it'll keep going, I felt I heard a voice say.

It was just like torture.

I clutched my throat with all my strength, desperately enduring as I rubbed my head on the floor.

As I was drenched in sweat, a part of my mind was clear. Dimly in my consciousness, I realized, and wrung out a yelp.

I knew.

I knew it would be painful in her body.

But if a girl younger than me could endure it, it couldn't be that bad, I thought. I thought I could endure, too.

What if my body was stolen?  
What if she didn't give it back after I let her borrow it?  
I didn't even entertain those thoughts.  
But thinking such terrifying thoughts at all made me embarrassed.  
Yet, embarrassment over what?  
Over Ellen, who I readily believed?  
Over the voice of society, who said there must be good?  
How did I really feel?  
Didn't I hate it?  
...Being put into a body on the verge of dying?

Ah.  
That's it.

I had switched bodies with her.  
But it wasn't because I felt sorry for her.  
It was because I wanted to be a kind-hearted person.  
It was because I didn't want to doubt her.  
It was because I didn't want "If only I could take your place" to have been a lie.

I was afraid.  
Afraid of her. Then, in that room, as she smelled of death.  
My legs trembled, wanting to flee.  
My hands wanted to push her away.  
But I was more afraid of something else.  
Of the look of despair she'd give me if I said no.  
That would have undeniably cut my heart into pieces like a cold blade of ice.

I complied with her wish.

Because I wanted to let her taste freedom, even if only for a day.

And it seemed natural that I should bear her pain in the meantime.

Because I loved her. Because I felt sorry for her.

Because I smiled in such a way that showed I would never doubt her.

Those were the earnest feelings I had for her, so I decided to lend her my body.

But no, that was all nonsense.

I pretended to believe in my sweet friend and lied to myself.

...If it was that important to you, you shouldn't have given it up so easily.

Her words came back to me.

She wanted to be loved.

Wasn't I the same?

I wanted to be loved.

I wanted to be her kind-hearted friend to the end. The sole friend whom she could put her trust in. I wanted to love her, who'd said she loved me. I didn't want to betray her who believed in me. Even if it came to giving up my body.

I shouldn't have lied.

I should have believed the voice deep down yelling at me to say no.

Believed in father, who said he didn't know such a girl.

...You can't go back now.

The black cat's words returned to me.

In my memory, his image was erased and replaced with myself.  
The words I thought were the black cat's, which I didn't want to hear, were all my own.

...“For just one day... I want to borrow your body.”

She appealed on the verge of tears.  
I held her faintly trembling hand.  
My soul was tested.  
And I lost.

Eventually, the pain in my throat seemed to withdraw.  
In its place came something warm from the backs of my eyes. Even though I couldn't see, I felt it was red.  
As if it were tears, I found it mysteriously comforting.  
Ellen knew I would do this.  
From the moment she found me in the forest, before we even met.  
Knew I was kind, and wouldn't betray her.  
Knew I was foolish, and couldn't refuse her.  
Of course I would find myself comfortable around her. Because she knew more about me than I did.  
When she looked into my eyes, she wasn't looking at me.  
She was looking at my body, and my expression that told of its life, its sights, and all the future ahead of it.

On the floor covered in bodily fluids, I heard a ringing in my ears.  
Crawling along the cold floor like this, I felt like I'd always been here, since long ago.  
Though it couldn't be so. I was Viola.

But now I was Ellen. The witch who had lived in this house for centuries.

This body remembered her, and teasing me, it showed me her memories.

She had innumerable amounts of ill will.

It made me nauseous trying to explain it.

Though she knew me so well, I didn't know her at all. The only thing I understood was that she desperately wanted to be loved. That was it.

She had sacrificed so many people for her desire.

She crushed human skulls like a child stepping on ants. But I also knew how it brought her agony.

All the people who died for her were her friends.

And I was one of them.

To her, "friend" was little more than a word to classify people.

...Just, why?

With my meager imagination, I tried to find the reason why Ellen had been driven so mad.

Her life in poverty? Her misfortune of being born sick? Her parents who didn't love her? The demon's whisper?

She must have gone wrong somewhere.

And how could her heart have been brought back onto the right path?

I saw a shadow looking down on me as I thought.

It was Ellen.

