
THE BLACK CAT WITCH

A Novel by Samuel McPherson

BLACK CAT PRESS

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Subjects (SORE): Cats -- Juvenile Fiction. | Magic -- Juvenile Fiction. | Other Worlds -- Juvenile Fiction. | Young Girls -- Juvenile Fiction. | Boarding Schools -- Juvenile Fiction. | Fantasy Fiction.

Set in 12-point Arabic Typesetting

Published by Black Cat Press, Kirkland, WA

First Edition, Halloween 2024

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Prologue

There once was a black-pelted young kitten named Fuyu who was currently in a glass case. Magicked there weeks ago, no trivial amount in her year of life, she was the princess of the Royal Cat Family, and the successor to the throne after her mother's demise. Unfortunately, she was unable to do anything about her predicament because, you may have noticed, she was encased in glass. She had ended up in here because her greedy younger brother, a skilled wizard, had snaffled the throne after their mother died of a "mysterious" illness (Fuyu suspected that this was her brother's doing as well). So, he put her in this claustrophobic case and faked her death in order to gain possession of the throne, being second in line after Fuyu. She would stare out of the frosty windows every day, pressing her polydactyl paws on the chilly glass and waiting for someone to find her... to save her... to return her to the Cat world.

Regrettably, that glorious rescuer did not come until a few days later, when a young witch, looking for a familiar, stumbled upon the forest that served as the portal to the Cat world, which incidentally was the forest which Fuyu and the glass case were currently inhabiting. Nobody went in this forest; there was a rumor that a ghost haunted the trees. Coincidentally, while wandering around the forest, the little witch happened upon Fuyu, a black cat which looked to be the perfect familiar. The young witch was pleasantly surprised, and after shaking the glass case to make sure none of the bullies at her boarding school were trying to stultify her, she used her magic to free Fuyu. Filled with energy, she chanted the release spell at high volume:

Kudunu Shiro

Ichi Kidivu Nakutoki

Queverence Willivern

Mallia Magica!

In Witch Language, this briefly translates to “free the one who has been locked up”. The witch scooped Fuyu up, as she had leaped out of the case after the spell, and nuzzled her affectionately. Of course, Fuyu wanted to get back to the Cat world and take her rightful place as queen and Grand High Witch (for her brother was not the only magically talented member of the family), but the witch girl had rescued her, after all, and she felt indebted to become her familiar. Once she found time enough to sneak away and brew a Translation Potion, she knew they would understand each other, and then she would explain and reclaim the throne. Her plan would work. She was sure of it.

And so they walked out of the forest, the witch carrying Fuyu in her arms, neither afraid of the other. Fuyu saw the girl as a small child who needed some help, and perhaps could be persuaded to give her some in return. The girl saw Fuyu as an ordinary cat, a creature to love and be loved by, an animal which would help out with magic spells and potions, an assistant who didn't ask anything in return except for attention and care.

They were naïve and fearless. Each of them had a plan for the other. But there was one snag in their plans.

The girl didn't know that Fuyu was a witch.

Chapter One

A Familiar at Last!

Kanna Sugimori carried her fuzzy new kitten through the forest, excited to tell her school professors that, at long last, she had her very own familiar. One that felt *right*. It was March, and a light mist hung over the air like a cover on a pot of soup. The season of spring was almost here, and her months at the boarding school were speeding away. She had come to her school, Fernshire, which was located in the secluded Lockwood Island off the coast of Canada, the year prior, and it had been a long trip from her native country of Japan. She had been searching for a suitable familiar for most of the year, fumbling through her magic classes, but, as she discovered while scouring the pet stores for months, there wasn't any animal that she really loved, or felt a magical connection to, which everyone else had seemed to take for granted. Kanna had started late at Fernshire because her mother and father had gotten a divorce a few months prior and they were still figuring out arrangements on their family's future, and apparently, sending Kanna, a magically gifted child, off to a Canadian boarding school would give them the privacy they needed to figure out their family's future. When she had first arrived at school, the pet shops were cleaned out of every familiar but toads and fish, and let's be honest, who wants an incompetent toad to help them do magic? Kanna was now nearing the end of her first year at the school, which had not been very kind to her, and had just found a familiar, a commodity for any self-respecting witch, so she was elated. She raced up the steps to Fernshire in delight, walking along the carpeted floor, to the Potions classroom, to show the teacher, a man named Mr. Skalowski, her discovery.

“Mr. Skalowski!” she called out into the empty classroom, a cobweb from the entryway nearly falling onto her head as she dashed inside. The kitten swayed in her arms as she sneezed. “Sorry, koneko...” she told it affectionately, scratching it under the chin. It purred. Suddenly there was a bang and the kitten meowed in alarm. Kanna looked up. There was a puff of violet dust and a tall man with an ugly sweater displaying an argyle pattern that clashed with the color of his jeans and a long mustache greeted her at the middle of the spacy room. “Hey, Mr. Skalowski! I found this cat, and I’m going to keep it as my familiar!” Kanna plucked out a maple leaf from her hair and stood up straighter. “Ehe...” she mumbled, smiling and looking at him brightly.

Disconcerted, Fuyu had decided to go limp when the girl picked her up from the glass case. While grateful, she was still a little bit cautious as to the nature of this girl. But when the girl had announced that she was going to keep Fuyu as her familiar, she was alarmed. *Why is this girl telling anyone about me? I’m Princess Fuyu Persimmon of the World of the Cats! Whenever anyone talks about me, it’s with reverence and respect, not as undignified as this schoolgirl with leaves in her hair. Or...* Fuyu realized something as she thought. If the people in this world thought that she was a simple familiar, this whole mission would be a whole lot easier! This girl obviously went to this “Fernrequire” magic school, which just might have all the components for her plan! How did such serendipity befall her? All she had to do was find the ingredients for the language-bridging potion and bring it to this potion-making classroom, and then she could make this girl understand the words she spoke! *This might turn out to be easier than I assumed...*

Unfortunately, as she pondered over this new development, the girl wrapped up talking to the tall man and carried her away to her cramped dormitory.

The girl burst into her room, talking to Fuyu vigorously and fast as lightning. “Okay... what should your name be? Night? Smokey? I don’t know, there are so many options!” Fuyu, only making out small snippets of the speech of this girl,

who was making sounds like a chipmunk devouring an acorn, implored her to think of her real name, but alas, she decided upon the bland name “Soot”. Fuyu scowled in distaste but said nothing. The girl wouldn’t be able to understand her anyway. “Okay, now let’s go to the pet store, buy you some treats and a bed and things like that with my savings... darn, I was going to use that to buy the new installment of “*Tonari no Majo Atorie no Hiyori-chan no Monogatari*” coming out this summer, but I guess this is more important.”

As well as getting a monthly allowance from the school, Kanna worked part time at the pet store, in the futile hope that a bedraggled cat might come in from the streets unwanted (as well as the reason of the book series mentioned earlier; she and her friend both enjoyed it though in English it was called “My Neighbor is a Witch!”) The shopkeeper had promised that if a cat did happen to wander into the store, she was entitled to it. But this only happened on one occasion, and the cat was wearing a collar.

But she wouldn’t have to work there anymore. She had her own familiar! Kanna’s spirits lifted as she envisioned her and “Soot” performing all kinds of magical spells together. That dream of a familiar was finally coming true! As she skipped along the alley leading from Fernshire to the pet store, her enthusiasm was boundless. But, as the door to the pet store swung open with a *ding*, the owner, Mr. Hansen, stood in front of the doorway. Kanna’s nose was swamped with the powerful smell of tuna. Her face fell, disappointed as she remembered what the other students’ cats dined on. “How’s my favorite employee?” Mr. Hansen inquired politely, but Kanna was deep in thought and didn’t notice. *Canned tuna is disgusting*, she thought, wrinkling her nose in distaste. *Is this what Soot will have to eat? No way will I blow my savings on some pungent smelling cat food!* She snapped to her senses suddenly, remembering what Mr. Hansen had said. “Wait, Mr. Hansen!” She dashed to him and grabbed his shoulder, holding up Soot, who had gone limp in the fashion of a rag doll.

“I found a familiar! Thank you for the job, but I don’t need to work anymore. Bye!”

Mr. Hansen said nothing, but his eyebrows pressed together in confusion as she walked away.

She led Soot to the bed aisle and the litter box aisle, choosing comfortable yet small options, and then took Soot to the small, dilapidated grocery store that lay in the middle of town, disappointed. She swung the bag of cat commodities over her shoulder, swinging it around. “I don’t understand why everything has to be so expensive,” she complained as Fuyu pawed at the plastic bag. “That was a quarter of my savings! I hope things are cheaper at this grocery store...” She looked up to see her destination: an unpleasant-looking store called “A-1 Grocery Store”. It was housed in a rustic old building that was made of rotting bricks that were crawling with termites and all other manner of unpleasant creatures. Because of this unfortunate detriment, the two were the sole shoppers. Kanna spotted the dried foods aisle immediately. It was on the right side of the door, in the form of a wood rack with bagged goods stocked on its shelves. She bought Soot some dried squid, large strips of white cephalopod meat in a bright yellow bag, which featured a squid that you could see through to look at the product; a small amount of beef jerky, a mahogany delicacy in all kinds of organic shapes; and dried chicken, which smelled good to both of them. Kanna grabbed the items off the shelf and went to the moss covered, damp checkout stand that stood directly beneath a hole in the ceiling that, due to condensation from the fog, dripped every few seconds onto the cash register, which surely wasn’t working now, if it ever had. Eager to get out of the run-down old shack that called itself a store, Kanna’s heart sunk when she saw that the corpulent man who was behind the desk was snoring, his scratchy stubble and tight red T-shirt moving up and down as he breathed. Having had enough, she shouted at him contemptuously. Eventually he woke up with a start, mumbling in Italian as he checked out the items lackadaisically.

After checking out, she spotted a bubble tea shop, which she took to mean *civilization!* She entered this store, “Shamrock Tea and Coffee”, which had a pleasant atmosphere and smelled like mint. Her shoes clacked on the marbled tile floor as she walked past three girls who were gossiping. She made a mental note to avoid them as she went up to the cashier, a tall woman with maroon glasses and frizzy hair. “May I have a milk tea, please?” she asked, suddenly realizing: Why not? She had just taken a trip to the disgusting grocery store to buy food for her new cat! Most people just avoided the store by driving to the next town over. “Sure! What flavor?” queried the woman. Feeling completely confident that she had made the right choice by coming here she stared at the menu, thirsty. “Mango, please.”

“You got it,” responded the woman cordially. “Would you like boba pearls?”

“Yes, please.”

Meanwhile, Fuyu stared enviously at the bubble tea as the girl paid, learning that her name was “Kanna”. Huh. She vaguely recalled learning the name, but for the life of her she couldn’t remember what it meant. Fuyu had learned Japanese and English from a private tutor her mother had hired, and as she was very intelligent, she learned extremely fast, learning phrases in both English and Japanese when she was a small kitten, not even having opened her jade green eyes yet, and eventually learning the written language at six months. She was proud of this, because as it turned out, the human world used a whole lot of spoken English and a numerous amount of the delicious treats that Kanna had purchased for her were labeled in Japanese. As she was carried back to Fernshire, swaying back and forth and beginning to feel a bit queasy as she looked down at the faraway cobblestone streets, her acrophobia acted up and she put her mind on other mysteries, whipping her head away from the bricks. This caused her to snap her head to Kanna, who scratched her chin affectionately once more. Fuyu pretended to enjoy the procedure, but after a while it got to be too much, and she turned her head away again, contemptuous and forgetting her acrophobia

entirely. As she hung limply in Kanna's arms, she wondered how in the Cat World her life was going to end up.



That evening, Kanna ate supper at the mess hall. The mess hall was not exactly what you'd call the cheeriest room in the school; rice hung on the walls like weary sentinels, from food fights years ago, and the windows were crusted with tapioca pudding. The whole place stank of sulfur, and if you were especially unlucky you would get your foot stuck in orange slices that someone had dropped from their dinner. Kanna gagged at the smell. "Why does this place always smell?" she asked her friend Lilly, who was walking next to her to the small wood table where they always sat. "I think it's the eggs," she responded with a shudder. "The cafeteria food isn't exactly appetizing."

"You said it." Kanna had packed two weeks' worth of instant ramen bowls in her lunch when she had first arrived, but they only lasted a week and a half as Lilly befriended her. She didn't *hate* the cafeteria food, exactly, but she thought the eggs in particular looked like something from the comic strip "The Far Side".

Today's lunch was quesadillas, and the cheese was not quite melted. It tasted more like a cheese sandwich. Kanna did not like raw cheese, as a general rule. She shied away. *Disgusting*. Who would eat this? Kanna picked it up, handling it like a dead rat, and a piece of cheese flopped onto the wood tray, where it had just sat before the tortilla dish had been picked up. Sighing in disgust, Kanna journeyed to the trash can, shoes clacking on the linoleum floor, and promptly disposed of it. The metal trash can reeked already of things that the other students had discarded, and Kanna held her nose as she threw it in. She made her way back to her seat and continued to converse while she quietly consumed the rest of the meal.

The peeper frogs sang their song of spring and Kanna wished she were one of them. Eating bugs would be preferable to eggs.

Meanwhile, Fuyu hatched a plan. Sitting on her fluffy new cat bed and staring at her new roommate, a Canada goose named Albert, she decided she was going to sneak in that room that Kanna showed her earlier, the room with Mustache Man in it, and she would steal a small vial to collect the ingredients for the Translation Potion:

A hair of each of the intended consumers,

Shredding of a manila folder,

The arm of an eccentric starfish,

And a small, mashed potato.

Fuyu knew where she would extract these ingredients. The hair could be plucked from Kanna's head while she was sleeping, the manila folder could be found and shredded in the front office of the school, the starfish would be found in the pet store, and the potato would be found in the mess hall.

Fuyu closed her eyes and yawned, the deep yawn that only cats can yawn. Her mouth opened to nearly a perfect rhombus, her whiskers bristled and her tongue waved in her mouth. Smacking her lips, she realized how exhausted she was. *I should probably sleep*, she thought. *I'll need my strength for tomorrow.*

Her breathing eased and she was soon no longer awake.

Unfortunately for her.

Fuyu did not usually sleep well. This was because she had a lot of problems that got in the way of this. She had a perpetual fear of water and spiders; because of her brother, who played tricks on her all the time. And she had been sleeping worse than usual recently because her mother had taken ill. She had always been

Fuyu's comforter, the duvet cover to her sheets, always providing affection and reassurance.

She missed her. Her mind took full advantage of this fact.

The first thing she saw when she nodded to sleep was a sea palace. Jewels lined the pearly white turret which she swam in front of, waving in the water's current. There was a curtained window on the turret in which seaweed was wedged, and Fuyu took her polydactyl paws and pried them out, shuddering at the slimy texture. *Mrrrr-row*. She didn't want to feel that again.

Then she saw a cream-colored tentacle in the curtains. It was waving as though directed towards her. A chill ran down her spine. Inevitably, though, she followed where it was beckoning, the curtains opening as though alive to reveal the room of a healer. Pancakes, heaped with butter, lay on a desk surrounded by medicine-laden shelves, covered with seaweed, algae and obvious old age. Fuyu was busy wondering what the pancakes would taste like when she realized that the water was thicker somehow. Darker. She looked to the right to see if her tentacled beckoner was still there and saw a cloud of dark smoke coming out of the corner. She trained her eyes on it. It was covering the body of a writhing monster. She screamed-- there was a laugh that reverberated in her skull-- she clamped her hands to her ears, trying to stop the agonizing sound ringing in her skull-- now it was dry, all dry, there was a sound of a bathtub drain and Fuyu lay, gasping, sandy, on the shore of a desert island.

Or at least she thought it was a desert island. She was lying on corn colored sand and something was coming toward ~~her~~ *★ ★ ★ snap -- snip snap.*

Oh goodness it was crabs.

Kanna walked back to her dormitory from supper, excited to see Soot. She gripped the wooden door handle in anticipation, watching the door creak open only to be greeted by the sound of quiet purring. Fuyu had curled herself into a perfect little dark fuzzball in the shape of an oval and had gone to sleep, head tucked into her body like a turtle. “Aw...” Kanna admired the kitten. The sight was enough to make any firm dog lover change their opinions. She reached out a hand ever so quietly and began to stroke her, silky soft fur gracing her fingertips. She closed her eyes in delight, feeling only the fur, and then opened her eyes again and looked at her bed. She and Lilly shared a dormitory, and their polished wood bunk bed was strewn with sheets that Kanna had not bothered to adjust since she was such a heavy sleeper. *I should probably go to sleep just about now*, she thought as she petted the cat. She opened up the small dresser of two drawers in the far right corner of the room, in the wall facing the bunk bed, and selected her blue and white striped long sleeved pajamas. She went into the cluttered bathroom and put them on, then brushed her teeth with an extremely minty toothpaste – *Guaranteed Cavity Protection* the label read – and grabbed book four of *Tonari no Majo Atorie no Hiyori-chan no Monogatari*, which was her favorite because it was the one where Hiyori and her familiar took Lana, the main character, on a broom ride through their town. She took her flashlight, dark blue with a cat-shaped light, up the ladder with her and settled under her covers to read.

Not long after, Lilly came into the room. She found Kanna’s light directed at the bathroom. She had fallen completely asleep while reading.

Chapter Two

First Morning

Briiiiing! Briiiiing!

Briiiiing! Briiiiing!

“Mmmmmmm...”

Kanna groaned, burrowing farther into her blanket.

“Jes’ a little longer. Jes’ five more minutes...” she complained, gripping the soft edges of her blanket like her life depended on it.

Briiiiing! Briiiiing!

Groggily, Kanna raised her head to look at her clock. It lay on a shelf just over her head. As she read the time, a chill ran down her spine. She gasped in dismay. “What?!” She whipped her head around to look at her clock again. The glass display told her in its Roman numerals that it was very nearly breakfast time. “How long was I asleep?! I must have slept through my last three alarms!” Panicking, she threw her sheets off herself, making them billow in her wake like a tornado had struck them, threw on her uniform, brushed her teeth for around fifteen seconds (don’t try that at home) and, scooping up a now-yowling Soot, dashed out the door as it creaked.

The hallways were bustling as the bell rang to signal the beginning of the day. All of the starving children and teenagers were directed to the mess hall, issuing a stampeding noise from under the doors of the dormitories as they woke up, alerting Fuyu to the fact that it was time to initiate her plan. But Kanna picked

up her new familiar and took her along to breakfast. The shouting of the crowd, shoving one another to get to the food that was laid out for them mere feet away, reminded Fuyu of a time not so long ago. She couldn't help but recall when she first realized that her brother had initiated his plan for her mother's demise...

It had been an otherwise peaceful day. Eerily still, the kind of day that feels like it's so perfect that something must be wrong, the kind of day where you sip a tranquil cup of tea and find a spider in it, staring at you with its gigantic eyes and smiling at you in such a way that it looks like it is about to devour you whole, even though you know that they are virtually harmless and cannot eat you because they are too small. After waking up, Fuyu had went down to breakfast to find that her mother was not present at the table. Her purple velvet seat, dyed with rare Human world Phoenician clamshell mix, was vacant and empty, and the whole room had been silent except for her brother's lips smacking together because of the excessive maple syrup he had poured onto his buttermilk pancakes. He had been eating as though nothing was wrong, though, and she had stared at him thinking he must have an answer to her many questions. "Uh, Taro?" she had asked her brother cautiously, haltingly. "Where is our mother?" Her brother had stared at her with blank eyes and continued to eat his pancakes. "Taro...?!" She stared at him expectantly once more.

"Our mother is not yet up," he had said lackadaisically, his eyes flashing as the light hit it. They were black as the night sky, pools of black muck in a black lake of black.

"What?" Fuyu had exclaimed, surprised. "She's always punctual to breakfast!"

"Not today, apparently," her brother had answered, pouring ever more maple syrup on his already sopping pancakes. *Glub. Glub.*

Fuyu had gulped. "Is there something wrong with her?"

“Nope,” Taro had responded, “She just hasn’t gotten up. I dunno, maybe she’s sleeping in for once.”

Fuyu had realized there was something very wrong with this situation.

But she had realized too late.

Now, as she was carried through Fernshire, she felt like there was once again something very wrong.



Kanna raced through the halls, dashing to catch up with her friend, a girl about the same size as her, but a little taller. She had dark chocolate hair with streaks of amber running across it. “Hi, Lilly! I overslept again!” she exclaimed. “It seems I’m always late to breakfast.” Lilly never minded this; she understood Kanna in a strange way. They both loved books and cats, and they had been given a dormitory together. While Lilly had been a bit grouchy at first about having a roommate, they became quick friends. Kanna often felt alone at school, and this was her ticket away from her miserable life. The bullies, Sean and McKenna, would always find her in the mess hall, but when she was around a friend, they kept away. When they found her alone, they would let loose. “Half Girl!” they would jeer at her, “An incomplete family makes an incomplete witch!” Usually, Kanna just kept her head down, her long bangs and oncoming tears clouding her vision, and tried not to cry. But some days, she let loose as well, sometimes she screamed at those boys between sobs, fighting the urge to do more, hit them, kick them, hurl herself at them, fight back. She had only ever done it once, and after that she had to go to see the school counselor. Kanna shivered at the thought. Anger management was not her favorite subject.

She wrapped up reminiscing and shook her head, but as she looked down, she noticed that Soot was nowhere to be seen! “Was that your cat that ran off?” Lilly

inquired, and Kanna nodded. *Probably...* She was confused and determined to find her. However, she had no way of knowing that her familiar was dashing towards the pet store.

The store's cold floors gave Fuyu's usually soft paws relief after the rough street's perilous, scratchy surface. Her paw pads buzzed with pain, but the cool floor dulled it, thankfully. But that wasn't why she was here; she was here to find an eccentric starfish. Picking up her paws, she walked to the aquatic section, which was nearly full because they were an unpopular choice as a familiar. No one wanted a fish glubbing along with them as they chanted incantations, or having to lug it around all day, or clean the tank every week, etc., etc., ... As she meandered through the store, trying not to drool at all the fish, she heard something calling to her, like a creepy clown. But it was glubbing, so Fuyu suppressed a purr of amusement instead. It glubbed and glubbed, and as she turned around, she realized it was coming from a starfish tank. She realized at once that she had found what she had been looking for. She dunked her paw in the tank and fished the starfish out, which was still glubbing enigmatically. (Direct translation: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers which plummeted perilously towards Peter Piper's papa's pickled plums for patrons of Peter and Papa Piper's Pickled Peppers 'n' Plums to pertly peruse and purchase.") With a quick swipe of her claws, it was done. She lowered the starfish back into the tank. Its arm would grow back, she was sure of it.



Kanna tapped her fingers against her desk, impatient. Her search for Soot had been unsuccessful, and when the bell had rung for first period, she had ended up late for Mrs. Waterburn's class.

Mrs. Waterburn's classroom was what one could best describe as a "junk heap": it was a relatively small room, and unlike all the other classrooms in the school,

it had very unstable walls, and when workers fixed them years ago, they came out squiggly, like lasagna noodles. The room was cluttered with pieces of paper, which Kanna suspected were documents for bills that Mrs. Waterburn didn't care about. But by far the most loathsome thing about the first period classroom was Mrs. Waterburn herself; she was a tall, lanky woman with a no-nonsense attitude. She always wore a pair of thick glasses that made you wonder if it was really her behind them, and she always seemed to have some sort of food on her face; a smudge of salad dressing, perhaps, or a scallion or two. Her personality was rotten as well, and whenever people were late to her class, she gave them a scolding, which not only interrupted the class but made the tardy student very, very cross. After she was given a lengthy lecture about how "attendance matters, and so do you" and "if you aren't punctual for class one more time, Miss Sugimori" she was going to "be in for it", the class started, and they started learning the language of magic.

Today, they would learn the word for "enlarge": "Seki-ya". Mrs. Waterburn smacked the dusty whiteboard several times to make sure that they were all listening, which Kanna wasn't. She was thinking about her neighbor Colin, sitting at the desk next to her, who had a particularly docile koala for a familiar. The koala was wandering around his desk, trying to find the rhinoceros beetle that Mrs. Waterburn had given each of them to enlarge. As the beetle that she was supposed to enlarge wandered around on her desk, trying to escape, Soot came bursting through the door, being caught by Mrs. Waterburn before Kanna could react. She held the cat by her scruff, barking, "Whose cat is this?" Her voice was warbly and slightly nasal.

"It's mine, Mrs. Waterburn," Kanna replied shakily, looking around the room awkwardly.

"Why is it drenched?" the teacher queried skeptically, adjusting her thick glasses.

“Soot is wet?” Kanna exclaimed incredulously, peering behind the blond girl who sat in front of her, who was looking over at the cat suspiciously.

“Yes, your familiar is shopping! It reeks of salt, too!”

“Salt?! Where has she been?!”

“Somewhere she shouldn’t be, apparently. Now, get back to work!” Mrs. Waterburn dropped Fuyu on the warped floor, and she ran to Kanna’s desk, concerned for the stability of the floor.

As Kanna rushed to pick her up, she racked her brain as to how to carry out her plan, buzzing with nervous energy. She needed to get out of here, and fast! This teacher was scary, and she didn’t think she could stand any more... She meowed at Kanna, and the girl stared down at her, scratching her under her chin. She couldn’t help herself; a purr rumbled in her throat. “I’ll grab you a treat during lunch, okay?” Kanna told her. Fuyu rubbed her head against hers.

Unfortunately, what she really wanted was to *get out* of this classroom! Fuyu resigned herself and sat patiently at Kanna’s side.

After a catastrophe involving an enormous beetle and a ruined, overdue water bill, Kanna earned another lecture. Mrs. Waterburn made her stay after class to lecture her on how to control her magic. Meanwhile, Fuyu’s mind was racing. If Kanna was able to do such powerful magic, then surely they had some kind of magical linking, the kind that could only come from a witch and her familiar. If this was true, then Kanna was correct; they were meant to be this way. But how could that be? How strange, for the Princess and rightful heir of the Cat world throne to be a witch’s familiar! She had to return to the Cat world and reclaim the throne, quick! She had no idea what kind of wickedness her brother was brewing up for the kingdom...

She had no idea that, at that very moment, her brother, Taro, was only ravaging the kingdom for all the soup dumplings he could eat, so he wasn’t much of a

threat yet. But she was right to be scared. The Cat world was dealing with a foe who caused the death of his mother and faked the death of his sister because of greed, so Fuyu's fear was perfectly rational. As she was the big sister of this cat, she had reason to fear for his mental stability, as big siblings do. Unfortunately, Fuyu had her own theories about these acts, and they weren't very settling. So you will be spared of them for now.

Now, you may wonder why Fuyu was the heir to the throne, when queens often gave birth to multiple kittens at a time. Well, the story gets complicated, but after a skirmish with a dragon, a thousand-year sleep, and a perilously insane dog, Fuyu's mother had not been able to keep more than one kitten alive at a time after she gave birth. She had to watch them all perish one by one, meeting various gruesome ends, until only the weakest kitten was left. As the dog, the one who planted this curse on the queen's head, was perilously insane as all dogs are, it was a nonsensical curse to be sure, but a terrible one.



Back at the school, Kanna was heading to her second class of the day, potions class. Mr. Skalowski taught this class, and Kanna always looked forward to it. It was the one class she excelled in, and when she had received her report card at the end of last semester, all her grades had been moderate or low except for this class. She was especially excited for today, as today, they were making a potion of alligator tears, a rare substance from an elusive animal. Mr. Skalowski had worked hard to find them, and to use them was an honor.

The spacious classroom was an ancient room from back in the days when Fernshire was built many years ago, and the cobwebs on the walls and the dusty old books on the wood shelves pressed up against the peeling paint of the walls proved it. Mr. Skalowski kept these things because they were useful for potions that were more advanced; it took a long time for dust to gather and an even

longer time for a spider's magnificent, unusually strong web to deteriorate into a drooping, flabby cobweb. That was just Mr. Skalowski for you, though. He had deep, chocolate brown eyes and a big, bushy mustache on his upper lip, which made him look like a character from a cowboy film. His deep, booming voice always echoed in the spacious, airy classroom, which made it quite easy to hear him. Now, he was stepping up to his cauldron, holding up a potato and a narrow, cylindrical vial encasing a small, clear fluid, which was filled to the rough cork.

"Today we will be making a potion of Transformation. It's a little more advanced than anything we've done in this class before, but I'm sure you'll figure it out," announced Mr. Skalowski with that voice of his.

This is perfect! thought Fuyu victoriously. *A Transformation potion uses a mashed potato! Now, I'll only have to get the manila folder and the hairs!* As the class continued, the teacher showed them how to mash the potato just so, to let the precious Chimera tears work their magic. As the students mashed and mashed, Fuyu snatched a potato and ran off into the halls, Kanna so focused on her mashing that she didn't notice.



As Kanna mashed her potato with the spell, her hands working without her breaking a sweat, she turned to her familiar, but she had vanished. Again. She turned to Lilly, who was sitting in front of her. "Hey!" she hissed in her friend's ear. "Soot has run away again!" But Lilly didn't answer, either because she was concentrating very hard or because the potatoes were beginning to whine with contempt as they were kneaded into a potion ingredient. Kanna had to ask for another potato earlier, because Soot had snatched it, and hers was not whining quite yet. But she could hear Lilly's potato squealing, "Stop it! Ohhhhhh. You're hurting me!" She rolled her eyes, knowing that though potatoes could see very

well, they could not feel anything and were therefore just trolling the students with their moans and cries. But eventually, their whining subsided and Lilly turned to Kanna, her flowing brown hair whipping around as she did so. “What is it?” she asked. “Soot’s gone,” Kanna briefly informed her, and Lilly sighed, smacking a potato covered hand on her forehead. “Not again. Do you know the Finding Spell?”

“No” was Kanna’s answer, for she had been romping in the woods the day Mr. Burmont, the fourth period teacher, had shown them the spell. She had almost caught a small frog that day and had named him ‘Filbert’. He had jumped away when she made her way back to class. She still missed him. “Well, I can’t find your familiar, seeing as Albert here--” she made a gesture towards her goose sitting besides her, “-- is my familiar, not your cat,” Lilly replied, “so we’re just going to have to wait.”

Kanna sighed and continued mashing her potato, her hands working at a slow pace.

The potato felt rough in Fuyu’s mouth, and the earthy taste and starchy dirt smell rising toward her nose made her eager to stash it away. She wanted leek and potato soup, but she doubted she’d be able to make it and she couldn’t request it, seeing as no one could understand her. *At the moment*. She arrived at the girl’s dormitory and deposited the potato, with a *hack*, where she had put the starfish’s arm earlier that day, which was now dry and bumpy. The bathroom cabinet was perfect for this kind of thing, because nobody ever peeked in there, for the simple reason that no one used it. Kanna kept all her toiletries on the bathroom counter, clustered near the sink. Lilly placed hers there as well, because it was more convenient that way. This was fortunate because the wood of the cupboard was now warped by the water that the starfish’s arm had drenched it with. Fuyu sighed and walked away, determined to return to the girl. She needed that manila folder, as soon as possible. But how was she going to get it? Suddenly she passed the administrative office... *that’s it!* she thought

triumphantly. She used her polydactyl paws to open the door, but to no avail; it was locked. There was a large sign on it: HOURS 12 PM TO 4 PM. She would have to come back later that day.



In the classroom, the students were finishing the potions, and Kanna was growing impatient. Soot had not come back. She sighed inwardly, closing her eyes in exasperation as the class ended and the bell rang for passing period. Why was her familiar being so disagreeable? She had dashed away twice just this morning! Fortunately, it wasn't long before Soot came racing into the classroom, where Kanna was moping. "All right", Kanna sighed, "time to go to third period." She was not looking forward to this, either. This class was the only one she had with her tormentors, Sean and McKenna! She shuddered to think of the things they would do to her today. Bash her on the head with sick Ritisha's violin? The usual "Half Girl" routine? Doing something horrific and then pinning the blame on Kanna? (Pin the Blame on the Small, Lonely Child: It seemed to be a popular party game among bullies.) She resigned herself, picked up Fuyu and made her way across the hall. Eventually, though, she ran into Lilly again. "Hey..." she greeted, breathless. They both went to the same third period: Orchestra. Lilly played the cello, Kanna the violin. "Ready to play 'Waltz with the Wicked Witch'?" Kanna asked her friend.

"Ready as I'll ever be." Lilly smiled, and a dimple formed on her cheek. "That song is terrible."

"Yes, it is. It kept getting stuck in my head last night. It sounds more like the hissing of a cat than any 'classical masterpiece' in recent memory." They both laughed and walked to class together, parting only when Lilly had to migrate to the other side of the room in position. Kanna took her seat next to a nearly empty black chair; her neighbor Ritisha was not here. Her white familiar stared

back at her. It was a mouse named Herb, sent to report back on her lessons, seeing as she was sick, using a magical Scribal spell that took a lot of magical energy. “Well, Herb,” she sighed, looking at the white mouse forlornly. “Looks like I’m alone again...”

And that was when Sean and McKenna found her.

Chapter Three

All's Fair

Fuyu's sensitive ears wanted to huddle in a corner and weep after the noisy hallway. What made it worse was that one of the bullies, a boy who looked to be about fourteen, had pulled on her tail and said in a mocking voice, "Oh, look at the cute lil' kitty!" Fuyu had hissed at him and ran off, and now she was cowering in a corner of the drafty music room, which was almost entirely brown walled, except for the back wall, which was purple, due to a painting mistake when the room was first added onto the school years ago. Shivering, she wondered if Kanna was plagued by these horrible people as well, and then decided against it because Kanna was so, well, likeable. There was really no other way to explain it: she had been very friendly to Fuyu, and she didn't understand why others wouldn't be kind to her. Unfortunately, her thoughts were interrupted when the girl's body was slammed into the corner where she sat, her pulse as fast as a runaway car. The boy who had pulled her tail loomed over her and Kanna, with an accomplice, a tall girl of around thirteen with dark, immaculately braided hair and a large smirk on her face, reciprocating the boy's. "Half Girl," they said simultaneously, "crawl back under the broken rock where you came from." They smirked and stared down at her, waiting for a reaction. Kanna's eyes were filled with tears, but she shook them away. She would not cry in front of Sean and McKenna, not again, not after all this time... She shook her head again, dashing away from the room to leave behind the tears that lurked just behind her eyes, and forcing Fuyu to quiver in front of these scary people who seemed to torment Kanna. The boy's amber eyes shone with dark, unadulterated pleasure, and she meowed, half frightened and half emboldened. She was scared of these children, sure, but no one got away with being unkind to

this girl, her only way out of this miserable wretch of a school. She unsheathed her claws...

Kanna felt a hand placed on her shoulder, warm and smelling like coffee. She edged away, grouchy. *It's a grown-up*, she thought sullenly, *wondering why I'm sitting out in the hall*. She unfurled her knees from where she had been hugging them, trying to avoid conversation. But she knew what was coming next: the “Why are you there? Are you quite all right” questions that always came from the raisin of a school counselor, Mrs. Black. Rumored to be eighty-three and a half years old, the darker-skinned, white-haired, bespectacled counselor drank too much coffee from her own good and gave advice that was often sarcastic. The other school counselor, Mrs. Ketchen, was no better; honestly, Kanna preferred Mrs. Black's snarky retorts. She was a young woman, in her twenties, rather pudgy with bouncy curls and rosy cheeks. She called everyone “friend”, which most of the students, including Kanna, took to mean that she didn't really care who you were, what you were doing, or how you were feeling. She would talk about the situation with the person and pretend to listen, then tell them “I'll speak to the student who is causing you trouble” or “I will speak to the teacher to see if there is any way to make class better for you” and then the person would leave her office and she would hop back on to reading the immensely sized, dusty red record book she always seemed to be holding, studying it like it was a diamond and sucking in water in great gulps from her insulated water bottle, big as an entire dresser drawer. Sometimes, she “invited” people over for lunch, where she stared at them, smiling like a shark who has found its prey. Kanna had been assigned to one of these once, and she never wanted to again. Mrs. Ketchen was the kind of person who you didn't say no to, so most of the kids avoided her and left it at that. Mrs. Black was a whole different soup dumpling – she was crabby, with big yellow glasses that seemed to shine with a strange radiance. She was a witch, which was to be expected, but she was remarkably low level. Her parents had decided to homeschool her, so as a result of the impatience of her youth, she had not absorbed much knowledge. Kanna

was sure that Mrs. Black had put some sort of intimidation spell on everyone in the school, so she would appear fiercer than she actually was. She was the complete opposite of Mrs. Ketchen in personality. No one, as a result, liked the school counselors. No one liked to see their faces in the halls. Especially not Kanna.

But this time, she had not been expecting this surprise visit and was resentful towards meeting any counselor at all. She shied away from Mrs. Black, not caring whether she was going to get in trouble after this. Then, she heard a yowling, a scream that must have belonged to Sean, and the sound of stomping feet. Seconds later, there was a river of teens pouring out of Kanna's third period room, orchestra with Mr. Rich, with Sean as the caboose. Soot was at his heels, chasing him and yowling like a wild animal. Kanna rushed to grab her cat. "Soot!" she screamed in surprise, rushing to her side and scooping her up. Soot's claws, still unsheathed, were covered with black-red sticky liquid, and the blood-soaked figure of Sean dashing away from the two of them was Kanna's clue as to what had happened while she was grouchy. Her stomach plummeted. Suddenly, a sharp pain blossomed in her forearm, and she realized that Soot's claws had dug into her arms, which were now streaming with blood. It rather looked like her arms were crying. This was Kanna's final thought before her vision began to cloud, and she heard a slight thump. Seconds later, everything was black and silent.



Fuyu dashed to the now unconscious Kanna's head. She plucked a few hairs from her head, and Kanna gave a little whimper involuntarily. Fuyu dashed away from the girl before she could wake up, though. Hairs in paw, she dashed to the room where she had hidden the other items, stashing it on the hardwood

cabinet. The handle's metal felt cold on her paw, and when she pulled it away, it almost didn't come off, sticky from Sean's blood.

When Fuyu was a small kitten, she had heard the aphorism "all's fair in love and war". As she dashed to the medicinal wing where they had surely placed Kanna, she wondered if this was true of what she had done this morning, if it was fair. She didn't think so, but she had to. She had done it in self-defense, and all that mattered right now was to get back to the Cat world.

But she couldn't help feeling remorse about hurting Kanna, and the guilt seemed to spread across her pelt like raindrops on a stormy day. She looked up at the clock. XII:I. Five after twelve P.M. The administrative office was open. That guilt she was feeling followed her all the way down the long hall to the foreboding wood door, where her final ingredient was lurking. Her paws made no noise as she strode away, but on the contrary, her conscience was screaming at her to pad back.

Chapter Four

Ersatz

Kanna came to with a gasp, her arm throbbing with pain. She looked over her shoulder to find Sean next to her, his arm also covered in blood. Why did it hurt so much to move? Why was the room so dark all of a sudden? And where was Soot at a time like this? Then she remembered the events of the morning, and her questions were answered. Her eyes pooled with tears, partly from the pain and partly because of what had happened. The shock was still tingling through her body. She guessed she had been drifting in and out of consciousness for over an hour, muttering unintelligible gibberish. And now that she had remembered who had caused it, her first thought was, *why? Why would my familiar do such a thing?* She couldn't believe that Soot had done this. Sure, she was a little bit mysterious at times, but Soot was docile and seemed to like Kanna, so this outburst was very surprising. Though, Kanna noted, she had only known Soot for a day. Maybe she was more complicated than she let on. But then again, how would she know? She was a human schoolgirl, not a cat! She couldn't understand what animals were saying!

But as she sat in the squishy, mite-infested mattress that the medicinal expert had prepared for her, she couldn't help but wish that she could.



Fuyu crept into the administrative office, determined. Even though it may have made her cry, Kanna would be safe, and the hours she would spend in the medicinal wing were of the essence. She needed to get that last ingredient, and

fast, before Kanna got in a whole heap of trouble. *More than she already is*, she thought privately. Harboring a harmful animal couldn't be good on her track record.



Kanna woke again to find the school's medicinal witch, a small, skinny woman with a face that looked much older than the rest of her body, wearing all white, looming over her with a stern expression on her face. "Young lady," she said in a fierce tone, "the animal you brought in the building must be evicted from Fernshire premises at once!"

"Soot?!" cried Kanna, fully awake now. "She's my familiar!"

"Not for much longer, kid!" The woman stood up, still staring at Kanna, and glowered at her with contempt.

"That cat has harmed two students and has been sneaking off where it isn't welcome. You need to take it away." The witch's nasal voice echoed throughout the room, causing Sean to murmur deliriously as his bandage slipped off his filthy hands. Kanna watched him with sympathy. No matter how horrible people were, no one deserved to get hurt. "Immediately."

Apparently, the medicinal witch wanted to get to the point, and to the point fast. She didn't seem to like children. *Why would someone like this take a job at a school?* Kanna wondered. Then her words snapped back to her like a boomerang, slipping her out of her thoughts.

"Use the correct pronouns!" Kanna cried, sitting up and glowering right back at the nurse. It seemed a mutual dislike. "Soot is a female! 'She' instead of 'it'!"

The medicinal witch stared lazily at her. "Sorry, kid," she said lackadaisically, "You're going to have to try not to get too terribly attached."

“Why?!” Kanna said with passion, getting out of bed. Her arms hurt like they had been struck by lightning or rolled over by an iron. A new wave of pain shot through her body. “W-why?!” she asked again.

“Because soon, if you don’t do exactly that, your familiar will have to be put to sleep.”

Kanna’s eyes widened in disbelief. “You *wouldn’t*.”

“Don’t be so sure about that.” The witch crept out of the room, leaving Kanna with an unconscious Sean and a door, artificial light filtering through it.



Fuyu looked around the administrative office, bursting with adrenaline. It was nearly a perfect square, with benches to the left and right of her. The hallway’s light was the only illumination coming in, making the room look rather like a funeral home. There were papers scattered all over the floor, which was quite similar to Mrs. Waterburn’s classroom. But this room was smaller, and a desk in the middle with a shadowy woman sitting on a navy blue chair said that it meant business. There was a little lamp on the desk, turned off but present, with a little amigurumi goose on it, which was facing the woman and must have looked to her like it was peeking out from behind it. The desk was covered with stamps, and a typewriter sang its song mournfully as the woman poked it with her fingers methodically, the sound echoing in the room. This was the only sound.

Clickety clack

Clickety clack-clack clickety!

Fuyu crept over to the large shelves positioned behind the desk, full of yellowed folders.

Clack-clack!

Fuyu reached for the report cards. She knew that however much negative emotion the folder held, the more use it had and the clearer her voice would sound to Kanna once she drank the potion.

Meanwhile, Kanna dashed to fourth period, Mr. Burmont's Spells class, with a feeling of dread. Her arms were clean and bandaged, but her wounds had come close to infection. She had pressed cobwebs against them until the bleeding stopped. The cobwebs had looked like a cranberry bog after five minutes, and the bandaging had begun soon after that. The nurse had not spoken to Kanna after her comments about Soot, and although she suspected that the nurse was exaggerating, she probably would have to release Soot anyways. She sighed, wondering where she was now...

Fuyu reached for a crumpled-up folder on the top shelf, climbing the many cubes of files and art the superintendent had to keep track of. *What a menial job that must be...* Suddenly, she felt a tug on her tail. She swiveled her head around to find the superintendent grinning at her, her teeth yellow as the folders stared back at her, her eyes green as the jade on the crown Fuyu had been anticipating wearing since the day she was born. And her furry, tufted ears poked out of her rough straw hat, which was meticulously decorated with a floral pattern. Fuyu didn't think this strange until she realized that she recognized them. Her eyes went wide in realization as the superintendent began to speak, in a deep voice with an accent similar to hers.

"Hiya, sis," her brother sneered.

The superintendent was ersatz.

Her brother, disguised as an old woman, was holding her by her tail, while she clutched the folder in her claws, feeling the paper slip from her paws like water that is cupped in human hands. The wrinkles seemed like small footholds for

some unknown bug willing to take on the challenge, and the bit of the folder that usually stuck out was folded into the rest of it unevenly. This reminded Fuyu of herself, she thought, dazed at realization.

“Taro?!” she exclaimed, the folder smacking the floor as she let go of it, the report card papers that had been in it falling out like large snowflakes onto the hardwood floor, although it made a sound closer to hitting Jell-O with a spoon.

Her brother did not reply. Instead, he pursed his chapped lips shut, and the skin cracked sickeningly, blood burbling slowly out of the already red facial feature.

Fuyu was getting desperate, and nauseous. Perspiration rolled down her face, and the room was beginning to get stuffy. Not only that, but claustrophobia was kicking in. She wanted to get back to Kanna, the girl who, in a short twenty-four hours, had become a safe person to be around. She wanted to run to anyone else, but her mother was dead and her only other living relation was carrying her out of the school right now...

Then Fuyu realized her brother’s mistake.

He had transformed into an old woman to avoid detection; however, his skin was vulnerable, and as Fuyu stared at the many maroon moles on his transformed arms, she began to get an idea.

She opened her mouth and bit down on her brother’s shoulder with a yowl, his skin ripping off. Fuyu stared down at the patch of pale skin that she had ripped off for a moment, horrified, watching her brother’s arm bleed. Then, the blood rose up and enveloped his silhouette, and with a flurry of black, scalding flames which almost caught Fuyu’s fur on fire, he was himself again – Taro Persimmon, Prince of the World of the Cats. He yowled with a fury that only a scorned mother could match, the fury that came with heavy responsibility of many actions of people not his own.

Fuyu dashed away from her brother, with smoke seemingly lodged in her nose, and followed the scent of Kanna as best she could.

For the rest of the day, Fuyu plotted. She decided that she would have to pour the potion into Kanna's mouth while she was asleep. This way, she wouldn't put up a fuss over it. That night, she crept across the floor, her paw pads barely making any noise. She slunk to the bathroom and removed the ingredients from the cupboard. Holding them in her mouth, she dashed back to the superintendent's office. There was no sign of anyone in the room now; it was lifeless. She grabbed the folder she had dropped and went to the potions classroom.

By the time she was finished, potato colored potion, smelling like star anise and chamomile, covered Fuyu's paws. She made very sure to cast the spell to lower gravity on herself before she walked in the halls, as she hadn't washed her paws and someone was sure to notice her prints. It looked like she had been digging in mud all day. She reminded herself, wringing her paws out at the sink in the dormitory bathroom when she arrived back, that it would all be worth it soon. The next morning, she would go back to the Cat world once Kanna understood. And then, she could save everyone from her brother's reign.

She was oblivious to the threat of the Fever.

Chapter Five

Understanding

Kanna gaped at Soot in disbelief. “You can *talk*? How?!” The bitter liquid that she had tasted when she had woken up just moments before was tickling her throat and her line of sight seemed to be spinning in front of her eyes. “Soot --”

“It doesn’t matter now. Right now, we need to catch my brother!” Soot interrupted with a hint of contempt in her voice. “And stop calling me Soot. My name is Fuyu, and I am the lost princess of the World of the Cats!” she announced with grandeur.

Kanna’s eyes widened, and then she began to feel lightheaded. Wind rushed toward her head as she toppled to the floor, and the last thing she remembered before she fell unconscious was the cold plywood against her forehead.



Fuyu shook Kanna violently, trying to get her to wake up. Her forehead was slick with sweat, however, the beginnings of a fever. That couldn’t be good. Suddenly Kanna roused and asked Fuyu, “What do you mean, a princess?” as if nothing had happened. Fuyu sighed in relief, but the potion seemed to be having some unprecedented side effects; Kanna’s cheeks were red and her head was covered with perspiration. “Pinch me, I must be dreaming,” she told Fuyu and then proceeded to carry out the task herself. Hard. With a feeling of dread, Fuyu realized that her yelp of pain was masked by the sound of the bell for first period. “Oh no...” Kanna said in a weak voice. “Mrs. Waterburn’s going to kill

me...” Then she collapsed once more. Fuyu dashed towards her. She needed to get a cold drink. But what, she thought, would be best? Looking around the room, she spotted the bag that Kanna placed her toiletries in. She grabbed it from the bathroom counter and recited a spell to tear the atoms of the bag apart...

Ichi Mikami Ni

Sikudo Marudo Kaido

Queverence Willivern

Lacilade Hika!

In Witch Language, this briefly translates to “rip apart this one item in front of me”. Now in front of Fuyu was a pile of gray. Gray possibility. It could be hot, or cold, or lukewarm, big, or small, or normal size. Fuyu’s eyes glowed, and her magic gripped her. She gathered a ball of energy in her paws and thrust it at the pile – or was that her imagination? – and then in front of her was the drink Kanna had asked for the other day, the thing called “bubble tea”. It was cold, and she had put a special spell on it to dilute the tumultuous effects of the potion. When Kanna woke, she would be all right.

Exhausted from the immense amount of effort, Fuyu slowly nodded off on the crudely cut, unsteady brown plywood, her head bumping Kanna’s hand in an affectionate gesture as she fell.



When Kanna awoke, she spotted a bubble tea on the floor, the light from the one window hitting it so that it seemed it was glowing. She reached for it, thirsty and hot. Her hand flopped in front of her, and she found she had barely any energy; she had skipped breakfast and she had slept badly that night, awaking

early to that strange, bitter taste in her throat. What had happened? Her head felt fuzzy, and she barely remembered anything from the previous hour. For some reason, she had the faint impression that Soot had started talking and told her that her name was Fuyu, and she was the princess of the cats. But that was so strange! I *must have been hallucinating*, Kanna decided and reached for the drink. With a large inhale, she began to drink the tea, which tasted a little sweeter than usual. It was her favorite flavor, jasmine. The boba was chewy as usual, and they seemed almost to make a pleasant little popping noise in her mouth as she sipped. Suddenly, she spotted Soot on the ground, unconscious. *Oh*, Kanna thought sensibly, *Soot's just taking a nap. Perfectly rational*. But just as she was pondering, a bell rang throughout the halls, and a stampede ensued, one she was not a part of.

Kanna's blood ran cold. She had missed... how many periods? She looked at her clock, which was a small, circle-shaped instrument with circles on the bottom for balance on the wooden nightstand it sat on. The outside was a cream color, and the display was in Roman numerals, which currently read XII: XI. Twelve thirty. Kanna gulped as she realized that it was lunchtime, after fourth period. She must have really been out cold. It was probably the eggs that the luncheon director had cooked last night. They smelled sulfurous and Kanna had wondered if they were real eggs, or just the powder that people used sometimes. But then again, would those smell sulfurous, since they weren't real eggs? She sighed and slumped on the floor in disappointment. She was ashamed of herself. What was she going to do? Her cat was out cold, she had missed half her classes and her friend was nowhere to be seen.

At that moment, she began to get a strange feeling. All the hairs on her arms stood up in unsettlement, and she rubbed them, trying to get them to go down again. She felt unsettled herself, though, and after the arm hairs were matted a satisfiable amount she looked around the room cautiously. Someone seemed to be pushing a thought into her mind. *Up. Up. Look Up, Stare Up*. She lifted her

head, obeying the voice, and then felt a strange tingling sensation as she was pushed off the ground... but she was still on the ground. Lying there unmoving. Even though she was moving herself.

Kanna took a quick look at herself, trying to grip the bedpost for a station as the pushing continued. Her hands went right through it and she yelped in surprise. Her hands weren't there. She was down on the plywood. But she wasn't. Where was she exactly?

Oh goodness, she had left *herself*.

After this little realization, she fainted, never hitting the floor.



Fuyu awoke with a start. Her dream slipped out of her claws like a tuna fish and wriggled away into a metaphorical stream, and she sighed and walked away, deciding to return to Kanna, who needed her. But as she opened her eyes, she noticed that Kanna was slumped on the floor, staring up at the popcorn ceiling with a strange look on her face.

“Kanna?” she called to her. “Are you all right? Why are you staring at the ceiling?”

No response. Her lip was beginning to drip with salivation.

“Kanna!” Fuyu tried again, this time more forcefully. “Wake up! You’ve got to get me to the Cat world--” and then she looked past Kanna’s tilted head, past the patch of sunlight on the floor and towards the wall.

That was the moment she saw the man out the window.

Chapter Six

The Man Clad in Black

He was a taller man, dressed in all black except for a white tie that stretched out in front of his pinstripe suit, which had very faint grey stripes. He wore a fuzzy top hat, lopsided on his large face, which was rather shaped like a potato. Fuyu's mouth began to water at this idea, but then she shook her head. That was absurd; his face wasn't a potato. Still, she should consider all possibilities. But by far the most absurd thing about the man was his eyes. They were hollow and raw, with a strange, ethereal light coming out of them. It was an ultraviolet color, and it worked as a projector to disguise his condition, but Fuyu was able to see ultraviolet, and so saw the truth. This man was not human.

He advanced toward the inside, and Fuyu immediately willed a protection spell towards the room. She did not like this thing. She did *not* want it in this room. But alas, she felt a headache sear across her skull, meaning that its magic was powerful enough to break the enchantment. Fuyu had never known anyone to do this, so she was scared, not something she felt very often.

As a cat princess, she had lived in the lap of luxury from the start, which meant that she had other cats to protect her from danger and anything that tried to harm her. Unfortunately, when her brother began his malevolent reign, this all stopped and Fuyu found herself thrown into a glass case, into a forest far away from everything she had ever known, and yet so close as well. That forest was where, Fuyu noticed, the footprints leading to the window seemed to have come from. That meant that this must be one of Taro's magical creations, a Spite. They had no eyes and were shapeshifters, resembling people in their true forms, but with pointed ears and a wicked smile that never seemed to leave their face.

They were creatures of darkness, and the only way to intimidate them was to shapeshift in front of them. Unfortunately, Fuyu didn't know how to shapeshift.

As she was worrying, she didn't notice the Spite crawl in and lift Kanna into its arms with a heave. That was what snapped her back to attention. She bolted forward, but it was too late; the creature had already disappeared with Kanna, and was dashing toward the forest, his arms shaking with the weight of the boarding school attendee.

And then a brown-haired blur dashed towards them, silent as a cat's paws. There was no way this person could have been who Fuyu thought they were. She was supposed to be in Mr. Burmont's class for third period! Nevertheless, there was Lilly Ademensi, running toward her missing friend.

Fuyu had seen Lilly before on several occasions, never mind the fact that she had been within fifteen feet of her for the last two nights. But never like this. Never disheveled, messy, and desperate; no, Lilly was the opposite. From what Fuyu had seen she was orderly, neat, and because of this, very calm.

But after all this came another mystery. Why did Lilly know about the Spite? Was she involved somehow with this whole affair? And if she was, how? The questions whirled around in Fuyu's mind like goldfish who are trying to escape a particularly fierce child at the popular carnival game in some corners of the world in which young children are given paper nets to try to catch goldfish in. Fuyu had never played this game before but, as a book she had read showed very clearly, it rarely was pleasing to anyone; if the child caught a fish, then the fish would have to spend the rest of its (now considerably shortened) life in a small tank in which it would sit around in boredom, perhaps glub every once in a while, and when it died, be ceremoniously flushed down the toilet as the child cried with sorrow at the parting of their "friend". If the fish was not caught, then they were spared until other eager children came along, wanting a turn and turning with large eyes to their parent or guardian, so the threat mentioned

earlier was still a strong possibility, but the child's parents or guardians would undoubtedly be in for a hard time because they would either have to endure a crying fit, complaining, or draining their bank accounts until their child caught a fish, which were all unpleasant options. Fuyu felt rather like a goldfish at this moment, with Taro as the young child. And because he was the king, he could twist any parent or guardian to spend as much money as he wanted them to, until he finally caught the beautiful black fish.



Kanna awoke in her own body, noticing first as she rubbed her sticky eyes that her vision was blurry. Was it? So was her memory, it seemed. She was being carried around like a sack of potatoes by a man in a pinstripe suit, which was a sure sign she was dreaming. She pinched herself for the umpteenth time that day, trying to get herself to wake up. But it hurt more every time, and it seemed the nightmare was not going away. Suddenly, a whirl of brown and tan sped across her vision, getting closer and closer. Kanna blinked to see that it was Lilly, running towards her with a look of desperation on her face. "Kanna," she exclaimed with a sharp exhale, and ran to catch up with her. "Oh, thank goodness! I thought you were dead!" she exclaimed.

"No, I'm not. *heh*," Kanna replied, rolling her eyes at the obvious hyperbole. Her voice wavered from the constant motion of the man's legs working up and down, up and down, as he carried her to his ruler. "Am I dreaming? Because I woke up this morning and Soot was talking."

"No, you're not dreaming," Lilly answered assuredly between large intakes of breath. "Something strange is happening, and you are being carried off by *his* Spite."

“A Spite?” Kanna cried in disbelief. She swiveled her head around to get a good look at the man’s stubbly face, and under the shadow of his large fuzzy hat were two glowing eye sockets. Her eyes went wide. Spites were the stuff of legend, fairy tales. Kid stuff. They couldn’t be real. Yet Kanna’s eyes didn’t seem to be lying.

The forest then seemed to shimmer, the trees blowing in the aggressive wind seemed to stop for a minute and change into something else, something fantastical. Something that shouldn’t exist. But it was true.

Large pine trees loomed over Kanna as she stared up in wonder. Suddenly, she felt the wind meeting her face, felt herself falling. She had been thrown onto the grass with an unceremonious *thump!* The Spite walked away and Kanna stared at him. He was walking up to a large crystal castle, shining in the noonday sun. There was a drawbridge which led to the crystalline doors, and a small, stout man with a bushy beard guarding it. The man conversed with this character for a while, and then the wood drawbridge was lowered, pieces falling off into the moat below, and the man walked across with a fast gait, as if he had a score to settle with someone. Then, he opened the door and was approached by a strong blast of fire, and then he was gone.

Just then, Lilly appeared at her side, along with Soot.

“This cat isn’t who you think she is.”

“What do you mean, not who I think she is?” Kanna was surprised and shocked at the appearance of the cat.

“I’m the princess of the World of the Cats!” Soot said (she was talking again). “Don’t pinch yourself; this is no dream! My brother’s Spite carried you here, probably to lure me here. The glass I was in acted as a scrying material, so he knew that you broke me out of there. And now, he’s after both of us.”

“Why?” Kanna asked incredulously, still not convinced this was not ventriloquism and someone had not stuffed her cat last night. “As mentioned before, I am the princess of this world, the World of the Cats, so my brother is the king. But my litter was before his, and he trapped me in that glass case. He was most likely the one who summoned you out of yourself.” Kanna shivered. A person – *cat* – with that kind of power was unimaginable. “And that was just a taste of his capabilities.” The inexperienced witch shuddered to think of what this suzerain could do at full power.

“In order to get to the royal chambers and make an attempt to stop him, we must get across the moat to Crystalline Castle, my home for all my life.” *Except for the past two days*, she thought. “But if you decide to go this way, there are some things you should know. One, my name is Fuyu, not Soot, and stop calling me otherwise.”

“... Like the persimmon?” Kanna inquired. “Yes, like the persimmon,” Fuyu sighed and continued. “Fuyu Persimmon, Princess of the World of the Cats.”

“Second, about that strange, bitter taste in the back of your throat?” Kanna gulped, tasting the blend already. “That is a Translation Potion. I brewed it using ingredients found in the school. That is why I was dashing away so much during your classes. I gave the remaining potion to Lilly, who willingly consumed it so she would understand me after she lost you in the woods. You, however, had the potion poured down your throat *inv*oluntarily, which means it had some unexpected side effects.”

Kanna stood there in the damp grass, resisting an urge to scratch at her hair, which had been building up an itch lately. She was bewildered.

“Third, and final because it might answer all of your questions, I am a witch.”

That was the final straw. Kanna pinched herself once more.