Surely an illusion created by my memory. She looked down on me

with a healthy body and a pitying expression.  
Ellen squatted next to me and told me without emotion.

...I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not wrong. I've always lived the right way, haven't I?

Something coughed out from the back of my throat. I didn't know if it was peeling skin from my throat or something from my stomach. The sharp pain erased the phantom Ellen.

I closed my eyes, feeling dizzy.

My vision was the same blackness, but I felt somehow relieved to not have the air coming into my eyesockets.

I would die, in this room.

The owner's soul released, this body delighted. The duty of its cells complete, they waited for death along with my soul.

...For a witch to die, must she despair?

If that were true, I would have died long ago.

Back when she betrayed me.

Back when I realized I'd been betrayed.

She was a witch, to the end.

She'd toyed with me, to the end.

She delighted in making me despair before my death, in ways that would please the demon.

All the days we'd spent together were nothing more but strategic preparation for today. Even her friendliness was just a game.

I felt my life like a candle about to go out.

...I'll soon vanish no matter what I do.

Gradually, my breath and the ringing in my ears grew distant, and finally, I heard nothing.

Darkness covered me like a black cloth.

Yet still, my senses did not fully leave me.

Perhaps it was a kind of hallucination.

Or maybe something else.

In a world of black, I saw a white mountain rise up.

It was made of human bones, which looked like rubble.

Bones large and small made up the massive pile.

I saw a girl sit at the peak of that mountain.

It was Ellen.

Ellen closed her eyes, holding light in her chest.

She looked peaceful, like a mother carrying her baby.

That was her one wish.

...To be loved.

She focused solely on being loved.

And she was convinced that in order to be loved, she needed to be healthy.

The white mountain below her was no doubt the remains of the people she'd sacrificed, which the demon had eaten.

Yet I didn't find it repulsive, perhaps because Ellen's memories invaded my consciousness.

I just quietly looked on at the spectacle.

She'd lived for centuries as a witch.

After waiting such a long time, she received a spell to cure her sickness from the demon.

It was a spell to switch bodies with someone else.

She wanted my - Viola's body.

Her desire for it was so great that even in this body which had only dregs of her memory left, it radiated a powerful, all-swallowing light.

Her feelings resounded with me painfully, and my heart hurt.

Because I'd never been so desired in thirteen years of life.

I began to think that this might just be fine.

I could go on and die in her place.

By my sacrifice, I'd finally fulfilled her desire.

She could go on and live in my place.

I felt, then, that I could peacefully embrace death.

In that moment, I felt I could now truly empathize with her.

And then.

She who sat atop the mountain of bones slowly opened her eyes.

A chill ran down my spine.

Her eyes gave such a seductive light, I couldn't think of her as a seven-year-old.

She slowly moved her eyes.

She looked toward a radiant light, like the entrance of a cave. And with his back to that light stood my father.

I was uneasy.

With the backlight, I couldn't see his face. Stepping up the pile of

bones, father approached Ellen. He stopped beside her and stuck his thick arm out to her.

Father's hand, which I'd known for so long. The hand that scolded me. The hand that praised me. The hand that raised me on its own. Now, it reached for her.

I had a bad feeling, and wanted to slap the hand away. But it seemed I was only seeing a vision, not sensing the presence of my body; I could do nothing.

She took father's hand as if accepting an invitation to dance.

It was no longer the hand of a seven-year-old girl.

...It was me.

There I was, with a golden braid swaying along my shoulders, sitting and holding my skirt.

Ellen in my body looked at father with those green eyes and smiled.

...When I saw that smile,

I realized everything.

She wanted to be loved.

But that desire had been etched into her heart in a twisted form.

Disgust and unpleasantness came up my spine, putting a bitter taste in my mouth.

I screamed, though I couldn't voice it.

...No. This is awful. What are you doing, Ellen? What are you going to do to father?

I shook my head. I kept on shaking it. As if to drive away Ellen's

feelings remembered in this body, thinking I might be mistaken about them.

But I was not. Ellen's cells smiled. In fact, they seemed to delight at my understanding.

...No. This is wrong. That's not love.

I shook from my core.

I feebly balled my fists to stop myself from rampaging.

The feeling that I could die as things were left me at once.

Yes, I could go away. But if father were hurt, that was a different story.

How much would Ellen's love hurt father?

How much would it hurt me?