Kanna didn't believe her. Of course she didn't. The declaration would have seemed absurd to anyone. Lilly was much easier to convince. Her eyes had widened, and without a moment to lose, sped towards the Cat world. She wondered what the urgency was but didn't push it. Now, she had to apply her plethora of knowledge, accumulated from many hours spent in the castle library in the nights before her mother's unfortunate demise. "In order to cross the moat, we will have to go birling," she announced.

"Birling?" Lilly inquired. "What is that?"

"It's an old lumberjack term," Fuyu replied, "for jumping over various pieces of wood in small, thin bodies of water. Did you notice," she asked, "that when the Spite ran across the bridge, he was so heavy that a few pieces fell off?"

"You don't mean..."

"Ah, but I do."

"Soo – Fuyu," Lilly argued, almost using the name Kanna had christened Fuyu with initially, "those planks are very thin! There's no way that you could jump across them, heavy as we are!"

Fuyu smiled. "Let's just say, I've got a plan. One that involves magic."

At that moment, Kanna decided to join the conversation, raising herself from the tall, brilliant green grass. "What do you mean?"

"The spell to lower gravity!"

Ten minutes later, they were all standing in front of the moat, which had a water system that was eerily still. There was nothing in the dull water that would allow

it to move, no motor, no river life and nothing else natural. It was built in a ravine, though the side the strange trio were standing on had a significantly taller ledge than the other one that they looked at sorrowfully. Their ledge looked to be about four meters, while the one across the water seemed to be only one. As they marveled at the only thing keeping them from carrying out their plan, pebbly auburn rocks crumbled down at their feet and fell into the crevasse. They splashed as they hit the still, gray water, making a plopping sound that was almost a crash as they sunk. Fuyu gulped. *If what happened to those rocks just now happened to those two, I'll never forgive myself.* Taking a deep breath, she recited the gravity spell:

San Murakami Pazu

Shiko Nahoku Manami

Queverence Willivern

Gravita Absurda!

In Witch language, this briefly translates to “lower the gravity of us three beings.” Kanna felt nothing at first, then she started to walk towards the moat. Her feet seemed to make some sort of invisible, squat staircase in the air, and she found she could stay up there for a longer period. Marveling at it, she exclaimed, “It’s like I can fly!” Fuyu looked up at her and joined her, making a large jump that was normally impossible for a cat to achieve. Soon all three of them were doubled over in a heap, breathing heavily and laughing, worn out, especially Fuyu, from the exercise.

“Now comes the hard part,” Fuyu informed the two girls. “You will have to climb down into the moat, to the nearest log. Be very careful, and I wish you luck; but whatever you do, don’t try to jump to any log you aren’t certain you’re going to reach if it’s only for the sake of trying out your temporary powers.

Although it has been lessened considerably, the threat of drowning still looms.”

“Uh, question,” Lilly said, “How long does the spell last for?”

“Until I pass out from exhaustion,” Fuyu replied.

The two girls looked at each other simultaneously with a feeling of pure dread on their faces.

Kanna’s hands hurt already, even though she had only been climbing down for a few minutes. “Uh, Fuyu?” she asked tentatively, her voice wavering as she looked down at the eerily still water. “How much longer is it?” “Three and a quarter meters,” Fuyu replied, much ahead of Kanna thanks to her flexible spine, which allowed her to jump from one muddy brown ledge to another. “Be patient.” She jumped onto the first plank, which even though with her reduced weight wobbled perilously.

Kanna sighed and continued on, wincing each time she touched the muddy ledge. Suddenly Lilly yelped in surprise, the sound bursting the pleasant silence that stilled the air. The unexpected sound caused her to lose her footing. “What is it?” she called down to her.

“You don’t see it?” Lilly asked, cocking her head at her as Kanna came to join her on the ledge.

“See what?” she inquired, brow creasing. “What do you mean?”

“The ghost.”

Chapter Seven

A Perilous Endeavor

Lilly looked at Kanna expectantly as she stared at the water, hoping some paranormal spirit would make its appearance. Her friend had stuck out a calloused finger, pointing towards the middle of the moat, but Kanna couldn't see anything and was, frankly, wondering if her friend had finally snapped, after almost a year of living in the same dormitory. "What ghost?" she asked at last, puzzled. "The ghost!" Lilly persisted. "Don't you see it? It's moaning, it's in pain!"

"Eh?" *This was getting even stranger*, Kanna thought. *Can a ghost be in pain?*
"Why?"

"I don't quite know yet," Lilly replied. "Let's go talk to it!" She took Kanna's hand, thrusting her forward to the next log. "Wait—" Kanna began, but she was already in the air, jumping onto the splintering wooden plank with a quiet *splash*. "Lilly!" she called as her friend stood motionless, waiting for something to happen. "Lilly, I can't see the ghost!"

Lilly turned to her, surprised. "You mean, you don't see anything there?" She pointed, again, with her muddy hands to the water below. "You don't see him?"

"Uh..." Kanna didn't know how to respond to this. "No. I don't...?"

"What?" Lilly was clearly shocked by this response. Her brow furrowed, giving her a constipated look, and then she turned to Kanna again. "You mean... you really can't see ghosts?!"

“No, most people can’t...” Kanna twiddled her rough, muddy thumbs. “After a certain point everyone just dismisses them as fairy tales.”

“Well, they’re *not!*” Lilly exclaimed, the revelation seeping in. “I thought *everyone* could see them!”

“No, I’m pretty sure they can’t. You’re the only person I’ve met who’s ever so much as mentioned them!” Kanna failed to tell her friend that she had never actually spent a long enough time with a person to get fully acquainted with them.

“Huh,” Lilly commented. “Strange.”

An awkward silence followed this conversation, and Lilly ignored the ghost completely, jumping to the next log.

That was where she spotted the first crocodile.



Fuyu was beginning to get uneasy. Perched on the bank of the moat, shrouded in a strange mist, she could not see the progress of Kanna and Lilly. She was wondering if they had fallen in.

As soon as the thought occurred to her, she dismissed it. She would know if they were drowning – lots of screaming, splashing and crying. But she was beginning to doubt the girls’ ability, and of course, she had not told them about the crocodiles.

Wait – the *crocodiles!*!

How could she have forgotten?

She dashed toward the water, birling towards the two girls.

Lilly spotted it first. She jumped back in surprise, and Kanna, feeling the abrupt shift of weight in the flimsy log, lost her balance and nearly fell into the still waters of the moat. Her arms whirled around and around madly, and the heat rose in her body, making her wish she had worn something that fit her more loosely. Her Fernshire uniform, all dull colors and flat sides, gripped her torso like a cup cozy. She was hot and tired. But she found the courage to continue on. "Come on," she told Lilly. "So there's crocodiles. So what? We can face them. Together." She offered Lilly her hand. She took it. And together, they jumped until they could see the short barrier that separated them from the land.

When they were almost to their destination, they saw Fuyu jumping towards them. She soared through the air in one final jump, and when she reached them, she landed on Kanna's head. The two girls laughed and continued on, Kanna balancing Fuyu, but the cat didn't react. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing heavily.

The log dropped into the water.

Lilly and Kanna were plunged beneath the silvery moat, glubbing, and treaded water up, up, lungs screaming for air, arms flailing wildly, but the weight of Fuyu was almost too much, and their efforts were no good-- they were panting, panting, they had reached the surface, and they had to get themselves to safety...

They tossed her onto the shore from afar, panting, before the crocodile struck.

It announced its presence with chomping. Terrible, terrible chomping, one that sounded like it could chew a person to bits.

And it could.

The two girls screamed in terror and anguish, swimming to the shore. Dirt and debris stuck to their uniforms from the water, ruining them, but that was not the most pressing matter of late. They were drenched in cold, cloudy water, being

chased by a crocodile. Suddenly, Lilly stopped swimming, treading water almost perfectly. Her head slumped and she looked towards the sky.

The crocodile was getting closer.

Lilly's head snapped back. The ghost, it seemed, had provided her with an answer.

Ni Kavana Inibachi

Se Hoku Nuyo

Queverence Willivern

Tokoru Huna!

In Witch language, though the two didn't know it, the spell briefly translates to "save us from harm by any means". Lilly and Kanna were heaved out of the water, over the barrier, and promptly collapsed on the lush green grass, looking like bedraggled rats, chests heaving madly. This was the last thing they remembered as they drifted, like their cat friend, into unconsciousness.



Kanna snapped awake. How long had they been lying there, in the damp grass that felt like feelers of some undiscovered monster? How long had they been lying there, in this land that smelled of petrichor and echinacea? How long had they been lying there, in this land that looked like some wonderful dream of a slightly insane middle-aged person? Yes, Kanna could still taste the bitter potato in the back of her throat, still feel the muddy, rough side of the ravine as she climbed down, but that felt like so long ago.

But it wasn't.

She shook her head. Clearly, her overactive imagination was acting up. Any moment now, she would wake up in Fernshire. But as the minutes passed, she realized she wouldn't. ...No fantasy realm would smell like petrichor.

Lilly stirred and Kanna rushed to her side, grass wetting her shoes once again. "Are you all right?" she asked her, extending a hand to help her get up from the ground. But Lilly was perfectly capable of doing it herself. She got up, uniform wet and muddy as was Kanna's, due to the perilous events of the previous... hour? day? week? Neither she nor her friend could tell how much time had passed. "What time is it..." Lilly rubbed her eyes and moaned. "No, I don't want to get up."

"Lilly, we're not in Fernshire anymore."

Lilly's eyes widened. "Oh no. We're *here*. No, no, no!"

"Lilly, what's wrong with you?"

"Don't you understand?! *HE* brought us here!"

"But Lilly, who's 'he'?"

Fuyu snapped awake. The two girls were worried and taking it out on each other, words increasing in volume as they bickered. She listened intently for a few seconds but was unable to make out anything; it all just sounded like unintelligible gibberish. Suddenly, Kanna's voice rang through, clear and understandable: "...Who's 'he'?"

Fuyu knew. Her stomach plummeted and it felt like crickets flew into her spleen, ramming at the sides ruthlessly. Destitute, she jumped to her paws, which were damp from the soft grass. Had they really just been lured here by her brother? Had she, Fuyu Persimmon, really fallen for such an obvious trick?

“My brother. *Taro*.” She grimaced as she spoke her brother’s name, spitting it out like a bad word. She had grabbed the attention of both girls. Unfortunately, neither of these reactions was expected. Lilly looked down at the grass, wilting like a flower, tears pooling in her eyes. “I should have known, I should have known.” Kanna’s reaction was not entirely different, she sank to her knees as well, but not because of sorrow, because of her stomach, which she was clutching with ferocity, as if it was a child who needed comforting. Her forehead was slick with sweat and her cheeks were pink.

She had a bad fever, because of her tumultuous sleep. And because it was magic-induced, it could mean death. And Lilly... she somehow knew about this whole thing.

The crystalline castle loomed over them, casting a shadow over the grass as the sun rose.



Kanna’s eyes were swimming. “You’re telling me... what?”

“You have magic fever, a particularly bad variant,” Fuyu repeated, in a tone so urgent it was believable. “If we don’t find a cure for this fast, then your body will dissolve into energy. Unfortunately, I’m no medicinal witch. I was taught defense and protection magic. So we need to find a way to save you.

“We’re far away from any humans who might help you, and that is what we need. So what we’re going to do is: sneak into the castle.”

Kanna gaped at Fuyu, staring at the crystal structure in awe and respect. No way could they infiltrate that. Unless a Transforming spell was performed, there was no way to pass by the ferocious guards. “Uh, Fuyu?” She glanced at the cat. “Are those... manatees?” Fuyu gulped and Kanna’s fears were confirmed. Manatees were known throughout the world for being notoriously smart and sharp-witted,

and they had amazing magical abilities. “Wait—I have a better idea,” Lilly responded, jumping into the conversation. “There’s an herb that grows here, and *he* gives me it in exchange for —” she cut off abruptly, eyeing Kanna surreptitiously. Noticing Fuyu’s reaction, she changed the subject. “Never mind. Let’s go to Star Lake, behind the castle. There, we’ll find what we need.”

Fuyu was puzzled and suspicious. How could Lilly, a boarding school child, know all this?

Still, they marched through the dew-soaked grass to the pond. Fuyu couldn’t help but suspect that something was wrong. Something was wrong, a wonky gear in a well-oiled machine, and she was afraid she might not be able to fix it.

Chapter Eight

Goose

He had first come in the night; late, late at night, when she could hear the cicadas chirping in the forest, basking in the tranquility of the dark, smell the scent of the cafeteria workers cooking up a potato salad for themselves for a midnight snack. But what she saw was a horrific sight. What she saw was magic fever. Her hands were sweaty, and her fingers trembled with each movement, so hard that it made it impossible to play the cello anymore. Her cheeks were hot and pink, and it felt like she was wrapped in a blanket even though she was sitting on her bedside shivering.

Nobody wraps up in a blanket on a sweltering summer evening, not when everyone else you knew was dancing and roasting marshmallows over the Midsummer Bonfire out your window. On the lawn, other children were doing that, but not her. Not the kid with the Fever. It had sprung up days ago when, meaning it as a joke, her friend slipped her a potion that turned her into a frog down her throat. She had started sweating. Her cheeks had turned pink. She had been bedridden since that day in Mr. Skalowski's class, and she had no idea how to cure it.

Apparently, according to the medicinal witch, the only way to get rid of it was to die. Her situation was destitute.

Nobody wanted to die. Especially not her, not now, not her. She had a familiar – a *goose* – a rare familiar which was easily mistaken for a non-magical creature. But Albert the goose could see ghosts. And apparently, she could too.

But that night, when a purple mist enveloped her familiar like the paw of a cat batting at a toy lackadaisically, she was rather scared. She had barely ever been scared before. She hated being scared. She liked being alone, with her books. But this seemed like something to be scared of. The mist writhed around the avian familiar, causing it to squeal... shut its eyes... scream... open them again, to see the mist in its eyes. He waddled toward her, ethereal purple light shining out of his pupils like small lamps. She gasped, edging away. Then, her goose spoke, in a gravelly voice that was deep and rough, but strained, as if it had been put in a food processor. Her legs shook as she stood up, peeling herself away from her damp mattress and comforter like a flower from the stem. *"I am here to help. Do not be scared. . . Lilly."* She backed away, her bare feet catching on the plywood floor. She tried not to wince or fall to the floor crying in pain. She would not embarrass herself in front of this mysterious stranger. She gritted her teeth, feeling the residue of the leek and potato soup from lunch. "How do you know my name?" she asked shakily, sliding against the wall like a gecko with a vengeance. *"I know everything there is to know. Do not doubt my knowledge, child,"* the purple mist spoke through her familiar, sounding contemptuous now. *"And that means that I know of a cure for the Fever."*

"No, you don't. No way." She faced her goose with a stern tone, her chin jutting out in defiance. "My sickness is incurable. The medicinal witch said so."

"The primal knowledge and supply of herbs in this world are nothing compared to that of mine. The herb exists and is growing near a lake near my dwelling. But I do not live in this world." Her goose's feathers ruffled and he had begun pacing. *"This is a temporary cure. But if you do as I ask, at this time next year you will have a permanent cure."*

"Say it and I'll do it," she cried. "Anything to be rid of this wretched fever."

“Good. I’m glad we could come to an agreement.” The stranger dimmed its light. *“When the new girl comes next term, find out everything you can about her and report back to me. If you promise to do as I ask, the herb will appear weekly with this world’s dawn. Mash it into a poultice and consume it. You will find all traces of sickness gone from your body.”*

“However, this cure only lasts one week. If you agree, I will come back with more every week, until the end of the year.”

“Come to a decision now, or this offer will be terminated.”

“Yes. —Yes. I’ll do it.”

“Excellent.” The light faded from her goose and he squealed like a pig, dashing around the dormitory. The mist floated out the door, into the forest and was gone.

What have I just agreed to?

Over the course of the next few months, it seemed that the Stranger had been right. A new girl – Kanna Sugimori – did indeed arrive at her dormitory. She had pretended to be reluctant to share, knowing that this would just make her want to share more. And indeed she did. But she found it tough to keep track of the girl. She was unruly yet tame, loud but sometimes philosophical. She couldn’t figure her out. But she nevertheless kept tabs on all she did: what books she read, how she ate her food, when she woke up in the morning. And every week she got the mysterious herb, clamped in her goose’s mouth. She had no idea of its intentions. Until he left a note on the herbs, and she learned his name. Now, she knew who she was up against.

And despite herself, she was beginning to become friends with Kanna. She couldn’t understand it. It was like... like... spending time with someone frequently made you get to know them better.

One week, a note came. It was a few weeks before the cat catastrophe began, and as she had found out earlier, the day Taro took control of the World of the Cats.

It read:

You have served your purpose. Here is the permanent cure.

With the note came a single small lozenge, wrapped in wax.

She placed it in her mouth, smelling the minty, sweet flavor of the precious curing herb, as well as something else, and left it there.

She was guilty. She felt like a liar, a criminal. The perpetrator of the crime.

But she was free of the Fever. For good.

Chapter Eight

Froggie, Froggie

“**Y**ou’re *sure* you know where it is?” Kanna inquired politely in a scratchy voice, skeptical of her friend’s knowledge of the herb. Of that it even existed. The Levitation spell Lilly had learned earlier was recited once more, raising her into the air. Small, soggy bits of rope had been found in the moat that morning, which Lilly had used as a leash. Anyone walking by would have stared at the scene: A cat and two girls, one girl pulling the other’s wrist. One was levitating, but no one walked by. Tourists were scarce here, especially human ones.

Until now.

“**M**ay--**I**--**H**elp--**Y**ou.”

someone said in a halting voice. Lilly and Fuyu jumped simultaneously, and Kanna’s head jerked up to search for whatever caused the sound. They were nearing the lake, she could see, but no one was in sight.

“**M**ay--**I**--**H**elp--**Y**ou.”

This was beginning to get creepy. Lilly and Fuyu both jumped, higher this time, and Kanna swiveled her head so far she thought it would come right off her neck. “Uh, Lilly?” Kanna asked her friend, in a wavering, inconsistent tone. “Did you hear that?”

“Yep, I sure did.”

“**M**ay--**I**--**H**elp--**Y**ou.”

“There it is again!” she whispered. Lilly gave no reply to this. They were almost to the lake.

The sun was rising, and it glimmered on the spotless waters of Star Lake. The water was pure cerulean blue, and fish were abundant in its waters. There were several cattails around the lake, but other than that, no plant life. It was like it was made of real starlight, and the fish were the stars that produced the light, with the cattails as different planets meandering around the solar system on their orbits.

“Maay--J--H(e)p--You”

Something jumped out from behind the cattails. Something small, something that could wrap around a blueberry but not a persimmon. Something with large eyes that bulged out of its amphibious, slick head.

It was a frog. Lilly and Kanna laughed in relief. Why had they been so scared?

“Maay--J--H(e)p--You”

They remembered in no large hurry as the frog began to speak again, their scratchy voice billowing from their vocal cords. The sac beneath their mouth expanded as they drew in a breath, dew dripping from it as it waxed. When it waned again, it did so very quickly, like a luxury mattress, or perhaps a balloon in the care of small children.

“Maay--J--H(e)p--You”

Lilly bent down to the frog. “As a matter of fact, you can -- do you know where the herb peppermint anise grows?”

“Near--The--Reeds--Where--My--Home--Is”

“Where is your home?”

“Right--Here”

The frog gestured to the reed bed, where, hidden beneath the tallest cattail, there was a large amount of flattened, fractured cattails. Kanna thought it looked quite a lot like Cream of Wheat. It was finely ground into a lump that looked like green and brown moss. There were some patches that had a suspiciously... *fuller* brown color than the others (Kanna shuddered, not only because of the chills, to think of the excrement that these frogs produced) and some that had a less suspicious fuller green color (Kanna thought it was likely that these were fresher cattails). But as she surveyed the small dwelling, she didn't see any plants that were unusual, that only grew in this world. Only cattails, reeds and the water, which sparkled as the sun rose in the sky. “Where is the herb?” she asked the frog, trying not to sound like an interrogator but still incredibly stressed out at the strong possibility of death.

“Under--There” The frog responded with a hint of a giggle, their sack wavering as they spoke. “Under *where?*” Kanna asked, cross and annoyed with the vague reply.

The frog burst into giggles, slapping their tiny arms on the wet grass. “Time's--fun--when--you're--having--flies” Kanna rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Where did you get that?” She turned to Lilly. “I think he must mean underwater, but I don't know how the heck we're going to get under there!”

“Under *where?*”

Kanna burst into giggles and Lilly rolled her eyes. She had fallen right into that one. “Okay *seriously* though, where are we searching?” she asked, her mouth a thin, annoyed line.

“Under *water.*” Kanna's response came after a small pause, like she had needed to stop and eat a salmon beforehand. That got Fuyu thinking about salmon, and she drooled as she listened to the girls' conversation. She was running around

the lake's parameters, trying to catch the frog, which was running away and jumping remarkably high for a being of such small stature. The wind in her ears made her barely able to hear anything, but she could tell when the two stopped talking, as Kanna especially was very noisy. When they stopped, even for a moment, it was like a breath of fresh air in a polluted city. *Words are cheap*, she thought, *but silence is worth a fortune*. She continued listening, then blanched at the word that came so easily through Kanna's lips. *Underwater*. Oh, *no*. She hated water and everything to do with it.



It had begun when Fuyu was a smaller kitten, and she was reading a book in the palace library. She breathed in the musty scent of the book, one of her personal favorites. The leather-bound tome was not of the Cat world; the author had been of the Human world. She had often wondered about the Human world, and this book only nurtured her curiosity, this strange fantasy from a land which she lived next to yet had never seen. The protagonist was a troubled sort, with a literal shadow following him wherever he went. Fuyu thought it was a good lesson on the nature of all beings, human and cat alike, to cause harm and trouble unintentionally, and the magic was uncannily similar to the magic she knew. Perhaps the author was a witch, though Fuyu knew it was common knowledge in the Human world that magic did indeed exist; though some, unfamiliar with the practice, may have taken to believing that it was a thing of fantasy. Fuyu knew that magical abilities could only be awakened in a young person, and when they achieved maturity, they stopped believing they had any talent at all, as popular culture led them to believe, and led a somewhat average life. Fuyu pitied these people, though she wasn't sorry she was a cat. Cats had superior magical abilities and had the rare power to strongly enhance the powers of others. It was only later that day that Fuyu would regret this fact, though, and for that moment she had been content to flip through the book's worn pages,

the book lying on the hardwood floor as she could barely lift it herself. But then, her ears had pricked. There was someone else in the library, which was uncommon since the only other cat that came here was her mother, on occasion, to do research; her brother often shied away from “long, wordy tomes” like that book and others, and played pranks on the cook and their mother instead. She was almost sure it was her mother, then. It must have been. But then she was unsettled by some spooky laughter. The candles, the only illumination in the spacious room, were blown out by some sort of fan. And then, she felt a chill as the contents of the castle’s well was emptied onto her, drenching her in not-quite-clean liquid, and leaving her completely susceptible to what happened next, even though she should have expected it; Taro had jumped out from the bookshelf nearest to Fuyu and made a loud, startling noise that had scared her wits out of her. She had mumbled a few words unintelligibly, and then got very mad, dashing away from the library with tears in her eyes, blending in with the water she had been doused with almost imperceptibly. She hugged the precious book to her chest, not caring that her tears seeped into the pages, making the ink from so many years ago smudge and leak, and the pages from many years ago warp and disfigure. Her brother was a horrible cat, just horrible.

But when she was queen and Grand High Witch, he would be sorry.

That was the only thought that kept her moving forward that night, as she cried almost silently into her silk pillow, covering the lotus blossoms with tearstains and regrets.

Unfortunately, feelings are like pomegranate juice.

Take it out of the refrigerator and shake it up, then pour it into a cup with ice cubes; that’s anger. Do nothing with it; that’s serenity. Drop it; that’s sadness. And one way to make anger last longer is to add more ice cubes. But you can also dampen it with a microwave oven, and that’s what Fuyu’s mother was that

night, a microwave oven. She came into Fuyu's room and sat down on the mattress, the four-poster bed creaking as her weight was accommodated.

"Fuyu, what's wrong?" she asked, her fuzzy gown tickling Fuyu's nose as she stroked her back affectionately.

"Taro played another trick on me!"

"Your brother is..." Her mother tapped her chin as Fuyu looked up at her adoringly. "Different than you. You'll understand in time."

"What will happen now that I told you?"

"Taro gets no mochi for a week, but that's not relevant. And what do you mean by 'again'?"

"He's been doing it for a while now." Fuyu stared out the window to the stars, not wanting to make eye contact.

"Well, it sounds like we need to have a talk. That will happen in the morning. Get some sleep, okay?"

"...Okay."

The ice cubes had melted. Fuyu drifted off to sleep.

Remembering that night, she wondered if the talk between Taro and her mother had ever occurred; Taro didn't seem to have lost any privileges when Fuyu woke up that morning. Unfortunately, now she would never know.

Her mother was dead.

Dead.

In spite of herself, she began to cry, leaving tearstains and broken dreams on the wet grass.

Chapter Nine

Peppermint Anise

Fuyu was sitting on the grass near Kanna and Lilly, and they were all looking at each other expectantly.

No one could remember the water-to-oxygen spell.

“Well...” Lilly said, remembering something, “The word for ‘oxygen’ in Witch language is ‘freggatus’.”

“Y-yeah, but that doesn’t g-get us a-a-anywhere,” moaned Kanna, her voice shaking with chills. “Th-that frog jumped away l-l-l-long ago, and they were n-no help anyway. We ha-huh-have no way to get the pap-perp-peppermint anise; it’s in the m-m-middle of-f-f the lake!”

“The middle of the lake?” Fuyu inquired, “is that right?”

“Y-yes, the middle of-f-f the la-a-a-ake.”

“Okay, I have a plan... If we can’t go to the middle of the lake, we’ll have to make the middle of the lake go to *us*. I’ll use the Levitation spell to bring the earth out of the water, bringing the herb with it, and then use the Low Gravity spell to let Lilly jump up to it. Then, she can pick the peppermint anise and save Kanna.”

“Well, not permanently,” Lilly intervened, “only for a week.”

“Yes,” Fuyu agreed, “only for a week. We’ll have to find the permanent cure when we find my brother.”

Lilly nodded in agreement and faced the water resolutely, the mild wind playing with her hair like an annoying younger sibling. “Yeah,” she said, “the permanent cure.”

Then Fuyu waved her paws around, clearing the area. Once Lilly had stepped away, she rubbed her paws, cleared her throat and recited the Levitation spell.

Kuvina Samun

Ikudo Murani

Queverence Willivern

Studia Lilica!

In Witch language, this briefly translates to “bring up the earth with the wind.” There was a great *whoosh*, and a gust of wind swooped around them, enveloping Fuyu’s hands. It turned a bright blue and retreated when Fuyu opened and closed her paws. “W-woah...” Kanna exclaimed, sinking to her knees and giving in to the intense pressure of the Fever. “That’s *beautiful*.” “Isn’t it?” Fuyu replied over her shoulder. “It’s the spirit of the wind. It helps with the spell.” She closed her eyes and shot out a blue beam of wind into the middle of the lake, where it seemed to dissolve. Then, there was a great bubbling, first just the sound, like a pot about to topple over with boiling water, then there were real bubbles in the water. The earth around them began to shake, as if it was doing the disco and had absolutely no consideration for them at all, and then a chunk of drenched dirt rose up from the bubbles, connected to the blue light. Fuyu smiled. “Now that,” she meowed, “is where you’ll find the herb.” She looked at Lilly, but as soon as she looked away, the connection to her and the light was severed, though the sopping dirt remained standing. That was part of the plan. She recited the Gravity spell again:

Ichi Murakami Pazu

Shiko Nahoku Manami

Queverence Willivern

Gravita Absurda!

This has the same meaning as before, except instead of “three beings” it was “one being”. Lilly backed away from Fuyu, until the cattails touched her shoulders, and then ran until she reached the edge of the water, where she took an enormous leap which propelled her to the small amount of dirt. Her feet landed on the brown soil, which kept its shape because of the dampness and the low gravity. She had become a speck in the distance to Fuyu, who watched nervously as the dirt began to shudder at the weight of the girl...

Kanna was hot. She was hot and that was the only thing that mattered... her nose was stuffed up, her cheeks were red and she was hot... so hot...

She was collapsed on the wet ground, her knees splayed out beside her. She was gasping in the air of the Cat world, knowing with every breath she was not supposed to live. She was supposed to die.

And it was becoming increasingly likely.

She gulped, swallowing a lump in her throat. Her snot was streaming out of her nostrils, as there were no tissues here. Her hair was wild and unkempt, for there were no combs here. She wanted to go home and get proper treatment for the Fever.

But she watched Lilly as she reached for the herb that would temporarily save her, knowing that her hope was futile.

The earth crumbled beneath Lilly's feet. She clutched the herb in her hand, knowing that if she didn't jump now, she was going to fall into the lake, and she didn't know how to swim, didn't know how to tread water. She looked down at

the dirt falling into the water below, gulping. Acrophobia kicked in and all of a sudden, she didn't want to jump. She was scared. She hated being scared, and she hated admitting being scared, but she was scared all right. She quivered as she jumped around the dirt, knowing that Kanna's life was literally in her hands. She could hear Fuyu, down below: "Jump, Lilly, jump! Don't hesitate!" But she hesitated, and soon, after a few agonizingly long *plops*, she was standing on very thick...

Air.

She flailed her arms as she fell into the water. Just before she pierced the surface, she managed to whisper the spell that saved you from harm. But this time, it wasn't for her; it was too late. She spoke to the herb, which had already hit the water.

Ichi Kava-a-ana Ini-i-i-bachi

Se Hoku Nu-Nu-uyo

Queverence-- Willivern

Tokoru-u-u Huna-a-a...

There was a splash, and she felt herself sinking. Was this the end? If so, it wasn't a bad way to go; at least she could save someone else. *Goodbye, goodbye... I'm sorry I had to go this way.*

Lilly closed her eyes as her breath ceased and she lay still, life slipping away and being claimed by the water.



SPLASH. The moment was on instant replay in Fuyu's mind as she watched a stream of rapidly waning bubbles come up from the water. SPLASH. She had let this happen. SPLASH. Lilly might be dead because of her. SPLASH. She needed to concentrate. SPLASH. What spell would save Lilly? SPLASH. She had saved Kanna; the herb was in her hands, but because she saved her, she was not able to save herself... SPLASH. *Think, Fuyu, think. . . NNGH... Thinkthinkthink! No! No! Lilly is in trouble, you have to help her, think of a spell... No, no, no!*

Fuyu's mind reeled to when the water took Lilly, thinking about it in horror. Then, she remembered the spell, the one Lilly had waiting on her lips when she was falling. The one she had spoken, in a voice wracked with guilt and tears. The spell to bring one out of danger in any means possible.

Ichi Kavana Inibachi

Se Hoku Nuyo

Queverence Willivern

Tokoru Huna!

The water exploded with magic. Fuyu immediately recoiled, remembering the day in the library. But the water seemed to be doing nothing, just getting narrower and higher and narrower and higher. Through the white foam at the top, though, Fuyu could see a drenched, sodden form. Was it Lilly? It was impossible to tell, as the spray covered nearly their whole face. Then, the water jerked wildly, causing the form to fall onto the grass, and fell back, with a deafening splash, into the lake.

There before Fuyu and Kanna lay Lilly, coughing substantial amounts of water onto the grass. Clutched in her hand was a sodden herb, the herb that would temporarily save Kanna. Peppermint anise.

Forehead slick, Kanna reached for the herb. Even damp, the herb was beautiful, with long purple stalks and red and white flowers with a brown pollen star pattern in the center. She was about to bring it up to her mouth when Fuyu exclaimed, “No, stop! It’s poisonous!” She froze, holding the herb. Her hands went limp, and it fell onto the grass. “What?” Kanna inquired, staring at Fuyu incredulously. “Lilly almost *died* to bring me a *poisonous herb*?!” “No, no – only the *stalk* is poisonous,” clarified Fuyu, causing Kanna to bend down and pick it up again. “Only the petals and the pollen are edible, and you have to mash it into a poultice.” Kanna knew that spell, and she was glad to remember that she had used it two days before, with potatoes in Mr. Skalowski’s class. She took out a vial that she had saved from the Potions classroom, hiding it in her pocket for when she might need it, and inserted the petals, snapping the top off the stem. She had no intention of getting poisoned. Though her hands shook, she was precise and didn’t put a single purple stem into the vial. She then used the spell:

Ichi No Kushiha

Nikaho Ika Go

Queverence Willivern

Gravita Mashika!

A blue mist enveloped the flower and its pollen, gripping the vial like a contemptuous fox. The glass shattered, falling onto the blades of grass below, and the mashing began. Kanna helped, making sure it was thorough, and then took the poultice and panted to Fuyu, “What next?” Fuyu looked at her. She was in even worse shape than she was this morning; her eyes were bloodshot and her Fernshire uniform was covered in sweat. “Get the purest lake water,” she directed, “and mix it with the flower. The potion should work then.”

After a peeved water spirit grudgingly gave them the water they needed, Kanna drank the potion. Immediately she felt the difference: her cheeks returned to

their original color, she stopped perspiring and she stopped panting. “It worked,” she said in disbelief. “It really worked! Oh my gosh, it *worked*!” Her joy was interrupted by a loud growl. She stared down at her stomach. They had all forgotten to eat breakfast.

“Are there any fish in the lake at all?” Kanna inquired. “It seems so peaceful!” “Just a couple of carp,” Fuyu responded, glancing at the unconscious Lilly. She had fallen asleep right after the rescue; the effort of casting the rescue spell and the convulsions as she fought to expel the water from her lungs, desperate for air, proved to be overexerting, and she had passed out. “And if we even try to catch them, my brother will have us in the guillotine before we know it.”

Kanna gulped at the mention of the guillotine; she knew it had been used in olden times to cut off people’s heads, but she had no idea they still existed. “A guillotine?”

“Yes...” Fuyu replied with a sigh, “they call it the ‘Neverseen Guillotine’, because it is seen by no one except the executioner and the person that has earned their fate. My brother is very focused on making things sound more awe inspiring than they actually are.”

“Yes, but what can we eat?” Lilly asked, stirring.

“The forest has mushrooms, and we can forage those; I read up on them when I was younger, when I was into mycology. Lilly, you’d better stay here and replenish your strength; Kanna and I will go to find the flora, if that’s all right with you?”

The two girls nodded in agreement.

“Very well. Come with me, Kanna. The woods over there are better foraging spots than the cattails.”

Chapter Ten

Poisonous?

The two made their way to the drawbridge. Fuyu enchanted the guard to sleep, and Kanna magically lowered the drawbridge. “Good work,” Fuyu commented as the chain subsided to make a path across the water. “But how are we going to get back? All of the logs sunk after a while.” “You’ll see,” Kanna replied mysteriously, and hung the drawbridge back, using magic to do so; a simple grab and throw spell. “You’re not the only one who surreptitiously brews plans.”

They made their way to the forest, Fuyu looking up at the sky as dark gray storm clouds gathered around it, looking like fists slamming down on an otherwise immaculate desk. “Looks like it’s going to rain,” she commented. “I’ll need the Umbrella spell for this.

Ni Gikano Midashi

Kunashi Matsuko Awari

Queverence Willivern

Shelterakuka Magica!

In Witch language, this briefly translates to “Shelter the two of us from the rain.” There seemed to be no difference in the atmosphere, but there appeared to be a slight weight over their heads, like an invisible slab of armor. “What happened?” Kanna asked. “You’ll see,” Fuyu replied, and Kanna groaned. “Oh, come on!”

It wasn't long before they found their first mushroom: a round, dark blue fungus with a brown stem. "Is that poisonous?" Kanna queried. "I've never seen that type of mushroom before." "No, it's not -- though we probably shouldn't take it out of the ground," Fuyu cautioned as Kanna reached for it. "This is the Umbrella Shroom. When it rains, small animals gather under it for shelter."

As if on cue, there was a rumble of thunder and rain began: first a mist, then a drizzle, then full on rain, hitting the pine needles and soil on the ground like bullets. Several mice and small birds made a beeline for the Umbrella Shroom, finding a dry space under its broad top. Kanna was surprised; she didn't know nature could work this way. "Let's go find some more mushrooms," Fuyu meowed, remembering their initiative, "Lilly must be up by now." But Kanna couldn't help but glance upward to see what the spell did; what she saw was a small pocket of air hovering over them, blasting away the droplets of rain from their heads. "Wow, cool..." Kanna marveled. Fuyu sat next to her, looking up impertinently. "Are we going or not?"



They worked until nearly noon, just as the clouds were parting. They had only about fifteen mushrooms, as nonpoisonous fungi were few and far between, but they were rather large and were sure to fill them up. There was the Horned-Owl Fungus, a small, stout mushroom with tufted "ears" poking out of the top; the Wottcrown Mushroom, a bioluminescent white fungus that had, instead of one stem, many, making it look like a jellyfish, though in reality the mycelium grew partly out of the ground and there was no stem for the mushroom; the Perseus Mycelium, a green, energy restoring mushroom and important potion ingredient that grew on hundred year old or older trees and only waxed during rain; and the Rushroom, a fungus with a top the shape of a star and which was also a sought after potion ingredient, heightening the consumer's speed; among others

with they were all proud of. And that was just the start: the other world had other mushrooms, each weird in their own way, such as the Birch Polypore, a fungus with a brown to white gradient that had a smooth surface which looked very different the tree bark it clung to, the Orange Pinwheel Marasmius, a mushroom that grew from a spindly stalk into an orange top that rather looked like an umbrella, and the Parrot Mushroom, a green topped, yellow stemmed ground dweller. Each tree-clinging mushroom had been found by Kanna, the taller of the two although short for her age and had been checked by Fuyu if it was of the poisonous variety. Fuyu had also found all the ground varieties, scouring every area. There was a spell to remove all poison from a selected item, but it took far too much time and energy to execute. They had fashioned a basket out of spells and tree bark, and Kanna longed to take it on a picnic someday, someday when this whole ordeal was over. “Hey...” Kanna queried cautiously, “Why hasn’t anyone come looking for me yet? How come no one at Fernshire has seemed to notice my disappearance? And what will happen when they realize it?”

Fuyu was silent for a staggering minute of suspense, then she spoke. “Time works differently. For the Cat World, everything is sped up; that’s why cats live shorter than humans, in the Cat World they live to about the same age. A day here is an hour there, so they only think you’re still sick. They will only discover you’re gone after they bring you dinner, which is in *days* here. You have plenty of time.” Kanna took a moment to process this, then looked across the forest, beyond the reaches of the Cat world, and saw that storm clouds were gathering ever so slowly. “Hey...” she said, and Fuyu braced herself. The torrent of questions and realizations were about to begin. “That’s why no one else found you at the forest! You were only there a day or two over there, but it must have felt like weeks to you...” “Well, yes,” Fuyu conceded, “But I only felt it was a day or two, though it was weeks to my brother. I felt both, since I was in the thick of this forest – the portal.” “So which one would you age according to?” Kanna

asked, puzzled. “Whichever one is the lowest,” Fuyu answered, “In this case a day or two.”

“Okay...?” Kanna said. “I think I understand now.” Clutching the basket, the two of them made their way to the bridge.

When they arrived, the guard was still asleep, but not for long; they had to execute Kanna’s plan quickly. “So,” Fuyu stared at Kanna contemptuously, “What’s this big plan of yours?”

“You’ll see,” Kanna repeated, and Fuyu glowered at her. “You’re terrible.”

“Yeah, so are you,” she replied, and then recited the Duplicate Spell.

Ni Kashuni Midago

Muhafu Sayaka Solito

Queverence Willivern

Duplica Woodiva!

There was a strange creaking noise, and then the bridge started lowering, the chain pulled by some invisible force. Except it was not wholly there. Its form seemed to waver, and it was then that Fuyu realized that Kanna had Duplicated the bridge: Quite simply, cut the atoms in half and constructed two weaker bridges from them. They crossed, trying not to look down, as the transparent bridge gave a clear view of the gray water below. When they were across, they cast the Sleep spell again on the guard. Better safe than sorry. Then, Kanna magicked the atoms of the bridge back together, making it look as if nothing had happened, and they continued to Star Lake.

Kanna was ready to collapse in an exhausted heap by the time they reached the water. In addition to the excessive fitness (gym, sixth period, was never her strong suit), she had used up an awful lot of energy casting spells, and she had

not eaten since yesterday. It seemed so far away now, Fernshire. She was tempted to forget it was ever there, along with her parents, Mr. Skalowski, and everyone she had met. It would be no problem forgetting Sean and McKenna, she thought with a snort. But it would be harder with the others. Unfortunately, it would take a long time to forget something like that. Why was she even thinking about this at all? Would she ever see the grey Fernshire cardigan uniform again?

Sighing, she followed Fuyu to Lilly and the mushrooms.



The water did not move against Lilly's feet. It was still. Eerily still, like the moat. *Are there crocodiles in this water?* she wondered. *Is there anything antagonizing us?*

Just then, Kanna and Fuyu appeared from behind the crystal walls of the castle. "We brought mushrooms," Fuyu proclaimed. "None of them are poisonous. I made sure of that!"

"No, it was *me!*" Kanna claimed. "No," Fuyu clarified, "You *found* most of the mushrooms, and I checked if they were poisonous or not. You didn't do any of that!"

"Yes, I did!"

"No, it was all me!"

Lilly rolled her eyes. It was rather fun watching them bicker, but she was very hungry. She looked down at her stomach, covered with the gray shirt she was wearing the day prior. It smelled like rotting socks. She needed to get it washed. *She* needed to get washed. Fortunately, Fuyu noticed the stench as well. "What's

that smell emanating from the two of you? Wash yourselves before we eat; you're both filthy!"

And that was how they came to bathe in Star Lake. Kanna and Lilly washed their clothes as they bathed, scrubbing themselves with the scratchy tops of cattails and trying not to giggle. At one point, there was a noisy splash fight, until Fuyu got a word in edgewise and said if they didn't stop, she was going to turn the both of them into frogs. She was on the grass, edging away from the water. Whenever she had bathed in the castle, it had been a shower, or curling up in one of the sinks that were there purely for decoration and the surface smooth as tomato soup when it has come out of its carton.

At one point, a water beetle jumped on Kanna's arm. "GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF!" she exclaimed when it began to take an interest in her hair. Fuyu tried to cast a spell to wave it away, but instead Kanna became a water beetle. Lilly, however, was quick enough to use the Counteract spell and was able to save Kanna from beetle-dom. Fuyu watched this, amused. She hated water, but Star Lake was beautiful. She was content to just sit and watch it, as long as she didn't get wet.

They ended up having lunch hours later. Kanna and Lilly floated in the water, hair waving about in the lake, and pondered the worth of their lives while their clothes dried. Fuyu was drying the clothes using the Fan spell. After a while and a lot of wind, the clothes were fit to be worn once again, and the two girls were fit to wear them. As they slipped out of the water, they went one at a time, staring at the other and Fuyu and imploring her not to look as she donned her clothes. When they were both fully clothed, Fuyu retrieved the mushrooms from a hiding place in the cattails, and they all ate ravenously. The mushrooms tasted excellent, and Kanna could feel energy seeping back into her. The mushrooms had no magical properties on their own, though. Still, they all tasted good.

Kanna's favorite was the Perseus Mycelium. She did not much enjoy the Wottcrown's slightly acrid citrus flavor, but the Mycelium was a bit spicy and full of flavor. She hadn't tried any of the other mushrooms, but she thought that the Horned-Owl Mushroom sounded good. 'Kanna thought that soup would be good with these. Mmm, soup. Kanna drooled, and her Perseus Mycelium fell out of her hands. Soup... Mmm... Leek and Potato Soup, her mom's Tortellini Soup, Clam Chowder, Wonton Soup, Miso Soup, Ramen... Mmm, soup. Soup, soup, soup.

Fuyu first noticed something wrong when Kanna wasn't eating. Her mushroom had fallen out of her hands and onto the grass next to the other two. At first, Fuyu had assumed that she merely did not enjoy the horseradish-reminiscent taste of the mycelium, but then she remembered that she had been eating them earlier and seemed to have been enjoying them. She also had not picked up a new mushroom. They were all hungry, and Kanna had only eaten one Wottcrown and one Perseus Mycelium. Getting suspicious, Fuyu called, "Hey, Kanna! If you keep daydreaming, we're going to eat all this without you!"

The girl was sitting on her knees, staring up at the sky, just like she had been when she was induced into sleep by the Spite. "Uh, Kanna?" Fuyu tried again. "Kanna! Are you quite all right?"

No response. Fuyu gulped. What could have happened? She considered her options. It could have been her brother, but she had no idea how he would have known that they were there, for in addition to being out of sight of any of the windows in the castle, Taro was on his daily afternoon nap. It could be a guard, she definitely wouldn't put it past Francesca, the entrance guard, but she decided against it because Francesca, and all the other guards, did not have much, if any, magical talent. Her third option -- and last resort -- was the creature that guarded the barrier between the worlds, only letting certain beings trusted by the royal family in. It has been known to play pranks sometimes, but Fuyu didn't think it would go so far as to reach outside the forest. Besides, last time she had

been informed, the creature was a two-tailed *kitsune*, not as powerful as it could be. Unfortunately, Fuyu remembered with a shudder, the book was from years ago.

Was it, truly, the creature? And if it was, then what did this mean for the forest?

Chapter Eleven

Thought Process

Kanna was not where she was supposed to be.

There were flowers all around her, instead of the calm waters of Star Lake and her friends. She was lying in a strange meadow which was between two towering mountains, though she wasn't sure if it was mountains or hills because everything was quite fuzzy. Kanna had never needed glasses, but she was perplexed as to why everything was not quite there. But she could see herself perfectly. She wondered if she was not supposed to be here. Or maybe, this place wasn't supposed to *be*. Was that possible? Kanna wasn't sure if any other worlds other than the two she knew of were real -- but then again, she had no prior knowledge of the Cat world's existence until she was in it. Of course, cats could not talk to people in general, and Kanna was not especially keen on humans invading the peaceful atmosphere of the other world and making it just as troubled as ours. She suddenly became aware that she was lying down, staring up at the night sky with a rather passive look. She got up, her elbows leaning against the wilting grass for support. She felt like she was standing up after listening to Mrs. Waterburn drone on about grammar for over three quarters of an hour. How long has she been lying there? She stretched. Her muscles were sore. Then, she began to survey her surroundings with awe and confusion.

Everything was fuzzy, so it was hard to examine anything. When Kanna came across a white lily, she snapped its stem off to smell it. Dark miasma began to swirl in the stalk, and a new plant appeared to take its place. The lily smelled of lemongrass, not how it was supposed to. Kanna had heard the aphorism "stop and smell the roses", but she didn't think that it would ever be literal until now,

when she was curious about the strange place she was in. Just then, the ground wavered beneath her, as if convulsing when sick. Kanna looked down, and the ground she was standing on seemed, for a fraction of a second, to disappear from existence. Then, it was back to its normal sturdiness. ***“That’s the thing with this realm,”*** said a mysterious voice with a slight British accent. ***“It doesn’t respond well to humans.”*** Kanna stepped backward. “Who are you? Why am I here?”

“Why, Sugimori, I’m the creature of the forest. Haven’t you heard of me?” A lithe figure slid out behind a thick peony bush, five tails flicking towards her. ***“And I brought you here to reason with you.”***



Fuyu wracked her brain frantically for the spell to snap one out of a trance. “Lilly!” she called in a desperate tone. “Kanna isn’t responding to anything. I think she’s been spirited away by the guardian of the forest!”

In an instant Lilly was at her side. “Is she all right?” “Nothing has happened yet,” Fuyu replied, “but I fear that she may not be the same person that she was when she comes out of this.”

“How do you mean?”

“The same thing happened to my brother. Months ago, he was just a normal troublemaker, nothing more. Then, he was different...

I remember getting out of bed that day. It was raining, and I was scared. The events of the previous day, when Taro threw a bucket of water over me, were still fresh in my mind. I huddled in bed for what seemed like hours until breakfast was ready. When I came down, Taro was eerily silent. It seemed like he was being possessed. He was staring up at the sky with a strange look on his face --

as if he were ready to go up and join the clouds in their endless migration to the ends of the earth.

“Then he jerked back awake, and stared at me for a long second, as if he didn’t recognize me. A dark film covered his eyes, making me curious as to whether he could actually see me or not. There was something different about him, the way he moved was almost like his shadow had engulfed him entirely. He eventually seemed to merge with his shadow, and I believe that he is now not my brother but a husk. A husk that something peeled and found him. A husk that has been inhabited by *something else* -- something that is not supposed to be living, but something that is not supposed to *be*. If we can bring him back --” she gulped, fighting back the hot tears that threatened to overwhelm. “I miss my brother, and I want him to rule beside me. He was a good cat, if a bit mischievous.”

Lilly stared at her. “Fuyu, I had no idea.”

“No one does. I don’t tell anyone.”

“Well maybe you should.”

They continued to eat their mushrooms in silence, partly because of the strange and sad conversation and partly because there were no words left to say.



“Why do you think that everything is all fuzzy?” queried the creature, tipping its head to one side and penetrating Kanna’s mind with its calculating stare, but Kanna wasn’t sure if it was being rhetoric and therefore did not answer. “It’s because, of course, this world that I have created can only be accessed through unconsciousness. And hence being a dream realm, it cannot really exist for long. After a few minutes, it will become completely obsolete and you and I will be standing on seemingly nonexistent ground. If you hadn’t been lying on the grass earlier, you would have seen this in all its glory;

now, it is fading away into the rapidly approaching night...” The creature seemed, for just a moment, to become wistful, as if wishing that its beautiful creation would be forever. Then it was gone, and the coldness that penetrated Kanna as she gazed at him returned. **“But enough about that. We have business to attend to. Have you met my dear friend Taro? He’s a valuable asset in my plan. If you were to meet him, maybe you would understand about this whole business.”**

“What business?” Kanna’s stomach roiled. “What happened to Fuyu’s brother?” **“He is part of my plan, Sugimori, one you will also play a part in. Fuyu is trying to mess with fate by taking back the throne, and she can’t do that. Once I have complete control of Taro, volatile thing he is, ravaging the kingdom for soup dumplings, and the fusion is complete, then I will rule over the boundary I used to guard. The worlds will be mine!”**

“The – Wait – BOTH worlds?” Kanna’s eyes widened in shock. “You can’t be serious.”

“Ah--ah--ah... I am. And you will soon see just how much.”

It dissolved into purple smoke, making a beeline for her oral cavity.



There were five mushrooms left in the basket: Two Orange Pinwheel Marasmius, as Fuyu and Lilly had agreed that it tasted the best of all, two Perseus Mycelium because Kanna had seemed to enjoy those, and one Rushroom because no one else liked those. Fuyu and Lilly twiddled their thumbs as contemptuously as one could hope and waited for something to happen. The mushrooms they saved were washed excessively until they shined like fungal diamonds in the clear waters of the lake. Anxiously awaiting when Kanna would snap out of it, they picked at blades of grass and stared at her worriedly. When would she wake up? And what was happening to her anyway?

The mystery roiled in their minds agonizingly as they waited impatiently for their friend.

“Lilly?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“What do you think happened to Kanna?”

They were both silent until Lilly asked, “What do *you* think happened to Kanna?”

This continued for quite a while.



Kanna closed her mouth quickly, terrified. The creature retreated to its original form and stood in front of her, staring at the ground with distaste, as if it had just committed a heinous crime. (Kanna could imagine it: “***Why are you staring at me, convict? Get back in your cell where you belong, worthless ‘dirt!’***”)

And then the ground turned invisible and Kanna was standing on, quite frankly, nothing.

Here was her thought process.

1. You are defying the laws of nature
2. Snap out of it. It’s just a dream
3. This doesn’t seem to be a dream, it seems like you are defying the laws of nature
4. Help help, where are Fuyu and Lilly when you need them
5. Oh right, you were spirited away by a shady fox creature

6. What happened to the ground
7. You should ask the *kitsune* what happened to the ground
8. No, it might get mad at you. Try a more subtle approach
9. Like, "May I please speak to you"
10. No, that isn't very subtle
11. Why is this even happening
12. Why are you even here in the first place
13. The fox is throwing sustenance at you run *run RUN*

The rice hit before Kanna had time to think. On second thought, she had had plenty of time to think. She had thought thirteen thoughts, as listed above, which Kanna thought was quite a lot of thoughts. (14. That's quite a lot of thoughts.) Her face became embalmed in rice and seaweed. "Hey," she called to the creature, which was vanishing in a black flame, "What was that for?"

Then she woke up, the cold gaze of the fox boring into her brain. "Fuyu..." she muttered, not wanting to open her eyes. "Kanna!" A reply came. Desperate, relieved. "We were worried about you, we --"

Kanna saw nothing. She was in a world of darkness. The only thing she could see was an ethereal blue light floating in front of her, blocking her vision.

"Kanna?"

And then she could see again, the light pushed to the back of her mind. "What happened?" She looked around and saw the wide gazes of Fuyu and Lilly. They were concerned about... *something*. And it seemed that *she* was the something. Kanna cocked her head, puzzled. "Why are you staring at me like that?" The

two of them breathed a sigh of relief simultaneously, and then Fuyu meowed, “It was nothing.”

Kanna couldn't help feeling something was up. Fuyu and Lilly weren't quite looking at her the same way as before. But she ignored it. “We saved... uh... mushrooms for you,” Fuyu told her, pushing the basket forward. “Are you all right? You were out for three quarters of an hour.”

Had it been that long? Kanna was surprised. “Really?”

“You couldn't tell? It's almost dusk. We'd better gather some more mushrooms for tomorrow before it gets dark.

“Lilly and I will go; you need food.”

Why are they leaving me behind? thought Kanna. She had so many questions. She watched Fuyu and Lilly walk to the forest again. “W-wait!” she cried. “Lilly! Fuyu!” But they were out of earshot, and Kanna wondered if she had missed something dearly important.



Kanna was all right, and that was the important thing; nothing else really mattered right now. She was not in the grasp of the creature. But something lingered at the back of Fuyu's mind. Something that she hoped was not important. For a fraction of a second, just when Kanna had returned to them, she saw the same black film over her eyes that she had seen on Taro's. The same black film belonging to the mysterious entity that had made her brother into something that she didn't recognize any more, something that she wanted nothing to do with. The vindictive force seemed to be going after them. But how? It may have reached Taro in his dreams, but Kanna... How with Kanna? Fuyu suddenly realized that she had come to a complete halt, looking down at

the grass below. She could hear Lilly calling for her: “Is this poisonous?” She shook away her disturbed thoughts and followed Lilly to the foot of the tree where she was standing, pine needles sticking to her paws like affectionate children. “Coming!”

Progress was slow and by the time they returned to Star Lake, they only had ten mushrooms. That would do for breakfast, Fuyu supposed, but she wondered if she could have found more. “Kanna?” she called across the riverbank. “Kanna, where are we going to sleep?” There was a short scuffling noise in the reeds, and Kanna yelled, “...nyme awagge!”

“Kanna, did you fall asleep in the reeds?”

“No, I’m really not sleepy, after...” Kanna shuddered, as if relieving a terrible memory. “After the creature...”

“...What?”

“The creature that I met in my dream! Everything was fuzzy except for me and it, and then it vanished! It said I was part of its ‘plan’, like your brother...”

Total silence.

Lilly looked at Fuyu with sympathy. Fuyu looked at Kanna with alarm. Kanna looked at Lilly for support.

And none of them said a word.

Lilly was the first to speak, in a hushed voice that was intended to only be heard by Fuyu. “...I think you should tell her.”

Fuyu took a deep breath. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“No reason, I guess... It’s just *hard*.”

Chapter Twelve

Weeping Willow

They settled down next to a weeping willow tree within the confines of Star Lake. Each of them sat in a different position; Kanna sat with her back on the tree, Lilly lay with the roots as her pillow, and Fuyu curled up in between the roots. The rough bark did not make for a terribly comfortable sleeping space, but it was something to lean against, for which they were all grateful. Somewhere to sit down and sleep in security. Somewhere they could hide. Unfortunately, Fuyu knew, Taro always had an eye somewhere. Somewhere no one would think to look. So before choosing the tree as a hideout, Fuyu patted the tree down for surveillance spells, casting a spell to counteract them:

Lacilade Hokuro

Shina Nakova Wichi

Queverence Willivern

Gwillershmidt Duckyduckyducky!

In Witch language, this briefly translates to “I call upon the mighty surveillance ducks to guard the area”. There was a strange whooshing noise and two pockets of air seemed to materialize in a circle around the tree. They made little quacking noises as they zoomed past the three, taking positions around the tree. Though Fuyu didn’t know or see them, the dynamic duck duo had names: The one with curly feathers was “Adrian” and the short one was “Sharona”. But no one knew. Not a lot of people know about things like that. The surveillance ducks would stand their invisible ground until the morning.

Snuggled up to sleep, Kanna dreamed.

She hated dreams. Often ominous, her worst fears would seep in through the cracks in the fabric of reality the dreams created. Like the time that she actually tried the cafeteria eggs. In her dream, the eggs turned into slime and spoke to her in a hideous voice; Kanna shuddered to remember the creepy “JOIN WITH MEEEEEE” that it had uttered as it oozed into her mouth. It had been extremely terrifying. She woke up sweating and hungry, though not for eggs. She wouldn't eat eggs for a while. Kanna was still scared of them today. When she dreamed tonight, there was an ominous blue light that surrounded her. “H-hello?” she called into the depths of her subconscious. “Hello?” The blue light went out for a fraction of a second, and Kanna realized that it was blinking. She was staring at her eye. “Oh, hey...” she remarked. “You're... my eye. Mutual, I'm sure...” She backed away as a black filmy substance oozed over the floor. Kanna tried to run, to find somewhere to hide, but it was upon her. It had enveloped her like broth envelops ramen noodles. That eye was going to be in her skull. Permanently. She heard a voice through the debilitatingly hopeless darkness.

You can't escape me, Sugimori.... You can run, but you can't hide!..

Kanna gasped awake. The creature had appeared in her dream, just as she had feared. The weeping willow's leaves danced in the wind, and Kanna stared at them with a renewed appreciation. She wondered if trees could think for themselves; and if they did, would they lead some sort of revolution? Trees everywhere, ravaging villages, busting up paper factories, saving their Christmas tree friends... There would be total chaos. Almond paper? No, almonds came from trees. Shrub paper? Kanna didn't think many people would buy that. Also, everyone would have to switch to eBooks and fake Christmas trees, both of which Kanna despised. They were poor imitations of previous items, things that didn't have the same scent or feel as the original. Anyway. She was glad that trees were so cooperative with humans. If not, who knew what could happen? Kanna seemed to know. She wondered where she would go to school if trees

busted up Fernshire. Maybe she'd go back to Japan, but she most likely would be at a boarding school. When would she see her parents again? Her father's warm hugs, her mother's warm soup. She missed them. Why did they have to divorce? Why did she have to go to Fernshire? She missed her world and a tiny aching spot inside her opened up, a vulnerable spot in her defenses. But she didn't care; why should she? Here, nothing really could hurt her. Here, she was safe from Sean and McKenna, from all of the other world's problems. She was safe. So why did she feel so insecure? Why was she sitting against a weeping willow tree in another world with a severe case of insomnia?

Why?

Why?

Why?

She fell asleep very quickly. Kanna was no insomniac.



Meanwhile, Lilly couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about all that had happened during the day. Kanna's strange stupor, the informing, the almost dying... it was a lot to take in. She stared up at the sky, but it was foreign to her, different than the sky out the window of her Fernshire dormitory. She couldn't find the hallmark star that led to the Lyra constellation, her favorite... The stars seemed closer somehow, twinkling more frequently. She wondered if it was an enchantment. She wondered if people became stars when they died, and that was why there were so many of them. She did not want to die and she came remarkably close to death today, sinking below the water of Star Lake. Death, life, what was the point of it all?