Sweat poured out of every pore. My body filling with energy, blood spewed out in places.

It hurt. It hurt. I couldn't see, but I desperately opened my eyes to see.

...No, no. This can't be.

I regretted with everything I had.

...It's all my fault. Because I ignored what father said and went deep into the forest. Because I met her. Because I believed her.

I couldn't just die.

I couldn't just go away.

I was lying to think that it would be fine to keep it this way.

Even now, did I want to be a kind person?

I laughed with misery. But it could only come out as crying.

My heart was hot, about to burst.

I panted, my heart nearly crushed.  
I writhed like a caterpillar.

In the darkness, the two went on with their play.  
Ellen, smiling with my face, took father's hand and left the skeleton mountain for where the light was.

...Stop. Don't go.

I screamed desperately.

...Don't smile with my face. Don't touch father with my hands. Stop, stop, stop, stop -

What I was seeing was a vision. My voice could not reach them. Yet Ellen turned around as if noticing me.

Though there was no backlight, Ellen's face was pitch black, only her red lips standing out.

Those lips. She raised her red, red lips -

“\_\_\_\_\_”

I screamed.

It had nothing to do with how my throat was ruined.

The scream that sounded like a broken whistle echoed across the room.

Between things vomiting out my mouth and blood, I kept screaming.

My head

filled

with hate for Ellen

and regret for myself,

my body began to crumble.

Ahh...

I'm dying.

So I thought.

...But I was wrong.

The pieces of my body which I thought were falling off became countless petals, floating as if blown up by a strong wind.

They flew around the house, creating the walls and floors anew.

A storm in which I was at the center.

I couldn't see, but the scene clearly came into my mind.

I was shaken.

What felt like my body vanishing was the sensation of emitting magic power.

I was unconsciously using magic with the few fragments of power that remained in this body.

My life, which I thought as a fading candle, became a roaring fire.

My heart beat ever faster.

I couldn't stop my feelings. I couldn't stop the outpouring of magic.

Like the pleasant feeling that comes when one cries aloud, I could not stop.

...Suddenly, visions came to my head.

An unfamiliar man was pierced by spikes and died. With that vision, a room with a floor of spikes was created.

An child had his spine crushed by a snake and died. With that vision, a room with a snake living in it was created.

A history of atrocious deaths. They were the memories of Ellen killing people with this house.

With the remaining magic of this body, based on her memories, I was creating the house's traps.

I found myself choking.

I experienced what felt like my body being torn apart.

I didn't want to see this. I covered my hollow eyes. But the visions continued without mercy; the reconstruction of the house would not stop.

My eyes were hot. So hot. Like lava was pouring out through them. I stuck my fingers in them. Still hot. It changed nothing. I screamed.

I knew this house.

The red carpets, the demon's tongue. The descending blades, his carnivorous fangs.

All the traps of this house were implements designed to make people taste despair.

This house was the house made for the demon to eat humans.

The house she had lived in for centuries.

The house that encouraged her desire.

This was her -

...the witch's, house.

My magic laid the wood floors, piled the stone walls, creating the house in the blink of an eye. Work that would require years was over in mere seconds.

Once the house was complete, the magic continued beyond it.

The waves of magic spread as if tearing through the forest air. It

made birds scatter in surprise. Rose vines weaved through trees like ferocious beasts.

Before long, the roses reached a girl loitering in the flower garden.

In that moment...

A red shock ran around my body, and I scratched at my eyesockets.

...Was I trying to kill Ellen? Did I want to? I didn't know. No. I couldn't stop it. I want my body back. Ahaha. I lied. Did you think I'd give it back? No. I...

The blonde-haired girl turned to face me.

With a sound like the air being split -

the forest was sealed.

## Begin

I heard the wind.  
The leaves rustling against each other.  
I slowly opened my eyes, and saw cute bell-shaped flowers looking down on me.  
I was sleeping in the middle of a familiar garden.  
I held my slightly-aching forehead.  
That's right. I'd lost consciousness.  
I was hit by the wave of magic.  
Magic? Whose?  
..."Mine," of course.

"You're up and at 'em, eh?"  
I turned to the familiar voice and saw the black cat looking at me.  
How long had it been since I'd seen the black cat in bright light?