During the two girl's philosophical ramblings, Fuyu was asleep, dreaming about little fish jumping about in a stream. She was the least troubled of them all.

The morning couldn't have come too soon. Lilly was grouchy due to the lack of sleep, as was Kanna. Fuyu was the mediator between the two as they argued over useless things. One such conversation was this:

KANNA: "Pancakes are better!"

LILLY: "No, French toast!"

KANNA: "Ew, why do you like French toast?"

LILLY: "Because it's *delicious*!"

KANNA: "No, it's not!"

LILLY: "Well, pancakes are disgusting too!"

FUYU: "Both of you stop bickering! We have larger things to worry about than breakfast food debates!"

LILLY AND KANNA: [*Simultaneously*] "Yeah, sure..."

KANNA: [*Pauses*] "...You're still wrong!!"

[*End of conversation.*]

Arguing all morning was not going to get any of them anywhere. Fuyu just eventually surrendered the mushrooms to the two of them and was met with a "Thanks." After this, there was silence. Fuyu was rather glad of this, but after a while it began to get worrying. She had never known Kanna to be silent for more than a few minutes at a time, except when she was sleeping; she was a very talkative person. Fuyu watched them eat, in silence. Their stubborn faces and furrowed brows reminded Fuyu of a sibling dispute. At one point, it got to be

too much. The tension built like crust on a bathroom sink drain. Fuyu fidgeted, twitching her ears contemptuously, until the pressure built enough to strike:

“WILL YOU TWO MAKE UP ALREADY?”

Lilly and Kanna went stock still. Their shoulders went rigid. Kanna glanced around the area, making sure that no one else was going to shout at her. Lilly was stock still. They were both very silent.

“Sorry...” Fuyu atoned, trying to mollify the two children, but they remained silent. “There are some boysenberry bushes in the valley beyond the castle; perhaps we could pick those for lunch...?” She breathed in worriedly, her whiskers tickled by the slight wind. Kanna and Lilly remained silent. Fuyu was getting rather upset again. She channeled her anger, *all* of it, everything since the past few days, when she had been locked in a glass case, walked through a smelly school full of children, and used up an immense amount of energy trying to carry out her plan. She furrowed her brow and barreled toward the weeping willow tree, her paws barely touching the grass. She rammed straight into the bark, making the whole tree’s dangling branches shake. She then unsheathed her claws and dug in, scratching at full force at the tree, yowling in rage and anger, the tears pouring out. When she finally stopped, she realized she had bored a large hole into the tree; raw light brown was exposed. The hole seemed to stare its way into her eyes... Fuyu sucked in great gulps of air, astonished. She was no longer angry. She was... scared. Of herself, of her rage. *Am I becoming like Taro?* This quiet thought echoed inside her mind like a piece of mushroom lodged in her throat, refusing to come out. The tears continued to fall. She hiccupped. Her eyes closed and she slumped against the tree, dampening it with salty tears. Her head swam with unspoken words and she pressed her paws to her temples. *What is wrong with me?*

How can I be capable of such things?

Of course, they were all dealing with something of the like; and it was all caused by the creature. If they knew his name, they may have had some power over it;

indeed they would know how to find it, and summon it out of Taro. But they did not know, nor did they know of the creature's mysterious past, which it has kept hidden even from itself...

Chapter Thirteen

The Fox's Tale

~ Years Ago... ~

He was hungry. His stomach growled as he walked across the halls of the Crystalline Castle, trying not to think about the extravagant feast he and the others were preparing for the queen. The queen was a benevolent ruler, but she delighted still in the occasional white rose and large bowl of ramen prepared for her in her special blue patterned china bowl. Covered in texture, this bowl was hand crafted by master artisans for her mother, who had passed less than a year ago. He remembered her; of course he did. It was the poisonous mushroom that finally finished her off. But who had done such a thing?

To protect the queen from such things, she was surrounded by her many littermates at all times, who always clamored for her attention. And now, she was having kittens, needing her strength more than ever. If she knew of his powers, it would mean instant rejection out of the only life he'd ever known, as a fox in the Cat world. He didn't *really* belong in the Human world either; the other place was odd and different, full of pollution and paper people yelling for attention. Time was so fast there, and yet so slow. It felt like it would drag on forever, and then was gone in an instant. The fox liked the Cat world better. Time was faster there, but slower somehow, like a dream that you couldn't escape. He smelled the odor of boysenberry jam as he walked by the kitchen. Today's royal lunch was sandwiches, with the edges cleanly cut off. There would be an abundance of them, of course, with sun butter from the sunflowers of the royal gardens. Summer had recently gone into decline and he missed watering the plants every day. Sometimes, he talked to them, like Little Vickie the peony.

She was his favorite, until she was snipped and given to the queen for a bouquet. He still missed her, but that had just given him an opportunity to get to know Little Nemby the poppy. Little Nemby was considered a weed, something to be taken out of commission, and so, like it or not, he was eliminated as well. That was when, last fall, he had stopped talking to flora. It was pointless, anyway. Why would he even do that? It wasn't like he was crazy, or anything. *Was* he crazy? To work in this castle, where no one actually interacted with him? Where no one cared about whether he lived or died? He wasn't important, a noodle in a cake of ramen, a cracker in a bowl full of them, a minute in a film. He was an expendable. He didn't really matter.

He was so wrapped up in his negative thoughts that he didn't notice that he had arrived at the queen's chambers.

"Yoshimitsu!" His name rang like a bell, the queen's clear voice echoing across the chamber. The marble tiles that he was standing on reverberated with sound. "I am glad to see you are well."

"Yes, my queen." His scratchy voice quavered, and for an instant, he wondered if the queen could hear it. He bowed, his hands clasped together. He rather looked mysterious: in human form, he had all the features of a normal human, excepting the facts that he had two white and brown tails snaking out of his hindquarters, and instead of having ears on the side of his head, he had two fluffy fox ears poking out from between his neatly combed long hair.

"No need for that." The queen sat from a crystalline chair, and the marble tiles that covered the wall were reflected on its clear surface. It shone with a dazzling radiance, even though it blocked the light. The queen's slate grey pelt was reflected in the sole window behind her. Her hat sat next to her on the tall chair. Her green eyes bore into his like a tooth in a kumquat. "Why do you think I called you here?"

His ears pricked. “For... food?” he asked hopefully, giving a little smile and hoping he was right.

“No, not for food. Yoshimitsu, I have a strong suspicion I am going to die today.”

He was shocked. He tilted his head. “Why?”

“I know who killed my mother, and I need you to stop them. I am the only one who knows of your powers...” The cat leered down at him, as if taunting.

“That’s not true,” protested Yoshimitsu. “Little Vickie knew!”

There was silence, then his queen furrowed her brow. “...Little Vickie?”

He sighed. “Never mind.” He began to walk away, his sandals clacking on the floor.

“Wait!” It seemed the queen wasn’t done with him. He stopped. No one defied the queen, and her requests were the law, especially in the castle. He would wait; he would have to. ‘Yes?’ he called over his shoulder. He half expected the queen not to give him a response, but she was prompt: “I need you to track this person down. They are dangerous, and if I am to die, I would at least like to give birth to my children, the next generation.

“Will you find them for me? If you do, I will tell you their name and you must try to become friends with them, slowly enticing them not to poison me. But I can’t force you, and if you refuse, than you may go back to your life like nothing has happened.”

He mulled this over. He was terrible at making friends; however, this seemed to be the very reason he was so hungry and destitute in the first place. Should he? Or shouldn’t he?

He turned to the queen. “Yes. I will do it.”

“Good.” The queen nodded her head. “Come close. I want no one else hearing what I am about to tell you, lest the person hear it.”

He made his way to the chair, making sure to be careful that he was quiet. The queen’s moth leaned close to his ear.

“It was your father.”

Yoshimitsu pulled back --

No one knew his secret; of course the queen wouldn’t, but still --

No one knew that his father was the one who had betrayed him all those years ago, made him an outcast --

I can’t --



The pain was what woke the fire. Kanna woke up with a roiling feeling in her stomach, as if she needed to go out and do something; run to the supermarket perhaps, or read the next book of a novel series that left off on a cliffhanger. But this was different, more urgent, like a call to action in a real, actual war, something people fought in and died for. The fire blossomed in her head and pulled her in, and she barely had time to think before she could see a royal palace, filled with marble tiles. There was a slight edge to her vision, as if she was watching a film, but she found she could move herself around. She spotted a large chair in the center of the room and found that she was next to a bathroom, with a smooth golden sink in the middle. The tile floor seemed to shine, just a little, from the light reflected from the sole window into the crystalline chair. This was all very strange.

She felt lightheaded. Then she realized she wasn’t actually there.

Not in the sense that most would think; Kanna was not dreaming, nor was she delusional. She just *wasn't* there. Her body was transparent. Experimentally, Kanna placed her hand on the golden sink, tiptoeing into the bathroom to do so. It went right through, and Kanna almost lost her breath. The strange sensation of moving *through* a solid surface was difficult to explain. It was a bit like moving through molasses, or a particularly slow novel. Her hand moved slower than she had expected it to, moving through it as if in a slow-motion video. Interestingly, though, she was still on the ground. She touched the tiles, stooping down to their level, and found that she could only graze them; the ground seemed solid to her, but the tiles weren't, and upon closer inspection she realized that her feet were going through the tiles as well. She was barely hearing what was going on behind her; the crystal chair was so large that she had not seen the cat that occupied it request an audience with an individual named Yoshimitsu. When Yoshimitsu walked in, however, was when she finally noticed what was going on. Only when she heard the word "killed" did she snap to attention. After this, what she heard was: "...mother, and I need you to stop them. I am the only one who knows of your powers." The guest then responded with, "Little Vickie knew!" Kanna was puzzled. Who was Little Vickie? And why "knew"? Was she this person's deceased little sister? The queen seemed to be having the same thoughts: "Little Vickie...?"

"Never mind." The visitor seemed to be losing patience.

"Wait!" The queen wasn't done with them yet. Kanna wondered how long this would last. Then the queen whispered something in the person's ear, and that was when she caught her first glimpse of him.

Coincidentally, it was also when he caught his first glimpse of her.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, then they asked each other, almost simultaneously, "Who are you?"

Unfortunately, the queen was still sitting there, and she turned to look at Kanna. But her face was expressionless. “Yoshimitsu?” she addressed the person. “Who are you talking to?”

“No one,” responded the fox, which Kanna suspected he was. They were masters of shape shifting, but she wasn’t blind. She could see the two tails snaking out of his hindquarters, the two tufted ears poking out of his hair. Then, he made a swift movement toward her. “I have to... uh... use the bathroom,” he called to the queen, then whispered to Kanna, “Why are you here?”

“I’m not actually sure,” replied Kanna. Why could Yoshimitsu see her, she wondered, and not the queen? “Did he call you here again?” he asked, and she gulped. Who was this? “Well,” she responded, “I don’t know. I just was taken here I guess.”

“By whom?” the fox urged. “You have to remember! This is happening all the time lately! No one seems to notice them!”

“You’re telling me this has happened before?”

“...We’ll talk later,” he told her, then called to the queen: “All done!” and ran out of the chamber like his life depended on it.

Kanna followed him. She was restless, and as long as she couldn’t leave this place, she might as well explore.

They went through the hallway. The alluring scent of boysenberry jam filled the space, tickling Kanna’s nose and making her feel like she was about to sneeze, though she knew that scents couldn’t do that. The smell was particularly strong, Kanna noted, next to a door labeled BAKER. Each room had a different label, a little metal slate next to the door informing passersby of the contents of the room. There was a little piece of parchment on the slates, with each name written in neat cursive. Kanna and Yoshimitsu passed by PRINCESS’

CHAMBERS, a fairly large room with two wood doors and cats guarding the entrance, with chain mail armor, LIBRARY, which was a fairly small room with a metallic door and a small slot for returns to be made. Kanna suspected that it worked on the Dewey magical system, named after the famous library cat, in which the cart, once it was full of books, would take them to the shelves and place them on the correct gap according to a sorcery in which the books were cataloged and stored in the memory of the system, so it always knew where they went, KITCHEN, which was slightly open and prompted Kanna to peek inside. There was a linoleum floor, some scratched broomsticks leaning against the plaster wall, and a cook making some clam chowder. The last thing they arrived at before the destination was BALL ROOM, the grandest of all. There was a skylight, Kanna could tell. The light from underneath the door was unmistakable. But other than that, it was a rather mysterious area. Just as she was observing this, Yoshimitsu stopped at the next door, opened it, and closed it quickly, as if haunted by something. To be fair, Kanna reasoned, she was probably the reason for this. She wondered what she would do now, then; she had nowhere else to go; then she remembered that she could go through things now. She slipped through the door into the room coarsely labeled SERVANTS' QUARTERS.

The room reminded Kanna of her own dormitory in Fernshire. The floorboards had nails sticking out of them, as if adamantly refusing to be forced into the wood. There were no windows, and the only thing that illuminated the room was a small lamp in the corner. The beds, it seemed, were a tangle of nets and hammocks and such, marked with a flower, perhaps, or an *origami* frog. Yoshimitsu's was marked with a shamrock, and as he lay down, Kanna felt a strange sensation, as if being pulled. Like someone was saying, *Come back later*. And then, without a sound, Kanna was back in the present, like nothing had happened at all.

Fuyu slumped against the tree, surveying her surroundings. Lilly was scowling, to be expected after all, but Kanna had a strange look on her face, as if she had just realized something. She no longer seemed to be angry. She was staring at her hands, as if they wanted to tell her something, and her eyes were wide, as if she had just witnessed a horrific event. If she had or not, Fuyu had no idea. Unfortunately, she wasn't in any position to talk to her. She had gotten angry, angrier beyond belief. She had no idea that her rage could drive her to do... she turned to the willow tree and felt extreme remorse. Why had she done this thing? Trees were alive too and she had nearly destroyed one! What had she been thinking? She was dangerous, she realized, just like the creature.

Little did she know it was actually the creature who was watching them, for another being was in the castle that morning with Kanna. Someone who would not give mercy to humans.

The guard snapped to attention from his magical slumber and began to stride towards the willow tree at Star Lake.

Chapter Fourteen

In the Dungeon

It was hard to tell who saw who first: Thurl or Kanna. The two of them saw each other at the exact same time, and locked eyes, having a silent fight like two rhinoceros beetles. Thurl won. He strode towards her. “Why are you here, human?” His voice was rumby, like a bear’s, and his thick crop of black hair moved as he stooped down to her. “Well...” Kanna said sheepishly, backing away, “I don’t really understand it myself.” She backed away. “Fuyu transported me here after—”

“Say no more,” rumbled the guard. He stomped to the shredded willow tree, his feet shaking the ground slightly and making the peeled shards of wood quake in fear. “I thought you were still in the glass case,” he said as he loomed over Fuyu, who was quavering in fear. “W-e-ell...” Fuyu meowed, her voice wobbling as she spoke, “There were some... complications” “COMPLICATIONS,” roared Thurl, “LIKE GETTING A NAÏVE CHILD TO BREAK YOU OUT?!” “Yes, something... like... that...?” Fuyu answered haltingly. With Thurl, you had to be careful. He was one of two guard twins; the other was named Francesca and she guarded the other side of the castle, but Fuyu had seen her occasionally when there was an emergency, such as strange mushrooms growing in the cracks of the crystalline chair her mother often sat in as a result of her brother’s magic. “I’m hauling you to the dungeon!” Thurl yelled as he gripped her legs and squeezed them. *Hard.* A wave of pain shot through her and she kicked at him, trying to get free. His sweaty hands had nearly slid off her when he strengthened his grip once again. And once again, he would win. “Nasty little cat!” he shouted.

“...You’re a *traitor!*”

Kanna gasped. “Don’t say that!” she exclaimed to Thurl. He glared at her. Obviously, this hadn’t been the right thing to say. “Who are *you* to contradict me?” he threatened. “It seems it’s off to the dungeons for both of you!”

The dungeons?! Kanna’s mind whirled. Could it be that, while she was with Yoshimitsu, someone else had also been there? Like Taro, the ruler of the Cat world? She realized with horror that he must have *seen* her there, *seen* where she went when she snapped back here... which meant...

Oh, no.

Yoshimitsu.

Kanna kicked Thurl and took off running, not caring if he came after her (which he did) or if her shoes got soaked from the grass (which they did). She ran all the way to the gigantic castle doors, and she rammed on them, feeling the tang of cold metal on her fists as she smelled the odor of *boysenberries*, the very same that she had smelled in the castle. *This is crazy*, she thought as she remembered Yoshimitsu’s calm demeanor. *He couldn’t be the creature of the forest!* The realization gave her new energy, and she slammed against the steel, tears streaming down her face. And just as Thurl reached her, she heard the voice of the creature speaking to her.

Thank you, Sugimori. My naïve younger self couldn’t’ve noticed you without your help.

Francesca came quickly, for Thurl had his hands full with Lilly, who was gripping his hand and trying to struggle free of his crushing ‘hug’, and Fuyu, who was scratching his worn hands. They were a fountain of blood now, gushing out like rain from clouds; yet Thurl kept a face like a brick wall. He said nothing. Francesca appeared from behind Kanna, opening the castle gates so swiftly that she fell from where she had been standing -- or more accurately,

sinking on her knees. She was about to cry and had given up. But she hadn't actually bawled in nearly half a year. And she wasn't about to start. So the silent tears would stain the floor of the castle as Francesca hauled her away from her friends.

There would be no happy things today, it seemed. All because of a young fox.

Kanna stared down at the floor for a while. Dust had accumulated on the slates of the doors, she noticed when she finally looked up. They were pristine when she had been here with the fox. Then she looked at the labels.

The door she was currently passing was labelled "COBBLER", but it was the door that led to the bakery when she had been here before. No scent of boysenberry jam filled the air and that, she realized, was what was different about this corridor.

Meanwhile, all the blood rushed to Fuyu's head. She felt sick. She was being bounced around like a sack of potatoes; not unlike, she remembered, when Kanna was carried off by the Spite. She wondered, in retrospect, if the Spite was actually the creature morphed into the shape of one. Spites were rare, and they were more common in the Human world. But this was different; Thurl was supposed to *protect* her, not haul her around like a sack of potatoes. She wondered if Thurl had been mind-controlled as well. But she decided against it, because his grip was definitely one of free will. It *hurt*. Hurt so much that she yowled several times, not caring if anyone else heard her. His hand, which she had pressed her claws into so many times, was now a sticky mess, and yet he continued on, stoic. She had no idea how he did this, for she remembered the time when she had attacked Sean, and he was quick to dash away, clutching his hand in pain. This was different; Thurl was almost *comfortable* with pain. It was rather terrifying.

Fuyu stopped clawing. She knew she'd need her strength later. Her paws, sticky with blood, stuck to one another, and her claws almost did not retract into her pads like usual. But she found that she could do it. She lay boneless in the crushing grip, and apathetically waited for the inevitable. It was all she could do not to yowl.

Kathump!

Kanna came back to consciousness. The air around her smelled putrid, like urine mixed with metal. She felt around, unable to see anything due to the lack of light in the room, and her hands grazed a cold, scratched cylinder about the size of a vial that one might use for potions. The metallic scent, Kanna reasoned, had come from here. She wondered if Fuyu had noticed this as well. *Fuyu?* She realized that the room was silent. "Hello?" she called out experimentally, to see if anyone answered. "Is anyone there?"

"We can all hear you!" someone hissed from behind her. "Keep quiet." It was certainly Fuyu; that nagging voice was unmistakable. "Why?" asked Kanna, in a rather whiny voice that was sure to get a response. "If the Guard catches us," whispered Fuyu, "They'll flay us alive!"

"The Guard? And will we die?"

"The Guard is a most elite cat! No one knows them. They sneak in and out of places like this in a flash, and they never leave a trace! Their paws are so furry they're silent on the metal, and whenever a prisoner is caught speaking, they take them away. Not even I know what happens after that.

"Long story short, it's a *bad idea* to get mixed up with the Guard."

"Wait a second -- *prisoner?* Where are we exactly?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

Lilly's voice broke through the silence following this statement. "It can't be worse than a dungeon."

"I think you'll find," Fuyu meowed mournfully, "that it is."

There was a gulp from Lilly. The action was reciprocated by Kanna.

"...We... we're in a dungeon, aren't we?"

The unexpected revelation prompted even more silence between the three. Unfortunately, there were no windows in the newly discovered dungeon cell, so no one could tell when it was time to finally nod off to sleep.

Kanna, however, couldn't sleep. She was again not in the place where she used to be.

The servants' quarters were just as faintly disgusting as she remembered them from earlier. Yoshimitsu, indeed, was still in his hammock, though he seemed to have had a little nap. His eyes were open now, and he was staring up at the plaster wall. It was very old and covered in cracks, and Kanna could imagine how it might provide hours of entertainment for the trained eye.

Her thoughts were interrupted: "**You're here again?**" The voice was like patchwork: not quite consistent, switching from the voice of a twelve year old to the voice of something much older. "I **wasn't expecting you so soon.**"

"Y-Yo-Yoshimitsu!" Kanna found her voice. "You... it was *you!*"

"**What was me?**" The patchwork was nearly smooth now. It was almost all the twelve year old voice now. "**Are you convicting me of something?**"

"Why am I even here if not for you? You seem to have called me here!"

"I didn't do anything! You're the second one this week! Go away! Who sent *you!*!"

passed Kanna. "***The tumor will continue to grow until it has replaced your brain entirely.***" Kanna was shaking. Yoshimitsu was walking towards the door labelled BAKERY, now nearly stomping and moving more fluidly as the thing inside his brain mastered the motion.

And then, Kanna was back in the dank cell, as if the events had not happened at all.



As the day progressed, the chances of escape deteriorated. Kanna, Lilly and Fuyu held idle conversations about the yokai and Kodama of old, trying to figure out a weakness of the current fox which caused their problems. "I heard," remarked Fuyu, "that kitsune, when they shapeshift, have a fox's reflection in the water."

"Are you suggesting that we push all of the guards into the moat to see their reflections? And what is a kitsune anyway?" Kanna was confused.

"No," Fuyu replied with a sigh, "but that would have been pleasurable. *Kitsune* are shape shifting foxes."

"How else do we know if anyone is being possessed like your brother?" Lilly asked her.

"Well, kitsune are afraid of dogs..." Fuyu was lost in thought. "But there isn't any dogs; this is the *Cat* world, and do you think we would allow dogs in our castle?"

"No, probably not. After all, it *is* the kitsune who is possessing your brother--"

"*Yoshimitsu.*" Kanna broke in, letting her knowledge of the past slip.

"Eh?" Lilly looked up at her and Fuyu reciprocated the motion. "Who's that?"

“That’s the name of the creature!” Kanna burst out. “He was – but it’s *not him*. It must be someone else. I heard the voice come out of his mouth, but he wasn’t really a patient person; he had a bit of a temper. This thing bides its time patiently, allowing people to eventually believe it is a Kodama. It can’t be him, but it is, and it makes *no sense* – He said that the ‘tumor would grow until it has replaced my brain entirely’.”

The cell was silent.

Kanna fell silent as well. There were clunking, heavy footsteps outside the padlocked metal door. Someone was coming. And it didn’t seem like it was the castle cook, coming to bring them food. The floor began to tremble slightly at the arrival of the Guard. The cell door was burst open, letting in a flood of light which soon escaped into every crevice of the small metal space. The three squinted in the light. “Nyanko mow mrr meyow yow?” shouted the guard. “Mrr mee nyan myau!”

“Fuyu!” Lilly whispered to the cat, who was huddled in a corner. “What’s he saying?”

“S-s-some-ome-th-th-thing-g-g ab-b-out beii-i-i-ng-g qu-qu-quiet-t-t.” Fuyu was shaking. “Th-they-y sa-a-ay to m-make sur-r-re w-w-e’re sil-l-l-ent-t-t...”

Lilly nodded. Fuyu’s reaction told her that this was not someone to be trifled with. She was silent and inconspicuous about this motion though, as it seemed that whoever this was, they not a very nice person. Kanna was reciprocating this motion in the other corner of the cell, her legs folded up in front of her chest, which she was hugging in a death grip. She made her way to this corner, taking care to keep her footsteps light. Her socks were now covered in toe lint, and whenever she moved, it squelched like mud in her feet. The dungeon staff had given them uniforms to wear, which were starchy and stiff and grey, with the unsettling words “PHYSICAL EDUCATION” engraved on them, but they had

not given them pants or socks; the shirts were so big for cats and short people that they rather looked like dresses. But Lilly was neither of these; her height was more accented than Kanna's, who was short and skinny. Lilly was of average height and skinny and it seemed the uniforms were for people who were of average height as well. It was rather like, Lilly reflected, wearing a very short skirt. She took care to make sure that her undergarments did not show, stretching and pulling at the cotton until the individual fabrics were elongated. Unfortunately, the sound of the large shirt pulling across the floor attracted the attention of the person and they began to speak again. "Mrr nyan nyo mrr?"

What does this mean? Lilly wondered. Then, feeling something on the top of her head, she looked up. The person, standing right in front of her, was pointing at her and glaring. "Yow~~~~~r Yow~~~~~r Meyow~~~~~" And only then did Lilly look up at the guard, staring past their ingrown toenail to the whiskers and the triangle nose on their face. This was a transformed cat; she was sure of it. And they were angry.

"Mrowyow mya." The cat seemed to recognize that their identity was compromised, though Lilly had known before. "Mrr mow." They left the room, walking in such a way that their boots looked like lead. The footwear made a *galumph!* sound as it hit the ground each time, making Lilly jump, frightened. The Guard wasn't squashing a spider, so why did he have to be so loud? This, as it would turn out, was one of the great mysteries of the universe. But nobody knew. Not a lot of people paid attention to that kind of thing. And so the *galumphing* continued, each time a new wave of terror dawning. Lilly had the strange feeling that something was going to happen here, something that would change all their lives permanently -- but she couldn't tell what it was. She speculated that it had something to do with the *galumphing*, but she decided against it because the loud noise, while irritating, could not be a life-altering action. What, then, could it be? Wrapped up in her thoughts as she was, Lilly barely noticed the Guard finally leave the room. When she did, though, she felt

grateful that they had left. She had no intention of speaking for the remainder of the time in the dungeon.

Kanna looked over at her friend as the Guard left, *galumphing* getting softer as they walked away into the... night? morning? afternoon? She could no longer tell due to the darkness of the cell. Time did not really flow in the dank area. *That was terrifying*, she thought as she lay on the cold floor, getting warmer due to her body heat. But she did not speak; she doubted she would ever speak again. The silence enveloped her, suffocating her like a blanket on a stormy day, except in a good way. She enjoyed the silence. She'd never believed the aphorism "Sticks and stones may break your bones but words will never hurt you". Sean and McKenna had been proof of this from the beginning. The "Half Girl" routine had hurt her more than she would have liked to admit. She wondered if they had noticed she was missing yet. Sean and McKenna would surely be the first to suspect that something was wrong, as they would not be able to bash her with one of sick Ritisha's belongings and would be disappointed as a result. Ritisha was a nice enough person when she wasn't sick, but she had a reputation of catching every sickness going around. Today it had been influenza. Ritisha was a popular person, strangely enough, and the clusterous forest of girls were all 'devastated' whenever she was sick. Whenever she was with Kanna, she wasn't disrespectful, but she was a whole different person when she was with her popular comrades: egotistical, loud, giggly. All the things Kanna was not. She found, as a general stereotype, that most popular girls were just that. And they talked about boys. Kanna had never had a particular romantic involvement with anyone and she didn't intend to. The things that those girls were interested in... Kanna had read a few romance novels that Ritisha had loaned to her, but that was only technically speaking since she had regurgitated halfway through each one and tossed them out her window where they were shredded by crows who thought they might be a snack. She wondered how those crows were doing. No better than her, certainly.

Her stomach grumbled and she tried not to think about malnourishment. She could imagine herself getting skinnier and skinnier. “Yer a rake, ye are,” a person passing on the street would say to her, and then they would tromp off into the distance and she would grow ever skinnier until one day she snapped from being bashed on the head by sick Ritisha’s violin. The violin would crash down on her and her spine would issue a great noise rather like the crumbling of a confection, and then she would feel a terrible pain-- she would clutch at her sides trying to keep herself together-- she would feel like a horde of elephants was stampeding over her-- and then it would be all over and her skinny-as-a-pole body would be lying in a pool of blood, snapped and dead.

Dead.

Lost and gone forever.

Never to be seen again...

Kanna couldn’t fathom death; she didn’t want to die. However, death’s doorstep was what they were all making the long journey towards.

And if they made one misstep, the Guard would correct it.

Kanna closed her eyes, ready to collapse from exhaustion. She had to get rest, she sensed, so she would have her wits about her for her eventual escape. But her mind was swarming with questions and they were buzzing around like bees in her head, waiting to be let out of the hive. So she sat up and called, “Fuyu?”

Chapter Fifteen

The Problem With Mortality

Fuyu was an insomniac. She couldn't help it. Sleep did not come easily for her. But Kanna was a whole different soup dumpling; she was out as soon as her head hit the pillow ordinarily. The conversation they held that night was unprecedented and extremely quiet, exchanging whispers, in the hope that whoever was in the cell next to them, if anyone was there, wouldn't hear.

Fuyu was lying on the floor, curled up into a small ball when Kanna asked a simple question.

"Fuyu, how come you can read but not speak human languages?"

Fuyu was surprised; no one ever asked her about this. Though, she reasoned, Kanna and Lilly were the only ones who could actually understand her in the whole Human world.

"I guess it's because my vocal cords can't make the spectrum of sounds required to speak any of them. 'Hello' ends up as 'nyellyow'. 'Thank You' ends up as 'meowyow mew'... And my Japanese is even worse."

"How were you able to read all of the signs then?"

"I was taught how. Cat language is not something you learn; you are born with it and you can't forget it or remember it. No one can be taught to speak Cat, either you can or you can't. I was taught by another cat who lived in both England and Japan how to speak both country's languages."

"Can you understand the spoken language?"

“Yes... The royal kittens are given a choice at three weeks old of what language they can master. English is the given, the one that everyone learns, but you can choose another one depending on your own will.”

“What did you choose?” Kanna queried.

“I chose Japanese; I thought it might be helpful if I could understand that as well. I wish, in retrospect, that I had chosen Spanish or French; they are more commonly spoken than that; though in how was I to know?”

”It’s true that you have never been to the Human world except for when your brother put you in the glass case...”

“Yes but that doesn’t truly count since I was in the Barrier Forest.”

“Oh, is that what it’s called? My classmates mostly just call it ‘spooky spooky spooky never go in there ever’.” Kanna rolled her eyes.

“They are probably correct; had they attempted to enter the Cat world the *kitsune* would have made them writhe with agony before it was finished with them.”

“Well I’m glad that it gave the illusion it was cursed then; it kept everyone away. Part of the reason I’m so looked down upon at Fernshire is because I love going in there and studying the antidisestablishmentarian flowers. Or at least I can make them that way; there’s a spell that you can enchant flowers with to give them personality, giving a specific adjective to show what you want them to be like. Many of my spells included ‘Konoko’, which is antidisestablishmentarian Witch language. I learned it from a book I got along with my grimoire when I first started in school; it’s been our textbook with Mrs. Waterburn.”

“Come to think of it where *is* your grimoire?” Fuyu blurted.

Kanna sighed. “Magical accident... A beetle ate Lilly’s and ran away with mine.”

“Oh. ...What happened to it?”

“It died. We found its gigantic body near ripped up pieces of the Oxygen spell and the First Aid spell.”

“Well that’s the problem with mortality; everyone has to die sometime.”

Kanna chose this time to interject, “Except for immortal jellyfish.”

“Yes,” Fuyu agreed, “Except for immortal jellyfish. But they’re not really mortal in the first place so they don’t count.”

“That’s true.”

“Yep.”

Even Fuyu fell asleep after that.



Lilly was fast asleep, until she wasn’t. The beak woke her up.

She had a dream that she was living in a medieval village. The smell of tomato soup hung heavy in the air and she was walking towards a stone house which had lanterns lit all around it. Lilly had entered the house inadvertently, not really seeing anything except for the dark rug at the center of the living room into which she had stepped. Kneeling on a wooden table were a person wearing a bonnet and a person wearing a kilt, which was rather surprising to her (she had never seen anyone wearing a kilt before). They were, upon first impression, laughing but at a second look crying. Whichever it was Lilly was not sure until they backed away a bit from the table and Lilly got a look at what was on it.

It was a child who looked sick, badly so. They were barely moving, their chest rising and falling slightly, so slightly that Lilly didn’t notice it at first. So horribly

slight that it looked like they were dead. And then she felt something on her shoulder, something long and straight made of plaster. She slowly turned her head around and was met with two hollow eyes, a white face giving off a strong aroma, and an extensive, unsettling beak reaching out from the black cloak that the stranger wore to her shoulder.

She was terrified. She had read about these kinds of people before -- her terrified mind managed to recover only the image from its archives. But what were they? Lilly could tell they were something to be afraid of.

A bony hand reached out for her. A strange, garbled voice issued from the mouth, sounding something like “Aaaaah the Werconders howw iss yeh chahld duz it hass the plage” but Lilly couldn’t tell what it was supposed to be and gave up. Or, rather, was forced to. She was no longer in the tiny, claustrophobic home. She was, instead, in a tiny, claustrophobic prison cell.

What an “improvement”.

She couldn’t get back to sleep, no matter how hard she tried after that. Her sleep muscles didn’t seem to desire to be flexed. They whined from underuse and lack of proper respect. They seemed to be whining, which may have been one of the things keeping her from slumber. “Lilly!” they would cry in her mind’s ear; “We hurt all over!” But she ignored them and squeezed her eyes shut, feeling her eyelashes plaster onto her cheeks. It was no use. All that happened was that her mind began to drift into dark matters that a girl of her age normally wouldn’t fathom, but it could never drift into sleepiness. Thoughts of creepy cartoon mascots and terrible war stories of the Human world kept her awake and afraid in the dark.



Harsh light shone into the small, dark area of the dungeon cell. A rude awakening by anyone’s standards, but for Kanna it was even worse. The reason

for the light, she knew, was the door opening. The door could only have opened because of a person opening it. And Kanna knew that the person wasn't there to say, "Good morning! Do you want pancakes for breakfast?". No, whenever someone opened the door of what she knew as Cell 42, it was because of grave matters. And the person who opened the door was not her mother; it was the Guard.

The Guard, in themselves, was a grave matter.

"Myowrrr!" they shouted at the three prisoners. "Rowr yowll!"

"Mggg..." Kanna was only just waking up. "Fuyu... What're they saying..."

Fuyu was fast asleep and Kanna was glad of that. Cats' eyes were less accustomed to the sunlight, being diurnal creatures. But her hands seemed to have a different opinion. They shook Fuyu's soft and cold fur, making the kitten's small body rock back and forth on the floor until she woke up, yowling in fright. This noise only added to the overwhelming voice of the Guard, and with Lilly waking up, a cacophony of sound was all around Kanna and for several moments, confusion was ubiquitous.

When all the people in the room finally calmed down, the Guard put two small, gleamingly white plates and a shallow dish on the cell floor, laced with a floral pattern. The dishes held a yellow pancake-ish food that had snips of a green stalk inside of it. "Yow-rowr~::~." The Guard left the room with a resounding sigh and *galumph!* "Meyowr!" Fuyu called after him, seeming that she had woken up, but they had already departed.

Kanna stared down at the dish and the thing mounted upon it that was most likely food. "What is this?" She looked up at Fuyu, who was certainly awake now. She sniffed at the yellow dish, shaped like a pancake, and made a face that would have won a contest in disgusted expressions. "It's *eggs!*"

“Yes,” Fuyu replied sarcastically, “It’s eggs. More specifically, it’s scrambled eggs with chives. You would do well not to complain.”

“But eggs are disgusting!” Kanna complained.

“Look, this is the dungeon. In the Human world, they would serve you gruel. Also, this isn’t the powdered eggs of the cafeteria at Fernshire. These are real eggs from our own royal chickens.” She brought the china dish to her nose and inhaled. “Smells like it came from Sakura. She always smells faintly of her favorite mushrooms, as do her eggs.”

“How can you tell?” Lilly interrupted, obviously awake as well.

“Weren’t you listening--?!” Kanna started, then decided that no, she wasn’t. She had just woken up. “The smell, the smell!”

“Ah...” Lilly nodded her head in understanding. It did not come back up, and she was fast asleep again. “I undherstambt...” Her words transitioned seamlessly into intelligible nonsense. “Mooks celishiss...” Kanna sighed in exasperation. “She’s out.”

As the two tried to eat their omelets, however, they found that it was very hard to eat without illumination. Kanna kept accidentally stabbing herself with a salad fork and Fuyu’s teeth kept snapping just out of reach of her periwinkle blue dish. “I’ll cast a Light spell,” Kanna told Fuyu, who couldn’t hear her since she was hearing her teeth crunch on thin air once again. “Mmmmokey,” Fuyu replied, readying herself to try again. “Wait --” she stopped. What had Kanna said? A *spell*? “No, Kanna don’t, bad idea bad idea bad idea --” she dashed to her friend, but she was already casting the Light spell.

Ichi Kanaka Muraki

Sikupo Deroro Me

Queverence Willivern

Illumina Limbina.

The cell trembled and Kanna did as well. A strange light burned from the right side of her chest and she clutched at it, trying to get it to stop. Her hand grew red at the touch, but she clamped it firmly around the area and breathed in... out... in... out. The breathing turned into hyperventilating. Her hand and her whole body were shaking and she felt sick to her stomach. The light turned to liquid and pooled on the floor, a chunky black reminder of the failed magic.

Kanna tried to recover the strength to speak but couldn't. Her mouth was dry enough that each attempt to talk sounded like a croak.

"Kanna, I tried to warn you!" In an instant Fuyu was by her side. "There is no magic in the dungeon. If you do choose to cast spells, it will draw strength from you instead of the world around you. That's why your heart was shining just now – it was in reaction to the spell. The more powerful the spell, the worse the pain will be."

"o yore 'ayin'..." Kanna croaked out, "at 'a'ic i' or'id'n 'eer?" She was trying to say *So you're saying that magic is forbidden here?* but could not because of the dry throat. "What?" Fuyu asked her, not comprehending. "What did you say?"

"Ah edd dat ah t'ot oo edd dat a'ic i' orbidden 'eer." Kanna was really trying to tell Fuyu, *I said that I thought you said that magic is forbidden here.* Her throat was slowly getting moisture from salivation but her speech was still impeded. "Hungah. Foo... hungah. Nee foo..." But Fuyu could understand this; it was the universal plea for food. "Here..." She picked up the fork in her mouth, tasting the metallic tang of the cutlery. "I'll feed you. Open your mouth all right?" She sighed inadvertently as she scabbled around on the plate, trying to find traction. Kanna did as she was told, but an annoying low humming sound emitted from her mouth as she did so. "Why are you doing that?" Fuyu was peeved at the

droning noise. “Stoppit.” The sound ceased. “Now be prepared; here’s one bite...”

It went on like this for quite some time, the immobile Kanna finding new ways to irritate Fuyu. Once, there was a strange scuffling sound near her mouth, but it turned out to be snorting, not a small elf scuttling around in her nose hairs like Kanna had claimed. When the omelet was gone, Kanna somehow found the strength to move. Or at least try to. Her torso was burning from sitting down on the floor so long. Unfortunately, all that happened was a chest workout and a throbbing head as it fell back to the stone floor. “Ugh...” Kanna sighed in frustration. “It hurts to move... Ohhhhhh...” she complained. “I’m immobile... So terrible... The *pain!*”

Her whispering was merging with something else. A low voice that was moaning with contempt.

“This is terrible...” The voice picked up where Kanna had left off, assuming she was still talking.

“I hate these omelets.”

“Who said that?!” exclaimed Kanna, Fuyu and Lilly simultaneously.

“Me, of course,” responded the voice. “Who else would it be?”

“Then who are you?” asked Fuyu and Kanna, exasperated. Lilly was silent.

“I’m tape.”

“Tape who?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think you understand. *I’m tape.*”

“But you must not be tape!”

“But I *am* tape!”

“But you certainly aren’t made of it!”

“Yes, in fact he is.” This was Lilly.

Fuyu and Kanna whirled around. “How can you see it?” Kanna asked incredulously.

“I thought I told you before. I can see ghosts. This one is made of tape.”

“How can a ghost be made of tape?” a suspicious Kanna queried.

“I don’t know! I’m no expert on ghosts! All I know is they are vengeful spirits who came back from the World of the Ghosts for a specific reason. Or tape.”

“Tape?”

“Yes, that seems to be the primary reason that ghosts come back to life. Not enough tape.”

“What the heck?”

“It sounds absurd but it’s true.”

“Is this the same specter which sent us the spell to save us from harm?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To get us here -- in the dungeons. He hated the omelets and died a sad lonely death in this cell, and now wants us to take a stand against them. He was being histrionic--” Before she was finished speaking, Kanna looked around.

“I’ll be delighted to, Mr. Ghost.”

Lilly rolled her eyes. “Of course you would be, but Kanna, it’s really not our business. We have to, you know, save the world from potential destruction by

way of a malevolent spirit?" She sharply inhaled. "So maybe let's save the protestations for after the Cat world is at peace, hmm?"

"Yeah I guess you're right..." Kanna sagged, and she felt her dress of a shirt stretch as her knees hit the floor. "But can you tell him to stay here at least? He would be good company." But Lilly looked at her with a pinched face that she sensed was masking bad news. "He's already moved on to the Guard's cell. Too bad they can't see him or they would get chewed out."

"He should have drifted to the kitchen instead," remarked Kanna, "then he'd be able to scold the chefs instead."

"Yes but I'm not sure that crossed his mind. He said that he was going to chop all of the omelets into 7,369 pieces."

"That's oddly specific."

"I think it was just a random number, yes." Lilly sighed and said no more, because she was tired of whispering and wanted a glass of water.

It turned out to be a very convenient time to be silent. Seconds later, a *galumphing* could be heard outside the door... "Rowwwwwr." The Guard did not seem to be pleased. The sound got closer. The room got considerably stuffier. And then it wasn't there.

Kanna stood in the servants' quarters of the castle once again, standing and staring at the hallway where Yoshimitsu had just vanished.

Chapter Sixteen

The Loss of a Dear Friend

Wait!” Kanna called after the fox. “Stop! What are you doing!” Her hands were shaking all of a sudden and she realized she was worried – worried about Yoshimitsu. He was no friend of hers, of that she was sure, but she had to help him nevertheless. He was only a kid, after all – he was scarcely older than her! If she went on a rampage, she would want Lilly trying to calm her down (though she suspected that her feelings would change in the moment). Perspiration trickled down her forehead as she gripped her legs in determination. Looking down at them, she spoke a sharp command. “Don’t fail me now.” Then, she stepped back. Placed one foot in front of the other. Summoned up all she had, all her strength that had been depleted with the Light spell. And she put her foot down on the wood, making a satisfying *creak* issue from the old architecture. And then she did it again. And again. And again. Soon a sort of artificial wind was flying in her face, making her hair move wildly around her scalp, filling her with a kind of exhilarating, breathless wonder that you can only get from doing something unbelievable. She was soon sprinting, speeding along, and she had almost reached Yoshimitsu when he began to run too, his ears and hair trailing back from behind him and getting in Kanna’s face. Slowing down due to the hairs, she stuck out her tongue and tried to get them out. “Ackpbth! What–” Her hand ran over her tongue and she wished desperately she had a towel. But she shrugged her need aside and wiped her hands on her uniform. She wouldn’t be wearing it for much longer.

A plan had hit her.

She continued to pursue her acquaintance, running faster than she ever thought possible. Her feet made smacking sounds on the castle floor as she ran to catch up with him. “You’re not a monster--” she called to him as she gripped his sleeve, trying to make him stop, breathless, panting, wheezing now, hyperventilating. He turned to her, glaring, and when he spoke it wasn’t the voice of an age-old grudge; it was the voice of a boy who had been denied childhood. “I *am* a monster. Do you realize what I can do? My mother is *dead* because of me!” Tears streaked down his face and he took in the breath that someone takes when they are weeping; audible, like a gasping fish. “My only friend in this place betrayed me and I have nowhere else to go! I can’t look for work in the Human world; I’m only a kid!” There was another gasping breath. “Nowhere else to go...”

Kanna didn’t know what she should do. She wasn’t as afraid of mysterious curses as she was of crying children. She raised a hand as if to put it around his back, then drew it back in a motion that was nearly instantaneous. Her brain’s gears were turning and she tried to think of what to do. Fortunately, it didn’t take long before the sobbing stopped and there was complete and total silence in the room. Kanna desperately wished that she would be sent back right at this moment so she would not have to dwell in silence any longer. But quite quickly, someone broke the silence by calling, “Hey, Cereal! Wanna work the boiler?” The voice was male but rather high pitched -- maybe from a fourteen-year-old or something close to that. Yoshimitsu looked down at the floor in a gloom and trudged away. Kanna could tell it was trudging even when he had exited the room because his feet made a strange slapping noise on the floor.

She followed him out of curiosity. She wanted to know why the teenager was calling him “Cereal”.

When the corner rounded there was a dead end, with a door that looked much like the one that they had entered into the dungeon. It was made of metal, with rusted nails dotting the arched door. The hinges squeaked as Yoshimitsu placed

his hand on the spherical doorknob, and Kanna could feel an intense heat radiating from the small, caged window that was in the shape of a half circle sitting near the top of the door. The door was very thick, and it took some pulling before it gave way with a *thump*.

An intense heat hit Kanna, and she nearly fell back at the force of it. It was like there was an entire summer's worth of temperature in the room. Heat practically burst out from the open door and Kanna was, within less than two seconds, sweating. Her foot caught on a rock underneath the tile floor and she fell forward just to be caught in the face by another rock, completely underground. Her face and foot and whole entire body was throbbing with pain.

It was a shame that moment wasn't recorded. It would have won first prize at any humorous film contest.

When Kanna recovered she made no noise. This would only have impeded the situation or made Yoshimitsu believe the fall was an act of incompetency. He had rushed ahead of her when she fell, already dragging out a burlap, soot-streaked sack of coal. *Why does he need that?* Kanna thought, looking directly at him. Then, she looked around her and realized why.

Yoshimitsu was lugging the coal out from a large drawer to the left side of the room, bits of black rock tumbling out onto the polished hardwood floors. This looked more, though, like Kanna's school gym than her dormitory. The only light came from a cylindrical canister-like lamp dangling from the ceiling via black twine. Kanna hadn't realized you could purchase black twine, and now desperately wished for some. *How cool my journal would look, she speculated, wrapped in a twine such as this!* She imagined a bracelet made of this substance wrapped around her wrist, showing it off in class, perhaps enchanting it with a spell to make a small shield around her that Sean and McKenna couldn't get through... Ahh, that day would be excellent. She could imagine giving them the

side eye as they jeered at her, making faces and then -- *wham!* They would be blasted out of range! Just like she was being pushed out of range...

Wait a second -- Kanna snapped out of her daydream. Yoshimitsu was pushing her out of the door. He was making little grunting sounds -- *nnggh! nrrgh!* -- as he tried to force her out of the room. "Hey!" she screamed as her knees wobbled. "Why are you doing that?" Perspiration stained his face as he pushed on her kneecaps, trying to get her out of the room. "If... you... can't... work the... bath..." he panted, "you... can't... be... here."

And then she wasn't. For a fraction of a second Kanna felt a breathtaking weightlessness fill her body, and then she was back in her present -- with the Guard looming over her. She gulped. The light was not as bright as it had seemed when her eyes were accustomed to the darkness that the cell brought but she still could not believe that the Guard was back so soon. Their shadow loomed, bringing out eyebrows that seemed to leap right out of their face and a sort of mustache that covered their mouth. Kanna suspected that the Guard was a British shorthair cat but said nothing because they had begun to speak.

"Mryoww." The Guard had a stern expression on their face. "Mow nyan meyw mo mowmow nyao." Fuyu had her eyes trained onto them. "Nyao," she muttered, looking down now, turning her head away so as to shield herself, in a way, from the guilt. "Mrr." The Guard slammed the door shut and a deafening *bang!* reverberated around the room for several moments before snaking into the occupants' eardrums and causing a small amount of pain. There was a simultaneous wince and then Kanna asked the inevitable question. Fuyu braced herself.

"What did the Guard say?" There it was. "And why are you making that constipated face?"

That one was unexpected. Fuyu rolled her eyes. “I do *not* look constipated! Where did you get that idea?”

Kanna looked over at the chamber pot in the back of the room and made a face. “That throne isn’t exactly fit for royalty.”

“I’ve gone plenty of times! It was just while you were asleep, that’s all.”

“How was I supposed to know that?! I’m not a mind reader, for crying out loud!”

“You weren’t! That’s why I was telling you!”

Kanna and Fuyu both glared at each other. Well, it wasn’t a glare so much as a contradictory glower full of malice.

Then, they both whipped their heads away from each other and glowered at their respective walls.

It was Lilly who asked the question again.

“What did you say to the Guard, exactly?”

Fuyu went pale, or at least as pale as a black cat can hope to be. She began shivering slightly and looked at Lilly, deciding to face her fate instead of the wall.

“It’s a court of law. For our executions.”

There was a long, dark silence after that. No one dared say anything.

A few hours later, they were all asleep.



“Murr nyanko nyo! Mrowr mow!”

Kanna felt a tightness at her chest and snapped awake. She felt a large, furry paw on her chest and realized that she was on the floor. No surprise there. Then she realized that her back was to the floor, and there was the oddest sensation, as if it was moving, all by itself, with no precedent! That was a small surprise, but it wasn't as big as when she discovered that she was in a grand hallway, being tugged by the collar to two half-oval doors which loomed over her like a foot looms over an ant just before it is eaten. And indeed, over the two doors was a metal sign, dark and foreboding and creepy. There were two ravens on either side of the text that was embodied by two curving arcs, mid-caw. The sign read: JACLYN STARANISE COURT. And below it, in slightly smaller text: NO TRESPASSING -- NO LYING -- NO LAUGHTER -- FROWNS ALL 'ROUND. There was a cylindrical light above this sign, shining on it and illuminating the slight rust that crept up upon it -- apparently, Jaclyn Staranise had met their unfortunate demise some time ago. The doors were crudely made, and Kanna looked up to see that the light was nearly invisible in the dark -- the cylinder which held the light bulb was black and it was suspended magically in the air. It was quite a simple potion to pour onto an object really; it only required three Perseus Mycelium mushrooms and one Seed of Breckman's Orange. A Breckman's orange was a lumpy citrus which looked extraordinarily like a stubbly face. Why it was this way, no one knew, but they seemed happy to be oblivious. The taste was a cross between lemonade, cantaloupe and oranges and Kanna could smell the scent of it hanging in the air, as well as the slightly nutty scent of the Perseus Mycelium.

The pressure on her collar ceased and she fell to the ground. She touched her chest, making sure she was still breathing. The Guard spoke a single word -- "*Kuttanga*"-- and then the doors opened, creaking all the while, into emptiness. *So you can speak...* Kanna thought. *'Kuttanga' means 'open, door'. Is that great door to heavy for even you to open, you who can carry all of my weight with little effort?* A respect was budding up inside her for the person. Unfortunately, this respect didn't last long.

Slam!

She was alone again.

Why didn't the Guard bring Fuyu and Lilly? Kanna wondered as she lay there in the shirt that was too scratchy, too big for her, in this room where the slightest noise echoed like thunder and no matter how hard she screamed, no one could hear her. There were so many seats, she saw, too many, too shiny. They were wood, but the kind of strange, unnatural polished wood that you could never find in nature, the smooth, shiny wood which glistened under a conical light right above her head. She was leaning against a tall brown stand made of the same material, knees high above her head, hugging herself and trying to adjust to her surroundings. It was too much, too much. Days ago, she had been a boarding school girl. An ordinary witch, one you could find anywhere. She had been in no danger; no pain; no dilemma.

And that was when the tears came: warm, wet, and needing, pleading to come out, pent up for so long that they may have exploded had she kept them in any longer. They streamed down her face like spilled lemonade streams down a counter, fast, strong and loud. Her sobs reverberated in the tan room, and she buried her damp face in her hands and wiped her nose with her elbow. She took a few great, heaving breaths, and then the tears ceased their flow and she was lying, trembling, on the floor. And not a moment too soon. There was a creaking behind her as the doors opened and a small thump as something was thrust onto the ground. Then the doors were slammed shut again and Kanna was no longer alone in the room. She heard paw steps and wondered who it was. Was it the Guard? Was it one of the residents of the castle? Or was it Taro himself, come to sentence her to death? She saw a black pelt as she peered around. As the cat came to look at her, she saw the intensity in the jade green gaze, recognition sparking in her eyes and realized that it was Fuyu, not Taro or some other cat.

Then she heard the terrible voice in her mind again. It had been silent for so long she had nearly forgotten it, but now it seemed like an old marionette which was kicking up dust.

Beware of the unchanging verdict.

What does that even mean? Kanna wondered. An ‘unchanging verdict’? That sounded a lot like a book that she had read about a little girl who fell into a strange world then realized it was all a dream. *If this is all a dream and Fuyu is just an ordinary cat, I’ll -- I don’t know what I’ll do --*

I am helping you, human, because this is the last chance you will be able to take part in my plan. If you help me, I will help you.

I can make this all a dream...

Kanna sat up with interest, but she knew in her heart that this was wrong.

You’re the thing behind Yoshimitsu aren’t you? She willed her thoughts to him. *You’re a sick and twisted monster, a brain tumor lurking. Yoshimitsu is lost but I can bring him back, can’t I?*

I will not lose my friend. Not when there’s so much at stake.

Defying me is not wise, human! That boy is a pathetic example of my past, what I could have been had I not be powerful! It would do you well not to speak of him!

I don’t care. I won’t help you.

Very well. When you are dead you will regret your decision.

And trust me, you will all be dead.

Chapter Seventeen

The Unchanging Verdict

There was another thump and creak, and there was another person on the floor. Brown hair lay on the floor like a pool of water and Kanna could instantly tell from the way that the hair faded from brown to an almost golden hue at the very tip, like the sun fading from view as it sets, that it was Lilly. She stood up in one fluid motion and ran to her friend. “Lilly! Are you all right?”

Lilly’s shoulders sagged but she got up. “Yes, I’m fine. Who does that Guard think they are?”

“Uh, our superior,” Kanna supplied in a helpful but annoying tone.

“Yes, I suppose they are,” Lilly sighed, “but dragging us around like that isn’t going to be something he’ll remember fondly, I’ll make sure of that!”

There isn’t any suppliers here, but we can still use magic, right? The power will just come from us!” She experimented, flexing her fingers and muttering the Electricity spell:

Hotaru Konako

Muraka Mino Hin

Queverence Willivern

Clustera Sparku

and her fingers shot out a small amount of sparks, which she directed at the chair closest to them. “That’s tiring, but it least it works, right?” She turned to

Kanna. “That’s great! Now if anything goes wrong, we can cast a spell to--” She was cut off by a creaking sound that issued from the door.

It was being opened.

And this time it wasn’t the Guard behind it.

A cat with a monocle strode in first, in human form with a wispy beard and a cloak that draped over his body like a rag. His golden-white tail stuck out from his back, and he had a gnarled cane, which he gripped so fiercely that his knuckles were white. He took the seat to Kanna’s far left, setting the cane on the floor. Next came a human, in a navy business suit with a red tie that made Kanna tremble with an overwhelming urge to push him over the edge of the tallest peak in the world. She sat next to the cat with a monocle. More and more guests arrived as the room was filled.

Screech!

Everyone sat up straight, and Fuyu knew that the Vulture was coming. Kanna and Kuka didn’t though. She could see them sitting upright, sweating, listening hard for whatever had made that noise. A figure clacked into the room -- a squat, long-necked and stout vulture who flapped up on top of the judges’ stand. “He’s the *judge?!!*” Kanna whispered to Fuyu incredulously. Fuyu decided to let the amazement run its course and kept watching the vulture. It had something in its beak, Fuyu realized -- something cylindrical, with an orange-colored thing inside. It used one of its talons to rip a cork from its top, and then poured it onto the stand rather abruptly.

The stand began to quiver, the wood expanding. There was a strange sound -- *crack!* -- and the wood began to reassert itself, turning around until it was sideways up in the air. The newly repurposed stand left a shadow on the tan ground. All of the members of the jury stared wide-eyed. Even more so when the vulture’s head peeked out from the top of it. It squawked. “Fuyu... Persimmon!”

It screamed around the room in a halting way. “Where is Fuyu... Persimmon! Fuyu... Persimmon! AAAAWK!!!”

“Present,” meowed Fuyu in a quiet tone. She gulped and the Vulture stared at her from up on the stand, inspecting her. Its head cocked back – and forth – and back – and forth – and “AAAAWK! Kanna... Sugimori!” The vulture pronounced the name with the first “a” sounding like the one in “apple”.

“Where is Kanna... Sugimo --”

“I’m here.” Kanna stood up from where she and Lilly were leaning on the side of the courtroom. The vulture cocked its head back – and forth – and back – and forth – and “AAAAWK! Lilly... Amadenski!” The vulture, again, mispronounced the first name, saying “Lee-lly” instead of “Li-lly”. “Where is --”

“Accounted for, sir,” said Lilly in the tone that she used when speaking to individuals of authority that was quiet and loud all at once.

Its head cocked once, and it stared at her with its probing eyes boring into her vision. Lilly stared back, but Fuyu could see the small trickle of sweat sliding down her brow.

“AAAAWK!” the Vulture screamed after a while. “Meeting to... order! Order in the court! AAAAWK!” There was an audible shuffling as all of the jury sat up straight. “Will the convicted... convicted please stand, please. AAAAWK!”

Lilly looked at Kanna.

Kanna looked at Lilly.

They both turned to Fuyu, who gave a brief nod.

They all stood, in one swift motion.

“Has been convicted of...” The vulture looked down at them with a cold, calculating stare, the one a parent gives their child when they have broken

something in their home because of “foolishness” -- the meaning of the glare comes across as something like *I can't believe you! or you're insane! Demented!* “Tres... passing! Tres... passing! Tres very bad. Tres a *crime!* AAAAWK! Punishable by death!”

Fuyu twitched her ear contemptuously. “We weren’t on castle grounds, were we?”

“How-should-I-know. How-should-I-know. AAAAWK!”

“You should know because you are accusing us of a crime,” Fuyu answered in that calm yet infuriating tone that most people use when they are trying to tell something very important to someone who was remarkably dim-witted. “If you don’t know how it happened, then you have no right to convict us.”

“Witnesses! Witnesses... please stand! AAAAWK!” the Vulture screamed. A few individuals stood from the jury and Fuyu twitched her tail with interest. She fixed her gaze on them. “Tell... your stories! Stories about prisoners!” the Vulture called, scanning the room for whomever was standing. There was a transformed rabbit who smelled heavily of carrot cake and had a white rabbit ear poking out from the straw hat he wore. His other one drooped on the side of the hat, and Fuyu could see that it was Lopear, the baker. “I was bakin’,” he said in an uncharacteristically deep voice, “when I heard sum voices outside. It was our princess returned, and two slatternly kids.” He stopped at that point.

“Con...TINUE! Con... TINUE!! AAAAWK!!!” the Vulture screamed. “All right, all right...” the rabbit muttered under his breath, but he nonetheless proceeded to tell the rest of the story. “See, the kids was doin’ sumthin’ that looked likes magic. So I says to myself, I says ‘is they harmin’ the princess? They better not be harmin’ the princess’ but hours passed an’ it didna seem like they was gonna do nothin’ rash. So I went back to bakin’ but I got shouted at ‘cause I was starin’ out them window for hours.”