Still lying on the ground, I turned my head to look around.  
The smell of flowers was strong enough to make me choke. Red and blue flowers swayed above my head.  
I could see the pale blue sky, but surrounded by deep green trees, I knew I was in the forest.  
Unmistakably, it was my garden.  
But something was odd.  
I felt like I was in a house much like my own, only it was someone else's.  
Just what was going on?  
I could more or less guess.

“...Did Viola do this?”

“Seems so,” the black cat replied.

I dimly recalled.

The witch’s magic resides in her body.

Even that ragged body had magic left in it. Viola had used that little scrap of magic to trap me in the forest.

Suddenly, a cute butterfly flew above my head. My eyes followed it casually.

I almost yawned in the carefree afternoon air.

Soon, the butterfly flew out of sight, so I looked back to the black cat and asked.

“...Did you know this would happen?”

“Eh. There was the possibility.”

“But you didn’t mention it.”

“You didn’t ask.”

The cat replied coolly, with no sign of anger.

I sighed and sat up.

I brushed away some leaves and petals in my hair.

“What’ll you do? Humans shouldn’t be out here. Too dangerous.”

My eyes widened at his phrasing.

...Dangerous, for humans?

I knew what he was trying to get at.

The irony in the fact that in exchange for obtaining a healthy body, I now had a powerless body.

I looked at my fingers, covered in leaf residue.

I gazed at my neatly-cut nails.

I wasn’t a witch anymore.

I could still talk to the black cat, but there was no longer any link between us. This demon was just talking to me, a human, on a whim.

Yes, much like the first time he spoke to me in that back alley.

Unlike then, however, I knew him, and knew he was a demon. And I knew I wouldn't ask for a demon's help ever again.

"Hmm. I wonder what I'll do..."

I said not too seriously, and stood up.

I adjusted my skirt.

Taking in the sensation of my feet on the ground, I went step by step.

I headed for the exit of the forest.

Between the trees around the path had been made a red wall which roses coiled around.

I brought my nose to the roses.

They didn't smell of anything.

The petals shone cold like razor blades. They could have easily sliced into my neck, but showed no sign of it.

I wondered why. Did the master of these roses not have any power left? Or was she not determined enough?

I quietly smiled and began to walk again. I went up the path to the point where I could go no further.

The exit to the forest was blocked by a startlingly huge patch of roses.

Nearly twice my size.

Roses that had before been my limbs. Now, they had a different

intention, and blocked my path.

I ran my finger along the stems. They were cold and hard like metal. Unmistakably, they had been a part of my body. And now they were her own flesh and blood.

I knew how to make these roses wilt. I knew how to take her body away.

A little bottle came to my mind like a ray of light.

That cute little bottle I had put away in a shelf one day. The key to destroying the body of Ellen, the witch.

Even if she had changed the house's form, it slept there somewhere still. It would just be a matter of going to get it.

...But.

I shot a pitiful gaze up at the roses.

Even if I just left things as is, surely she would die.

A normal human, especially one only thirteen years old, wouldn't be able to bear it in my body.

I had lived.

For decades, for centuries. My heart being eaten away at by sickness.

But I was able to live through it all, never despairing, because I had dreamed of this day. When I would obtain a body that would be loved.

But do you have what I do, Viola?

A reason not to despair in that body.

I can't think of one. You have no legs to stand on the earth, not even a voice to call for help.

Betrayed by me, who you thought your friend, you can only writhe in agony in that room.

Is there a reason for you not to despair in that situation?

What could make the light of hope shine on you?

What could your broken eyes see?

Perhaps you still want to believe me, Viola. You stopped me thinking I might give your body back.

...If I'm right, how foolish you are.

I covered my face with my hands, pretending to sob.

But I quickly stopped, finding it boring.

“What'll you do?”

I turned to the black cat's apathetic voice.

He sat upon a stump.

I ignored him, looking toward the house.

I could just barely see the red-roofed house from here through the green branches.

I narrowed my eyes and thought.

She must be waiting for me in there.

In the house filled with my friends.

My mouth loosened into a smile. I stood on the balls of my feet.

I want to go play. Yes, I'll have to go. Because she must be inviting me. She's waiting for me to come in.

“I'll go.”

The wind rustled, scattering leaves and petals.

My forelocks were swept up, and I smiled, my back to the roses.

...After all, it's my house, yes?  
It wouldn't be killing me anytime soon.