“I-see, I-see,” the Vulture called, but it sounded more like he was saying one word instead of two. Fuyu’s tail thrashed with annoyance. Who else had been watching them? “Come to a... decision. Come to a... decision, jury. Decision! AAAAWK!” *So soon?* Fuyu thought incredulously. This wasn’t *quite* enough to go on! Nevertheless, the room filled with the sound of an elephant stampede – no, it was all of the jury, who had only been sitting down for a few minutes, running out of the courtroom, pushing the double doors open with each person that ran out. This continued until the doors finally banged shut before an unfortunate frog named Melvin could hop his way out. Fuyu guessed that they were going to the private room, which was on the side of this one, to discuss the matter. But the scent of strong magic hung heavy in the air when she strode over to sniff the wall. It smelled like lies. Fuyu gulped and her hair stood on end at the scent. She was smelling the Persuasion spell. This was Dark magic.

Dark magic was a particularly forbidden type of magic that used a certain kind of energy to work, one that you couldn’t harness in the natural world, like most witches did – no, this power came from deep inside you. It was your heart, your emotions, everything that made you yourself – and it was positively brimming with magical energy. So, when Dark mages crafted a spell, they were summoning power from themselves. The Magic Council, located on an alternate dimension just off the coast of Greenwood, Florida, in the Human world, decided which spells were forbidden or not. They placed a heavy spell on all forbidden magic so that when they were cast, they did not harm the environment around them. You cast Dark magic at your own risk. If you cast it too much you were no longer yourself – you were a shell, emotionless, dark, nothing. You were just a functioning body and nothing more. No one learned of Dark magic, and all books on the subject were also under heavy spells. No one cast those spells, and the words that enabled them were no longer learned. There was no Magic fever to be had in Dark magic. It was a disease all its own. All witches had to be very careful.

“Wait, no!” Kanna screamed at the top of her lungs.

The entire room fell silent and slowly, very slowly, the heads turned as one to stare at her. She continued speaking. “You have no evidence that we were even trespassing!” she argued.

“One... witness. One... witness. AAAAWK!” the Vulture screamed.

“Yes,” Kanna contradicted, “but a single biased witness isn’t enough! The only thing that the chef was probably thinking about was, ‘when can I get back to my carrots?’ That isn’t very fair is it?”

“Is-this-true. Is-this-true. AAAAWK!”

“Get us out of here, now!” Fuyu hissed to Kanna. “I’m trying,” whisper-screamed Kanna, frantic, terrified. “I can’t think of any spells!”

“It’sssss nooooot truuuuuuuuue...”

Kanna gripped the seat in front of her. There was a rumbling which shook the room, and the door was pushed open by a burly tattooed man. “I heard someone’s ready for a beheading, is that right?” he said in a deep voice. Thurl had come back and he was going to get his revenge. Again. Kanna gripped the seat so tight her knuckles turned white. “I’ll take it from here, my friend,” he called to the Vulture, and it screamed again. “AAAAWK! Thank-you-for-the-service! Thank-you-for-your-service!” Kanna was perspiring and shaking so violently that she couldn’t have protested, even if her vocal cords had been cooperating. *I’m going to be beheaded. I’m going to be beheaded. I’m going to be beheaded. I’m going to be beheaded.* The thought was racing around in her mind like a flustered carp. “Come!” barked Thurl. “The convicted please come to my side!” Lilly was shaking slightly, and had a flushed face, but still obediently strode over behind Thurl. “Good. You’ll die first, nice and painless,” Thurl told her, smiling at her like a rag doll would smile at a small girl: not at all genuine.

“Now kid, why are you being so stubborn?” Thurl turned his gaze to Kanna.

“Why won’t you move?”

Kanna didn’t say a thing. She didn’t dare.

“ANSWER ME, RAT!” roared Thurl, and Kanna suddenly heard him utter a word which she had never heard before, though it was obviously Witch language. He clutched at his chest but kept reciting the strange spell. Kanna could recognize some of the words, but they seemed *wrong* coming out of Thurl’s mouth. It was a magic she had never heard before. And in an instant, she was at Thurl’s side, following him blindly through the corridor.

Beware of the unchanging verdict.

There was Dark magic at work here. Kanna struggled against it but her mind was too weak to respond, dizzy from the shock of being sentenced to death. Any sane person would feel the same way, Kanna knew, but she couldn’t do a single thing. She just had to watch her feet moving. Right -- left -- right -- left -- right -- stop -- they were at a large door. The metal label read, in scratched writing that looked like it had been carved with a toothpick, *NeverSeen Guillotine.*

And below it, in slightly smaller print, it read, *The Executioner will terminate all visitors.*

Thurl closed his eyes and shoved open the door. It was made of metal, and it was cold, like that of the prison cell, and so thick that even Thurl grunted when he opened it. Kanna shivered to think of what the Executioner was like, to live in a place such as this. But she hadn’t even seen the inside yet.

A desk lay in a corner of the room, with black velvet draped over it like a child clings onto their father. It was covered with dust but worn, heavily used. There was an empty vial on the table, orange residue sticking to it. Green smoke flowed from a narrow box bulging slightly underneath the cloth, enveloping all

kinds of paraphernalia that lay on the desk and around the room. The air was thick with the smell of fried okra and fear. And there was a skull lying on the desk, half dissected, the shade of weathered paper. Fuyu gasped. *So this is what it's come to...* she marveled. She had never actually met the Executioner before. He always stayed in his room. But now, seeing the skinny, stubbly red-haired person snoring on a silver bucket, she wondered how this person had ever found employment at the castle. His mouth moved. "You're here for an execution."

There was a simultaneous gulp. "Y-yes."

The person looked at a black curtain which draped over a boxy thing. There was a circular object on top of it. "All right." He pulled the curtain back to reveal a guillotine. A steel blade sat at the top of two wooden planks. There were two boards at the bottom where there was a small hole -- *where a neck would go*, Kanna realized with a shiver. There was a slit in the higher board, to let the blade through. The circular object was a picnic basket -- *where a head would go*. "Who's first?"

"Uh -- ah --" Lilly stammered. "It's you, innit?" barked the man. "Let's get it over with already! You two --" he pointed a finger, darting back and forth between Kanna and Fuyu -- "You stay there!" He grabbed Lilly's wrist. Kanna looked on with a sinking feeling in her stomach. It was over, all over.

"Kanna. There's still time." Fuyu's voice issued from below her. "This room is not magic proof -- the Executioner is a wizard!"

"What?" Kanna gasped. "Then that means..."

"Cast it! Now!" Fuyu yowled.

"I can't!" fretted Kanna. She stole a glance at Lilly. Her neck was in the bottom board. "I don't have anything to draw energy from!"

"The forest, Kanna, concentrate on the forest! Okay?"

“Okay.” Kanna gulped.

The board was being brought down onto Lilly’s neck -- *Ni Kavana Inibachi* -- Lilly’s head was ready -- *Se Hoku Nuyo* -- The string which brought down the blade was gripped by the Executioner’s grubby hand -- *Queverence Willivern* -- *the blade was coming down, it was nearly reaching the neck* -- **TOROKU HUNA!!!**

Kanna screamed the last two words, desperate, pleading for the desired effect. The blade warped, the metal compressed, and it shattered into thousands of different pieces, raining down onto the executioner’s bare foot. Just then Fuyu had the strangest sensation. It was like flying into the air and sinking into the deepest depths of the ocean all at once. Surprisingly, she enjoyed the feeling, and almost embraced it. But it wasn’t long before the sensation stopped and she was back in the Executioner’s quarters.

Scratch that...

Worn, dark planks of wood were the only thing keeping the room together. Two bunk beds lay to her side, made with the same wood. A window in the middle of the room reflected the stars onto the floor. A bathroom lay next to her, and she smelled the smell of a starfish. A particularly eccentric one. But the thing that made her certain, *absolutely certain* that her assumption was correct was the fourth book of *Tonari no Majo Atorie no Hiyori-chan no Monogatari*, lying on the floor with a pale blue flashlight. And in the beds lay Kanna and Lilly, sleeping, unaware that she was there. *Was that all just a dream?* Fuyu wondered. Kanna didn’t seem to have magic fever now. There was no sign that any of the events of the previous days actually happened.

Thank goodness.

Fuyu curled up in her cat bed and went to sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

A Dream Come Back

Kanna stretched and woke up to the beeping of her alarm. “Nyime up...” She yawned and slammed it off, feeling the vibrations cease as the bells fell silent. “Nyime up...” she repeated sleepily, smacking her lips in the way that most people do when they have just woken up. She groggily combed her fingers through her hair, feeling the tangles that sprang up from her tossing and turning overnight. Patting it to make sure that she didn’t look like she had been dashing about in the mud, she glanced at the splintered floor to see Fuyu curled up sleeping. She remembered, with a gasp, the events of the previous days. “Fuyu!” she called her. “Fuyu!”

“Myow...” The cat looked up and cocked her head. *Myow?* Kanna wondered. *Can Fuyu still talk? – Well, can I still understand what Fuyu is saying?* “Fuyu!” she called again, “I can’t understand what you’re saying!”

Fuyu was already asleep again.

Was it all a dream? Kanna speculated. She remembered wishing that it would all be over – that her life would once again go back to normal – but now she realized that it may have just been a fantasy that her mind had made up.

The problem? She couldn’t remember a single class after third period. *I don’t remember lunch after fourth period – I remember waking up in the medicinal office, but I can’t seem to remember anything else.*

What is going on? Did I not attend?

Was I sick?

The bell rang to signal breakfast. Kanna heard the herd of elephants, or rather herd of children, as they stampeded, or rather dashed, to the direction of sustenance. She could make out a conversation from under her door just from the bed: “CHICKIN!” a person squawked. “CHICKIN!” All of the other people around them laughed. *Must be some kind of inside joke*, Kanna thought. Their voices got fainter, going off into the distance, and were replaced by another – “So, like, guys! He’s totally trying to ask me out! Like, should I, like, cast a spell on him to make him go away?!” said a person with a high, annoying voice. “Like, yeah!” said another person in a tone that made Kanna want to pick up her signed hardcover edition of *Tonari no Majo Atorie no Hiyori-chan no Monogatari, Book Eleven* and cream them with it. “Like, you should totally do anything.” “Yeah,” said the first person, “I totally should! I should give him the Fever!”

“Ugh, too rude! That’ll *kill him!*” exclaimed another person, but Kanna had stopped listening.

--The *Fever*?

She had had the Fever. She remembered -- It was true now -- *how had she gotten better?* No one ever recovered from that.

Or had she? Maybe it was just a dream after all...

She shook her head. Now wasn’t the time to dwell on the past. There was *food* to be had! She jumped out of bed and retrieved her uniform from the small brown dresser sitting in a corner of the room. Strangely enough, it was stiff when she removed it, as if it had been in water. *It has...* she thought, remembering her crazy dream. *Was that real?*

No, she decided resolutely. *The laundering people probably used too much starch.* She went into the bathroom to change her clothes.

When she came out, she looked at Fuyu. “Are you still asleep?” she asked her. The medicinal witch had told her, she remembered, to evict Fuyu from the premises if she caused too much trouble. *That surely won’t happen,* thought Kanna hopefully. *Fuyu will be good now.* She scratched her cat behind the ears, and Fuyu began purring. “Time to get up, now,” she said lovingly. Fuyu blinked open her eyes sleepily. “Murr-ow.”

Kanna giggled. “It’s almost as if you can understand me.” She picked up her satchel, which contained a book and the English textbook, as well as some potion ingredients she had found in the woods. “Goodbye! I’ll pick you up on the way to first period!” she called to Fuyu. As she walked out the door, she suddenly realized that she hadn’t left out food for the kitten yet. She turned back immediately. Bursting back inside, she rummaged through her drawers for the food, pulling out the bright yellow packaged dried squid. She pulled at it but the packaging wouldn’t come off, so she gripped her teeth on it and pulled. It tasted dusty. *Why does it seem like it’s been in my drawer for more than a day?* Kanna wondered. *It’s almost as if I was gone...* She shook the thought away. Her strange dream kept coming back to her.

Kanna dashed to breakfast through a crowd of children who were clustered around, talking excitedly like there was something more important on their minds, and of course they didn’t have time to walk at the same pace as other people. She spied Ritisha talking to a group of people a little older than her, but who she was really looking for was Lilly. *She volunteers at Mr. Burmont’s class to set up,* remembered Kanna, *so that’s probably where she’ll be.* Suddenly, Kanna absentmindedly bumped into someone. Her jaw hit just above their shoulder, and it was buzzing with pain. She rubbed it, feeling a slight bump just beneath her chin. “Ow.”

“Sorry,” apologized the person whom she had bumped into, and Kanna looked back to see that it was Lilly, going to breakfast after assisting. “Oh – it’s nothing,” Kanna said, looking at Lilly with relief. “Let’s go to breakfast.” She put her hands together and made them form a little arc near her chest in a gesture that was meant to convey sarcasm. “What will it be this time?” she asked while doing this. “Fifty-year-old pancakes, powdered eggs, prepackaged frosted biscuits from when they were first manufactured?” Lilly laughed, and Kanna smiled shyly. She wasn’t normally a shy person, but she was sometimes shy around Lilly. She was so nice it was humbling. “Hmm,” she said, going along, “I think they’ll have *burnt frog!*”

“Oh, that’s *disgusting! Lilly!*” scolded Kanna, and Lilly cupped her hand over her mouth in the way she always did when she was laughing. A dimple formed on her cheek and Kanna laughed as well, but her laugh was louder, and it lasted longer, unlike Lilly’s short bursts of giggles. “But really,” she said when she had stopped laughing, “I wouldn’t put it past them.” She shook her head mournfully. “Those poor frogs. You know, I met a frog in my dream last night.”

“Really?” Lilly gasped. “I did too! How strange.”

“It said ‘May I Help You’ so many times! I think it was trying to scare me.”

“Well, that’s odd. Because that’s exactly what the frog did in *my* dream!” Lilly raised an eyebrow. “Did your dream, by any chance, feature yourself and your cat, who may or may not have been able to talk?”

“...Yes...” replied an uncertain Kanna. Where was this conversation going?

“Why?”

“Because we had the *exact same dream*. Kanna, what does this mean?”

“It means you’re grade ‘A’ nimrods, yo!” A voice came from behind them. The corner of the hallway which they were in had been shadowed by a dark, burly

form. Sean pounded his fist against his hand. “Looks like Half-Girl is hidin’ out! Layin’ on the rizz!” he said in a fake-excited tone. “Where will she show up next?”

“Leave me alone, Sean,” Kanna told him. She fixed her gaze on his, keeping her head high. “Don’t bother me anymore.”

“Yo, get serious!” said Sean, a smirk on his face, but he wouldn’t meet her gaze. “Looks like it’s knuckle sandwiches for breakfast!”

“No, thank you,” said Kanna. “I don’t want to be pummeled today. I am going to leave now.”

Sean grinned. “Too bad you’ll never make it to the door.” He raised his fist, and it came down with a sickening crack – *onto nothing*. An invisible shield had appeared around Kanna and had repelled his fist from her skull. “Yo, what magic is that?” he laughed, but with a final “Dorky, bruh!” he dashed away.

“He was scared.” Lilly told Kanna, giving her a knowing smile.

“He was scared.” Kanna nodded, a grin spreading across her face like butter across a piece of bread.

They walked to get breakfast, hands clasped together.



Fuyu twitched her tail, interested. *It’s a mouse*. The scratching at the corner of her ears told her, the quiet squeaking alerting her to the presence of prey. She pricked her ears, following the sound of the scuffling to a small corner, where it was squeaking and clawing at a floorboard. Eventually it scampered away through the walls. *Best to let it be*, Fuyu thought with a sigh. *It’s most likely someone’s familiar. Plus, I wouldn’t’ve been able to catch it even if I knew how*

to hunt. She had never been raised to be a predator; in fact, she only ate meat on seldom occasion, and even then it was caviar or shrimp. But her stomach growled in contempt, and she looked with sadness towards her fuzzy stomach. She was very hungry, since the only thing she had eaten that morning were dried squid flakes, and she longed for the delectable taste of the mushrooms that she and Kanna had gathered three days before. How delicious they tasted! She drooled just thinking of them. *Ah, if only I could have them now,* she lamented silently. *That seems so far away now...* She wished she could ask Kanna for more food. The ability to speak to her seemed to have worn off with the force of the spell from the previous night. Though inconvenient, it was likely for the best... wasn't it? She wanted to talk to Kanna, but this morning the girl had seemed much more interested in getting out of boarding school alive than trying to have a conversation with her once more. *That reminds me,* thought Fuyu, *I have to meet Kanna at the warped classroom a few left turns away from here.* She sighed. *How am I going to get to talk to her? We did nothing in the Cat world except escape imminent death! I still need to take back the throne!*

But the days she had spent not ruling made her realize just how much urgency, yet uncanny dread, was packed into her desire to become Queen and Grand High Witch of the Cat world. She had realized, over the past three days, that maybe, she didn't *want* to rule.

Maybe she wanted to learn magic good and proper. She had a tutor earlier but had only been taught the most basic of spells; indeed, most of the spells she knew she had read from books. She wanted to learn about magic, powerful magic, scary, wonderful magic. And she couldn't do that if she was a ruler.

Do I really want to go back to the Cat world?

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she had barely bothered to glance at the analog clock just outside the door until now. The display read: IIX:V. *Eight twenty-five,* Fuyu thought with alarm. *Kanna's class starts at eight thirty!* She

sprang out of her bed and set her paws on the wood floor. *I have to get to the classroom before she does! She must be already on her way!* She nudged the door open with her muzzle, feeling the wood splinter her whiskers. She winced, but continued to nudge until she could sufficiently break free from the room. When she was in the hall, she was instantly greeted by the dirty bottom of a shoe which was tan with a crisscross pattern. It swung up... and missed her face. *Phew*, Fuyu thought. *That was close* -- “MEYOWRRRR!” The shoe had stepped on her tail. It smarted like nothing ever had before. She stuck out her tongue, swiveled her head around, and licked it fervently. She purred quietly, trying to get herself to cope with the pain. *It’s nothing*, she reminded herself, *it’s nothing*. But it didn’t *feel*/like nothing. Almost no injury does, not even a paper cut. Fuyu’s tail was slightly flattened, and some fur had fallen off, showing bright red flesh underneath. *Ouch!* Fuyu gritted her teeth, willing herself to continue on. She tucked her tail between her legs -- the slightest movement caused a reverberation of pain within her body, a wave coming to meet her skull at alarming velocity. Trying not to show she was hurt, she weaved around the next set of shoes -- black ones with an impressive variety of white laces -- and continued to do so, ducking and weaving through the crowd of children until she reached the door of Mrs. Waterburn’s classroom. She jumped to reach the rusted doorknob, gripping it with her polydactyl paws, and twisting -- twisting -- until she could shove it open, pushing to reveal the classroom that she had worked so hard to get towards. She glanced at the clock in the hallway. The minute hand was between “V” and “VI”. *Eight twenty-seven*, Fuyu thought. *Thank goodness*.

When she entered the room, though, she discovered that it was full of familiars.

There were three rows of desks in the classroom, each with seven, and Kanna’s was far right, in the middle row. Fuyu made her way to it, glancing nervously around the room at the many animals which resided there. A rabbit was sitting at the battered desk in front of Kanna’s, where the blond girl usually sat. Next to

her was a raven, who smiled enigmatically. Fuyu shuddered; it gave her a feeling of dread which she couldn't shake. Next to the raven was a white mouse, which looked at her with the look of someone who is about to be eaten or mauled to death. Fuyu sighed and her eyes traveled to the seat next to it, which contained a small glass pool of water. This held a brightly colored nudibranch. Fuyu peered over in interest, and the nudibranch looked at Fuyu with their nonexistent eyes in something that translated to a glare. Fuyu quickly forced her eyes to migrate to the next seat, which held a brown-spotted brown puppy. "Hi," they panted, wagging its tail wildly. "Wannabemyfriend?" They smiled like something from a book Fuyu had read once about a girl who got trapped in an alternate dimension where everyone had buttons for eyes. She shivered, gave the mad creature the side-eye, and moved on. Next to them lay another black cat, who was similarly staring at the dog disdainfully. They had amber eyes which looked like two jewels in their eyes. They noticed Fuyu staring at them, and growled, raising their hackles. Fuyu blinked, terrified, and it relaxed a bit. Fuyu made a mental note to *never, ever* mess with the cat, then let her eyes travel to the next desk. There was a frog there. They croaked several times before settling down, then starting up again. Fuyu rolled her eyes in disdain. The row of desks ended there, and behind it was another set of familiars, ready for the children who would soon enter the room. There was a junco sitting next to Fuyu, and they chirped happily, looking at the door expectantly.

Soon after the third chirp, the door creaked open and Mrs. Waterburn ushered in a tidal wave of children. The blond girl took her place in front of Fuyu, stroking her bunny. A red haired, freckly boy sat at the desk next to her, and the raven cawed and perched on the top of the ridiculously wide-brimmed hat he was wearing. A wavy-haired girl with skin the color of coffee took the seat with the mouse, and patted them affectionally. The mouse squeaked in delight but kept stealing terrified glances at Fuyu all the while. A dark-skinned bald person put the nudibranch on the desk, and smiled at it lovingly, while a lighter-skinned girl with impossibly long wheat-colored hair and exuberant pink nails

ruffled the fur of the spotted puppy. A dark-haired boy stroked the cat, and it purred while glaring at Fuyu. A longer-haired boy tickled the frog, while a girl with her hair in two pigtails stuck out her finger for the junco to perch upon. Kanna came in next, and Fuyu perked up. As her person made her way to the seat, Fuyu looked on in excitement. When she did come, however, she scratched her ears, smiled warmly, and directed her attention to Mrs. Waterburn, who was beginning a lecture. “Today, we’re going to be learning a word that could be very dangerous if used in the wrong way – *equido*, which means *liquify*.” Fuyu jumped down from the desk and began kneading Kanna’s lap, the uniform jeans and Kanna’s bony lags making it hard to make a comfortable sitting space. *I may as well go to sleep*, Fuyu thought once she had settled down. *There’s nothing here for me*. But somehow, she couldn’t fall asleep, she couldn’t bring herself to. There was something about the lecture that made her want to listen, something *magical* even. It held her attention, and she realized that she was actually *interested* in what was happening.

She wanted to become a real witch.

But it would be impossible.

Wouldn’t it?



Kanna left the classroom, groaning. “That was *boring!*” she exclaimed to Fuyu, who she was carrying. She scratched her behind the ears again. “Ugh, Mrs. Waterburn is the worst. I can’t wait for Potions class!” Fuyu had enjoyed the lecture – heaven forbid, she actually *learned* something – but it seemed that Kanna didn’t feel the same way. “I wonder what Lilly did in gym this morning... You can walk, here.” Kanna put Fuyu on the floor with a quiet grunt. When they finally reached Mr. Skalowski’s room, Lilly was walking with them and

Albert, her goose, was trying at last to make conversation with Fuyu. “Do you like shrimp?” he asked. “I like shrimp. Lilly sometimes buys them for me. What does your person buy for you?”

“She buys me dried meat,” responded Fuyu scornfully. This goose was annoying!

“Really? Really?” said Albert excitedly. “That’s excellent! I want some dried meat!”

“You’re as bad as a puppy,” snapped Fuyu. “Stop talking to me. I don’t know how that poor girl puts up with you, talking all the time!” Albert reeled back, hurt, and Fuyu felt a little ashamed of the act of *bêtise*. Still, that goose was so annoying! She was glad when they finally arrived at the classroom and Mr. Skalowski got talking. “Today, we’re going to make a Levitation potion,” he announced, mustache bristling. He held up an orange that looked like a face. “This is a Breckman’s orange. They only grow in San Francisco, so treat them carefully.” He then brought out a large crate that held twenty-seven oranges, the number of children in the class, and spoke the spell for Distribution.

Breckman’s Orange

Yokoriku Trogolodicus

Queverence Willivern

Distributa Twenty Seven.

This spell contained some words in English because they were needed for the intended item and quantity to be passed out. The oranges glowed purple, then soared into the air and migrated to the desk of one student each. “Wow...” Kanna marveled at the display, but Fuyu was more impressed, if that was possible. The way that the word “Trogolodicus” was seamlessly pronounced... the way the oranges glowed faintly lilac purple, a near perfect complement to the

orange's color. She was enthralled. *Magic is so beautiful. I would love to weave a spell like that...*

Kanna set about, casting the mashing spell on the orange. She pulled out the rough black cauldron from under her desk and heaved it on it, grunting a little bit with the effort. But the cauldron wasn't terribly large and she was able to lift it with minimal problem. When it was on her desk she scratched Fuyu under the chin, and then dashed to the Vial Shelf to get the other ingredients.

The Vial Shelf was a wood shelf that was in the back of Mr. Skalowski's classroom, near the door. It was rather old, but all of the ingredients that lay in the sparkling glass vials that sat on the shelf were freshly collected. *Mr. Skalowski works so hard to make sure we're learning*, Kanna thought with gratitude. *How nice he is...* She selected the three ingredients necessary for the potion; frog's breath, pond scum and three petals of a yellow tulip. She carefully crushed them with the ceramic mortar and pestle that was under her desk as well, as one was always needed for making potions unless they were of the kind that used entirely liquid. It had rained earlier, she had heard when she woke up in the middle of the night, and with the torrential downpour came an onslaught of cold. It crept into your bones and made all belongings frigid, and Mr. Skalowski's room wasn't very protected from the rain, as it faced a wall. The cold came in and seeped into the equipment, and the mortar and pestle Kanna was working with was slightly cold to the touch, as if a frost maiden had touched it oh-so-delicately that night.

Before Kanna realized it, she had already completed the Levitation potion and the bell was ringing for passing period. *Already?* Kanna thought, surprised. The time had flown by like a sparrow, or cinders in the wind.

She gulped. Her next class was with Sean and McKenna. *I can face them*, she told herself confidently. *I can face them.*

Lilly caught up to her in the hallway. “Hey,” she panted, trying to catch her breath after running to catch her. “You were unusually *quiet* during second period. What’s gotten into you?” Lilly looked at Kanna with one eyebrow raised in inquiry. “Just thinking.” Kanna shrugged. Some things couldn’t be explained. “Let’s go to orchestra.”

When McKenna approached her, Kanna said nothing. When she taunted her, Kanna said nothing. When she pulled her cheek like a doting aunt, trying to prove a point, to rile her up, Kanna said nothing.

Eventually McKenna left. Kanna stopped holding her breath.

Those people weren’t going to bother her anymore. Not if she had anything to say about it.

“Today,” Mr. Rich announced on the podium, red hair draping over his eyes, “We’re going to be sight-reading a new piece.” Fuyu sighed and twitched her tail impatiently. This class was *boring!* She didn’t get to do *anything*, just watch a bunch of amateur musicians play a song for the first time. “This piece –” Mr. Rich held up a sheet of paper with a bunch of lines and black dots arranged meticulously on it – “is called ‘The Little Broomstick’. It was written by a musician and his cat, who provided the melody by meowing and purring in a certain way.” Fuyu perked up. That was a good thing, at least.

Kanna seemed excited when she received the sheet music. That was another good thing. And when the orchestra actually played the piece, it flowed beautifully through Fuyu’s ears. It was enjoyable. Still, Fuyu wished she could learn more magic in Mrs. Waterburn’s class. The teacher may have been strict, but the subject matter was fascinating. When the class was finally over, Fuyu found that the song they played was on instant replay in her mind and shook her head repeatedly, trying to get it out. “What are you doing?” asked Kanna, looking down at her and laughing slightly. Fuyu turned to her with a look of

contempt, and Kanna burst out laughing. The laugh was loud and long. The best kind.

Because Kanna and Lilly were to part ways in fourth period, Fuyu found that the time between third and fourth period where when they talked to each other the most. “So I’ll have to read that by the end of today? Great. See you at sixth period then.”

“See you then.” Lilly waved and was swallowed by the tidal wave of children which swarmed the halls. Kanna sighed and opened the door, a bit reluctantly, to Mr. Burmont’s classroom, where magic wands were found all over. Though superfluous to most all spells, wands helped direct and strengthen magic. Fuyu made her way to Kanna’s seat, where she already was, she listened intently as Mr. Burmont talked about the history of the Finding spell, which had been covered some months earlier. Neither Fuyu nor Kanna knew the spell.

After fourth period was Mrs. Williams’ arithmetic class. Kanna was good at arithmetic, Fuyu noticed as the class went *on* and *on*, but she didn’t seem to be extraordinarily enthusiastic about it.

Meanwhile, Kanna was dreading sixth period. There was a broom race today.

Sixth period was gym, which was Kanna’s least favorite class. She was decent at it, but she didn’t understand the extremely athletic athletes that you sometimes met; they were foreign to her. For the first half hour of the class, they would practice on their brooms, and for the latter fifteen minutes they would run laps around the school or another cardiovascular activity that usually left three fourths of the people in the class wheezing and defeated. The mud around the school was always filled with shoeprints from this, and sometimes even imprints from knees -- people would trip and fall sometimes. With the broom races, however, things got *super competitive*. The event lasted the entire day, with the

races once a month after the first month of the year, which was reserved for orientation.

Kanna was not good at casting the spell to make the broom fly; she kept pronouncing the words wrong. On the racing days especially, her voice would tremble and wane, until she was whispering, imploring the wood and straw to soar into the air.

Kanna's arithmetic worksheet was littered with lines and letters and equations and her worst enemy -- the *variable* -- when the bell rang for passing period. She sighed. At least she wouldn't have to bear the terrible day alone -- Lilly was in her class, though she was often the victor in these kinds of races; she was very good at flying. *Maybe it's because of her goose familiar*, Kanna mused.

When she caught up with Lilly, who was departing from Mrs. Waterburn's classroom, she looked extremely confident. "Aren't you excited for the broom race today?" she asked Kanna.

"...no... not really..." Kanna looked down and shuffled her feet.

"Is that just because you aren't very good at flying? Don't worry, you'll get it in time."

"Lilly, it's been nearly three terms already."

"So what? It takes a lot longer than that to develop a superior skill. You're better than my older sister."

"Your older sister isn't a witch. She's a teenager who drives a taxi for her job."

"Well, that's true..." Lilly laughed. "But she does try, sometimes."

"When? I'd love to see this."

“She does it sometimes, whenever I’m out of the house. When I come back from the engagement, I spy on her from the backyard.”

“What does she do?” asked Kanna, intrigued.

“Well, she’s had no practice, so she wiggles the broom. Whispers the spell to it at first, then screams it. Then, when she’s had enough, she breathes in a lot of air and lets it out behind her in the hope that it will propel her. See? At least you can actually make your broom fly.”

“Yes, but that’s about the *only thing* I can do.”

“Relax! You’ll be fine!”

Kanna rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything. They had approached two double doors, separated by a slight wall that only barely separated them -- it was so fragile you could have gone at it with a hammer and it would fall into pieces. The small sticker on the wall read “RM-165”. She shuddered and opened the door, pushing on the metal rectangle which opened to reveal a large, spacious room where every shout echoed. It was old, but well-used, as was the physical education teacher, Mr. Raveneticus. He was a corpulent, aged man with a pinched face and thick glasses which he never took off. He had a strained voice which he would often use to yell at the students, which he was doing now. His green turtleneck sweater didn’t match the room. Kanna and Lilly both stared at it, down on the gym floor, as Mr. Raveneticus barked, “Hurry, kids! Hurry!” He looked up at the large analog clock, and Kanna could see his face visibly droop. There were three minutes until the bell rang. He hung his head, defeated for a moment, until he snapped it up again to see that it was two minutes before the rang. “Hurry, kids! Hurry!” he wheezed again. “One minute ‘till the bell rings! Hurry, kids! Hurry!” Kanna sighed. Mr. Raveneticus had just been waiting until he could say that. When the bell finally rang, Mr. Raveneticus stopped shouting. But only for a fraction of a second. “Okay! *Okay!!!* Getcher brooms for the race!

Hurry!” There was a flood of people rushing to get their brooms, from a closet that was behind Mr. Ravenitticus. “Hey,” he barked a couple of times, “Hey! Slow down, kids!” This was the only day of the month that he ever said this. Kanna was pushed and smushed as she made her way to the closet and reached her hand through the crowd to feel around for her willow broom. It was smooth and the color of hot chocolate after milk has been poured into it – a light, milky kind of brown. Kanna found it and yanked it into her arms, relieved that she had it. Her hands trembled slightly.

“Okay,” said Mr. Ravenitticus, “Line up!” The students were standing on a long, checkered tarp-like line and Fuyu, to her dismay, was lined up around a tree with numerous other familiars, including Albert and the barksy dog from first period. She flattened her ears, trying to tune them out, but the sound reverberated in her skull like a child who has had too much sucrose. *Oh, Kanna...* she thought desperately, *be done soon...*

Meanwhile, Kanna gripped her broom. The school was on her left side, the yard on her right. In front of her was the starting line. “Three laps around the school!” Mr. Ravenitticus barked. “Whoever gets here three times first is a winner!” Kanna began to sweat; her hair fell over her forehead as she pressed it to the broom, willing it to fly. These races were always intense. “Don’t go more than ten feet off the ground,” Mr. Ravenitticus told them, listing the rules for the race, “Don’t knock anyone out of the sky, and have *fun*.” He said the word *fun* like it was something sour caught in his throat. “See you on the other side.” He cleared his throat. “Ready...”

“Begin!”

There was a swooshing sound as two dozen children rose into the air on their brooms. Kanna kept low to the ground, making sure that no one accidentally bumped her. She could see Lilly’s oak broom above her, bristles waving in the wind. She kept her eyes trained ahead of her and swerved past a couple of

people. She gripped the broom's handle so hard her knuckles turned white and started shaking, adrenaline rushing through her. She could see three people in front of her -- the blond girl from first period, Sean (she willed her broom to catch up with him) and Lilly, racing ahead to finish her second lap. She shouted encouragement, or at least she tried to...

Her voice began to break. Her breath came in short gasps, and her hands trembled. All her strength was gone... she felt her face flush, she was hot... too hot... she gripped the broom, but her strength wasn't going to be enough... she felt it tilt, and she was now gripping it as it sped along in midair, dangling from the piece of wood. She could hear landings; everyone was stopping to gaze at her, trying to help her. She could feel their hands grabbing at her uniform, trying to help her down, and she felt her sweaty hands slip from the broom, and she was free falling for an exhilarating, terrifying fraction of a second.

Then she fell to the floor.

Then...

Then...

Fuyu watched as Kanna fell to the ground, eyes closed, breath coming in desperate gasps. Soon they slowed, and she breathed a sigh of relief. *A Fever bout...* she thought with despair. *It's coming back.*

I have to get her the Permanent Cure.

She shuddered. *I don't have time to gather the potion ingredients again... Potatoes aren't being served tonight, and Kanna will be put to bed to rest anyways. Why did I have to drag her into this? I could have escaped myself. But she did help me...* She closed her eyes, resigned, and took a breath. She knew what she had to do.

I'm going to have to transform.

Chapter Nineteen

The Return

“Come on, Kanna, wake up, wake up...” Kanna groaned and blinked. She was lying in her top bunk bed, her dormitory around her, and *someone* was shaking her awake. She felt their fingernails dig into her flesh and groaned again, in mild pain. “Wake up! Come on, we have to go! It’s coming back!” Kanna raised her head groggily to take a look at the mysterious stranger who was waking her.

“Who are you?” she groaned, half asleep.

“Don’t you remember?” said the person, and it was only now that Kanna had a good look at them; it was a girl, she realized from the long hair. She was tilting her head in question, and her black hair swung with the action. It was dark as night, and so full. Her eyes were a penetrating jade green, and she was wearing a black robe with a hood which draped over her entire body, even the top of her head. There was a slight mass poking out from there, and Kanna wondered if anything was underneath other than hair. All she knew was that it was pointy, nothing else. “You *know* me!” The girl smacked her forehead. “Are you going insane?” The thing under her hood twitched. “No, I’m not *insane!* Who even are you?”

“Be careful not to wake Lilly. She spent a lot of time hauling you up here. She’s exhausted.” Just then Kanna’s stomach gave an exasperated growl. “How did you know that?” she asked the stranger suspiciously. “Have you been... stalking me?”

“No, no -- nothing like that!” The girl waved her hand in front of her face, laughing slightly. Then, the appendage fell to her side and she looked thoughtful

instead of humorous, in a fraction of a second's difference. "Well, I guess in a way."

Kanna was confused. Who could this be? She racked her brain for answers, but nothing seemed to come up. Except that the eyes... something about those eyes gave Kanna an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*, even though she'd never seen them before.

"Are you coming? Remember, the fate of the world is at stake." The stranger reached out a hand, and Kanna recoiled. "Why should I come with you?" she cried. "Kanna," the stranger protested, exasperated, "You're acting like you don't know me! Drop the act!"

"Who are you? I've never seen you before!"

At this, the stranger removed her hood, letting the top of her head show. Two fuzzy black ears poked out and she looked at them self-consciously. "Well, maybe not in this form..."

"Fuyu?!" Kanna gasped with a strange combination of delight and surprise. "Yes!" answered the girl. "You didn't figure it out yet?" "No, I didn't!" protested Kanna, "I had no idea! How was I to know you could transform like this?"

Fuyu shuddered. "I hate it. It's thin and my senses are flimsy. I still can't transform *fully*..." She patted her ears and the tail which was now poking out of the long, flowing black cloak. "But I can still talk to you. Come on, there's no time to waste! Get up already!" She pulled Kanna out of bed, her fingernails digging into her palm. Kanna winced. "Your fingernails are *sharp*!"

"Well, I can't very well *retract* them, can I?"

"That's true." Kanna decided not to press the matter. "Shouldn't Lilly come with us?"

“We don’t want to put her into any more danger. Come on...” Fuyu began to descend the ladder. Kanna followed suit.

They quietly slipped through the window. “Remind me why we’re not leaving out the door?” Kanna whispered to the cat.

“It’s because,” Fuyu hissed back, “someone might see us. You need the cure for Magic fever. I need to go back to the Cat world and defeat my brother. So you see. We can’t be spotted.”

“Isn’t there some kind of invisibility spell?” Kanna queried.

“Not much magic can alter the body,” Fuyu replied. “I read that in a book once. If you ever do that, then it may become permanent. Most stay away from that spell.”

“Mmm...” Kanna nodded in understanding. “Then how come you could lower our gravity? In the ravine?”

“That was the gravity *around* us, not *our* gravity.”

“What about the spell that protects us from all harm?” They were on the lawn now, heading towards the forest.

“That isn’t usually used to do harm. Kanna, did you study the laws of magic?”

“Yes, we read a book about it in Mrs. Waterburn’s class.”

“Quit it with the questions. We’re getting close.”

Leaves crunched beneath their feet as they walked into the forest. Kanna shuddered; it was somehow rather creepy when sneaking in at night. Cold moonlight shone on the trees, which selectively filtered onto the forest floor. *I wish I wasn’t wearing my flannel pajamas right now...* thought Kanna, disappointed. She shivered again. *It’s cold. At least these are long sleeved. I*

should be grateful I'm not wearing my summer outfit. Sighing, she followed Fuyu until they reached a brighter side of the forest. *It must be nearly dawn, in the Cat world,* Kanna thought.

Then Fuyu stopped. She had a worried expression on her face. "I can't get through," she whispered in disbelief, touching an invisible wall. "I can't get through."

Kanna's eyes widened. "How are we going to get in? And why did we get in in the first place?"

"The creature wanted to see *you*, remember? It is the one that watches over this world."

"Ah... I think I have a plan..." Kanna sighed. "But I really don't want to do it..."

"Don't push yourself," Fuyu told her. "You'll need your strength."

Kanna tried to make a decision. *Will it be worth it to defeat it, once and for all?* It was a hard choice and she ended up clutching the sides of her head without even noticing it. "Fuyuuuuuu..." she moaned, "what should I dooooooo..."

"Do whatever you think is right." Fuyu nodded resolutely. "I don't know what your plan is but if you think it will aid us, do it."

Kanna closed her eyes. Took a deep breath. *This is the only way. I can't risk losing Fuyu's world forever.*

It's strange, she thought, *how something I never would have dreamed existed a week ago is the thing I now fight to save.*

"Yoshimitsu!" she yelled into the other side of the barrier. The forest woodland seemed to warp in front of her, waver out of existence. "That is your name, isn't it?!"

The trees began to shake as if swayed by the most powerful wind anyone had ever seen. Roots quivered and toppled over, talking down the trees with great *crashes*. Kanna put her hands over her ears as the cacophony roared: *Boom. Boom! Boom.*

The voice in her head began to speak again, louder, real.

DO NOT ADDRESS ME BY THAT NAME!!!

A tree fell with each word, as to accentuate the point. Kanna roared, “I’M NOT AFRAID OF YOU!” on top of the noise, hoping – wishing – praying – that she would be heard. The barrier rippled, shimmered, and small holes began to tear in it with a small *ripping* sound. “KANNA!” called Fuyu. “WHAT DID YOU DO?” She was standing to Kanna’s right, clasping her hands together and bearing a worried expression. “WHAT DID YOU DO?” she repeated.

Kanna calmly walked over to her friend, amid the *rips* and the *booms*. “It’ll be fine,” she said. “I’ve got it.”

Then she grasped Fuyu’s hand. It felt odd, and the nails, as expected, were unusually sharp. She took in the other hand the broken barrier. It was oddly materialistic now that it was broken, like a clawed quilt. It shimmered and wavered, then began to close up in an attempt to heal. “Come on,” she urged Fuyu, “we don’t have much time.”

The two of them went through the barrier into the ruined forest.

Twigs littered the ground, and sap lay like blood on the floor, sticking fallen pine needles together into clumps that stuck to Kanna’s footwear. She shook her black shoes in order to get the clumps off, but they stuck like stubborn children and refused to move. She huffed and scraped them on the ground, but that only accumulated more pine needles. Soon it seemed one could not discern Kanna’s shoes from the forest floor. She grimaced and continued walking, though her feet made an annoying crunching noise as they walked.

Soon they reached the wet grass and the moat which surrounded the castle. It shone in the new yet waning sunlight, for clouds were gathering in the sky and it was already beginning to rain lightly. Kanna eagerly rubbed her feet in the grass, relieving them of their sticky burden. “Disgusting,” she muttered softly. Fuyu heard her, though. “What’s disgusting?” she inquired, watching Kanna clean her shoes. “Nothing,” Kanna told her. “Some pine needles got stuck on my foot, that’s all.”

“Ah.” Fuyu didn’t pry. There was silence as they trudged toward the castle. The grass brushed against their ankles and made them wetter than they had already been, causing great annoyance to Fuyu, as she hated water. Soon, though, Kanna felt *dizzy* again. It was the same *dizzy* that she had felt on the broom and she realized too late that she was falling unconscious. She groaned to Fuyu in a desperate attempt to preserve her consciousness, but to no avail. She fell to the wet grass, smelling the strong smell of pine sap and feeling the frigid wind slap her, but she didn’t shiver. She was already out.



“Oh come on, Kanna, not now...” Fuyu pressed her eyebrows together, making a pinched face. “You can’t be having a Fever bout now...” She exhaled sharply to accentuate her point. “Don’t make me carry you... ugh, I hate these hands.” She gripped Kanna’s shoulders and began to pull. “These fingers feel like limp noodles! How can you stand having so many of them?” She shuddered at thinking about having these so called ‘limp noodles’ for the rest of the foreseeable future but shrugged it off when she saw that they were already getting close to the castle. *Thank goodness.* Fuyu sighed.

How are we going to get past the guard? The thought hit her like a bullet train. *Kanna is unconscious and I'm going to have to drag her! And she's the one that knows the duplication spell! I can't very well wake her up, can I?*

Fuyu considered her options, slowing down until she realized that she was simply gripping Kanna's shoulders and staring up at the sky, mouth open.

"Hey!" a voice called from near her. "What do you think yer doin'?"

Fuyu froze. The guard had noticed them already from so far away! She gulped and summoned her courage. She was going to need it, whatever she was going to do...

But she hadn't even figured *that* out yet. She was staring blankly out at the clouds, gripping Kanna's shoulders, mouth open! *What am I going to do?* She racked her brain for options. *Think, Fuyu, think!*

You can't control the guard to let you in because controlling someone else is a forbidden magic. You can't use the Duplicate spell because you never learned it! Your only chance is to wake Kanna up so she can help us, but even then the guard is still there... Fuyu groaned. This was going to be a lot harder than she thought. *Can I send the guard to sleep?* she suddenly wondered. *The sleep spell is not forbidden because it is almost entirely harmless. But how does it go? Inova Kiriko... yes, something like that...* Fuyu muttered the spell under her breath, knowing that it wouldn't do anything but just practicing. *But I have to be careful not to unleash it on Kanna. That would get me into an even bigger mess!* She tore her head from the clouds and fixed the guard with a stare, straight in the eye. He was a skinny person wearing metal plates and had a spear at his side (*where did he even get that*, Fuyu wondered). He seemed to be a badger in human form. *Not a manatee? Oh, phew...* "Ay," he called again, "little lady! Get out or I'll make you wish... uh, what was the line... wish you'd, ah, never come here! Yeah, that's it." *What's up with him?* Fuyu thought. *He's like a bad actor...*

She sighed again. “Y’hear me?!” he hollered at her again. “I’ll... uh... uh...” Fuyu allowed herself to roll her eyes. *He’s hopeless. Why did my brother hire this person?* “Uh...” the guard stuttered on. Fuyu locked eyes with him once again and gave him such a fierce stare that he let out a little fart of fear. *Pffart!* Fuyu’s eyes went wide but she didn’t laugh. She had to concentrate. She kept staring into the guard’s golden eyes. He narrowed them suspiciously. “Whaddaya think you’re doin’?” he shouted at her after some time. Fuyu decided, after this, that it had been long enough. She recited the spell at low volume so as not to attract, well, *unwanted* attention.

Inova Kiriko

Snitchrova Daedecus Tusama

Queverence Willivern

Slunnia Duluthok.

“What was that?” the guard shouted. “Little girl, you’re in a lot of trouble! I’m not asking you again... whaaaaat... was... thaaaaaaaat...” His grip on his spear loosened and he fell to the ground, where he began to snore. Loudly. Fuyu sighed and sat down on the grass, exhausted. *I need to think of a plan...* she thought mournfully. *The magic made me so tired, though. I need to find some way to lower the drawbridge.* She considered her options. *I could use the spell to levitate things, but I’m too tired to move something as big as the bridge. I could just levitate myself, but it would be difficult to control myself and I might end up plunging into the water. Hmmm... The logs have all drifted downstream again, so I can’t burl there...* She narrowed her eyes, looking at the bridge. *Hmm...* She observed the unstable wood that made it up, observed the planks that held it in place, observed the black metal chain which, when yanked, brought down the bridge – *the black metal chain which brought down the bridge – brought down the bridge* – Fuyu’s eyes widened in surprise. The chain! Why hadn’t she

thought of it before? The answer had been right in front of her the whole time! Shaking her head incredulously, she began to chant a spell of Pulling, which will pull any inanimate object to the ground.

Haksudo Jouh

Uoarvn Hioera Yojerna

Queverence Willivern

Hilkie Stumina Isoap.

The chain shuddered once, as if trying to resist the spell, and then began to slowly pull downwards, creaking and groaning. The drawbridge went with it, more than one plank falling off and splashing into the ravine below, and soon it was right in front of Fuyu. She dragged Kanna onto the edge of the ravine, then stopped, considering her options. *I can't leave her behind, can I..* she thought. *She's bound to wake up soon and I can't have her imprisoned with the guard!* But as she tested her friend's weight on the bridge, she realized that between the two of them they would never make it across. *I'll have to leave her behind... Sorry, Kanna.* She looked back at her friend as she tested her own weight on the bridge. It creaked, but it held. She tentatively made her way across, stepping so lightly one would have thought she was floating. When she did reach the other side, she approached the guard again. Inspecting his belt, she saw a set of silver keys. *I'll take that.* She wrapped her fingers around the set of keys and yanked. They came off of the black belt with a snap. After this, she lowered the drawbridge and went to the large door. It was imposing, but when Fuyu tried to doorknob, she found it locked. She held up her keys, jangling them in front of the door as if taunting it, and then inserted the correct key. It wasn't hard; the guard had labeled them all with toothpicks. The one labeled MAIN DOOR worked excellently. She turned the doorknob, pushed the door open, and then dashed into the castle.

There were no guards to be seen; obviously, her brother -- or at least the thing which was now controlling him -- had the ultimate faith that they would not find a way in and saw no need to employ further guards. The sparkling steps to the private quarters of the monarch dazzled her, the sunroof making them sparkle. She shook her head. *I've lived here most of my life. Now's not the time to get distracted!*

She dashed up the steps -- *tap-tap-tap* -- and arrived at the top of them. She looked down at the long, dark hallway which led to the Office of Magic and shuddered to think about what might be in there now. She instead took the key labeled DOOR OF RULER and thrust it into the keyhole. She turned the key, dripping with sweat, shaking with excitement, scared, exhilarated, and so many other things. She gripped the handle on the door.

It was time to show her brother who was the true monarch of the Cat world.



Kanna came to on the side of a large ravine, just nearly on a bridge. She wondered what she was doing there. She had been in her bed, dreaming... *no*, her brain told her, *that's not it. There was something after that... something important. I can't quite remember what, though.*

Will you please try? Kanna begged her memory.

I am! It seemed to respond, as if it could talk. *I know it can't, though*, Kanna thought. *I'm only fooling myself.*

But just at that moment, something came to her. A person. A person who Kanna had never seen before. And yet she seemed familiar. *Who was it?* Kanna thought. *Who was it?* It turned into begging internally. *Why can't I remember? Ugh...* She rubbed her forehead, sighing. *Come on, brain, work for me.*

Unfortunately, her brain didn't have very much time to respond before she heard someone shouting at her. "Hey! Kid! I thought I told you two to leave!" She turned to see the guard barking at her. *Is he an animal in disguise?* she wondered. *His voice sounds like an animal's, just a little bit... An animal in disguise! That's right!* "Uh, and if you don't," continued the guard, "I'll, uh, cut you with my spear! Yeah! Fear me, because, uh, I won't hesitate to, uh..." Kanna sighed again, but for a different reason. How had she forgotten what had just happened to her? "Uh... Well, no using magic this time!" he called. "That's cheating!"

Kanna started to walk across the bridge, hoisting herself up from where she lay. "Yeah?" she called to the guard. "Who says?"

"I say," he said proudly. "And what I say goes!"

"Yeah," Kanna said, "but what if it doesn't?"

"What do you mean?" the guard asked suspiciously.

"This," answered Kanna, smiling proudly at him. From the other side of the bridge. "Ah-ah-ah-how'd you find your way across?!" exclaimed the guard, stuttering in surprise. "It was while you were distracted," said Kanna in a matter-of-fact tone. "Mind telling me why magic is cheating now?" She reached out for his spear. Her hand, though, touched nothing. Groping for the wooden handle, she was caught entirely off guard when she found what she was looking for pointed at her. *When did that show up?!* Kanna was surprised and jumped back from the spear's sharp tip. "Yes, in fact, I will tell you why magic is cheating, little girl," said the guard, flashing her a crooked grin that was missing more than one tooth. "It's because your life is now in my hands."

Kanna gulped, trying to swallow an earsplitting scream that was already bubbling up in her stomach. She fixed the guard with a stern glare, trying not to betray her feelings to him. "Oh yeah? What if I use magic?"

“Then I’ll kill you.” The guard didn’t hesitate. “You are now my hostage.” He sounded a little proud of himself. “You will do as I say. Get into the castle! Move!” He thrust the spear at the door. In a split second, Kanna was off running to the bridge, her feet working as fast as they possibly could to escape. “Can’t catch me!” she called to the guard tauntingly. He gritted his teeth and looked down at the ground. In what seemed like an instant he, covered with earth, appeared back at her side. “Don’t run away,” he warned her, “or I’ll kill you.” Kanna was learning by now that this was an empty threat, but she still complied. There was always a chance.

The guard unceremoniously pushed her into the castle, tying her hands behind her back with rope and taking out some duck tape to tape her mouth shut. Kanna didn’t fight it, though she found the stickiness of the tape on her mouth unsettling and wished that she could rip it off, painful though it might be. She didn’t say a word and found that being compliant was actually not terrible as the guard didn’t give out any orders except for barking “MOVE!!!” once or twice. She did move a little faster each time that happened. Quite soon she was running, so it didn’t take long to climb the steps to the ruler’s quarters and soon they were at the door.

It was ajar. And when the guard peeked inside, he found a black-haired, cloaked individual standing in front of his ruler, blinking, thrashing her head back and forth, clutching at it, knees wobbling, crashing to the floor.

Trying to resist the wrath.

Chapter Twenty

The Bonito Blade

It was inside her, now. She realized how Kanna must have felt when it had been inside of her. It burned, burned with a massive radiance which came from satisfaction and victory, expecting victory, reveling in it, needing it to survive. The dark entered all of her, her brain, her body, her mind, her very soul. She was drowning. She couldn't breathe. This was the end. She had to succumb. Her legs were wobbling, she was falling to the floor, but she could barely feel it, now, nothing mattered anymore. She was in a desperate struggle to hold onto herself, to being a cat, to her memories and dreams and hopes and everything that was Fuyu and not the dark miasma in which she was drowning, melding with, becoming a part of. She was losing herself, losing Fuyu...

"We've found an intruder." The dark, writhing tentacles retreated. Her brother looked up at the guard, who had burst into the room, and returned it to himself. His black, sightless eyes stared up at the guard with a cold, piercing gaze which instilled a kind of shocked silence in the young chatterbox of a guard for a second.

"What matter," said her brother in a voice that was not his own, ***"was so pressing that it made you feel the need to disturb me?"***

"N-nothing, sir, Your Highness, I--"

"Never mind that. ANSWER THE QUESTJON, WORM!"

“I-I-I... I found this girl by the bridge, sir. I’ve taken her in as a prisoner. What should I do with her?” He yanked Kanna in by the wrists. She looked sadly at Fuyu and a sharp pang of sadness resounded in her heart.

“What you were trained to do with all the other prisoners. Put ‘er in the dungeon.”

“But-but sir, I’ve seen this girl there before! Uh, isn’t there a law that says that prisoners have to be tried when they have been convicted of the same crime twice?” the guard stuttered.

“Yes. She will visit the courtroom once more.”

“Thank you, sir, Your Highness, sir.” The guard bowed and left the room, lifting his metal boots onto the linoleum and holding his head high as he left the room. Taro glared at her as soon as he was gone. **“Your friend is in trouble. Shame she has to die like this... and she could have been so useful, too...”**

“We escaped you once,” Fuyu told him. “She can surely do it again.” But a whisper of doubt wormed its way into her mind. *What if she can’t escape the Executioner? What if this is the last time I see her alive?* She shook the thought away but still it remained. “You can’t defeat us!” she announced defiantly, if a little unsure, concluding her talk.

“Yes, in fact I can, sister dear.” Taro smiled, but it was a hollow smile, a blank smile, a dangerous smile. **“The Executioner has agreed to cease his little wizardry experiments, so... I magic-proofed his quarters.”**

“H-how...” Fuyu’s eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“Oh, I see everything, sister dear. I can’t help but fix any little mistakes I seem to have made, Amm?” Her brother -- or what was inside of him -- smiled again and Fuyu felt her stomach twist sickeningly. “Stop it,” she reprimanded him, on the verge of tears. “Stop calling me your sister. You have no right to.

You're not my brother. You're the creature who guards the forest and you have some sort of sinister plot. Well, leave my family out of it, because whatever you're trying to do KILLED MY MOTHER!" Fuyu was shouting now, in between sobs that made her shoulders shake. "GET OUT OF MY BROTHER! GET OUT OF OUR FOREST! GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT!!"

She lay on the floor, on her knees, sobbing, distraught and that was when the tentacles reached out for her again. She lifted her head to see them, a writhing black mass of horror, and she didn't hesitate this time, didn't stop. She thrust the door open and ran out, dashing away from the evil that threatened to envelop her in its burning embrace. Tears were still pouring out of her eyes but she continued to run away. The tentacles touched her foot ever so lightly and she recoiled, stopping for a moment to make sure that the burning tentacle was off, before she began running again, faster. The tentacles reached for her again, and she looked behind her to see where they were. When she saw that she was a safe distance from them, she continued running. It was now a full-on sprint.

At this point, though, she wasn't running *from* something, she was running *to* something.

The courtroom.

Kanna.

She knew she had to get there before the final verdict. The spell that encompassed the jury's room addled their minds and made them always reach the same verdict. And it was not a good one. She recalled the Vulture screaming at her and Kanna and Lilly that they were to be escorted to the guillotine, remembered the terror they had felt in that moment. She couldn't let it happen again. She wouldn't. Not to Kanna. Not to anyone.

The doors were flying past her as she dashed down the corridor, her long cloak flowing behind her. She passed the bakery, the prison door and the hens' room,

not paying much attention to her surroundings as she sprinted past them in a desperate race to get to her destination. She dashed until her lungs felt like they had turned to ash, her throat to blood. Bile rose in her throat and she stopped for breath, wheezing. Her hands came down to her knees instinctively and she stood there, bending down and catching her breath, for a few terrible seconds. The tentacles touched her again, and she flinched back but they kept coming, burning her with their soft touch. She gripped her hands together, sweat pouring down her brow, coming down in drips onto the linoleum floor, and raised one foot in front of the other, finding the strength to walk, run again, *one... two... one... two... one... two... one-two-one-two-onetwoonetwoonetwo... she dashed away again, feeling the strength in her legs come rushing back. She was gasping for air, needing breath, but she didn't get it, wasn't fast enough. She had to keep running, keep going. When she finally skidded past the courtroom door her legs knocked together and she had just enough time to grip the door of the courtroom before she collapsed again, gasping for breath. She kept gripping the doorhandles, though her hands were rapidly losing their grip because of the sweat, because she knew that when she got up again, the tentacles would be able to reach her. Her sight grew darker and, as she regained breath, the tentacles reached for her again. Hands shaking, entire body shaking, she shoved the door open and collapsed to the ground, wheezing. Her head hit the cold floor and her hair cushioned the blow, but it still left a considerable bruise. Fuyu rubbed her head, trying to dull the stinging. *Ow.**

Kanna was in the courtroom, standing taciturnly next to her brother. She was on the verge of crying, Fuyu could tell. She was gripping her hands together very tightly in front of her stomach, fidgeting, and she was biting her lip to stop it from trembling. A single tear managed to make its way down her cheek and she wiped it away furiously, then resumed her position, standing up, it seemed, straighter. Fuyu felt a pang of sadness for this girl, who she hadn't known until a few days before but now was so close to her. She had to save her from what her brother had become.

The tentacles chose that exact moment to reach for her again. Her ears flattened, and she crept slowly away from them, but they reached so fast that she was almost enveloped before the tentacles retracted into her brother. He cocked his head, and then he smiled at her.

The smile, oh, *the smile*. It was cold and heartless, the kind an evil genius gives their victims just before they are pulled apart by their new machine. Fuyu recoiled in horror, reminded that whatever was in that black cat, it wasn't her brother. She raised her hand, but then remembered that she had no claws, not in this form. "**AA, sister dear. Come to save your little friend?**" Kanna gulped and Fuyu could see it. They were both shaking, sweating, breathless, unwilling to give up. "Yes," Fuyu answered, looking her brother straight in the eye, "I did. Let her go; she's done nothing wrong. Your quarrel is with me."

The tentacles reached for Kanna, and Fuyu shouted "No!" but it was too late. Kanna was closing her eyes, trying to shake away her tears, when she was enveloped by the tentacles. They curled around her like a snake, and one pressed against her mouth, rendering her almost immediately unconscious. "Kanna!" Fuyu shouted in dismay, turning to glare at her brother. "What have you done to her?"

"**Exactly what you've suggested.**" Fuyu rushed to Kanna, checking for a heartbeat. She didn't find one. Turning to her brother, she said in a shaky voice, "Put her back. *Put her back.*"

"**Not until we've finished.**" The creature continued smiling and Fuyu wanted to scream. There was rage and hate roiling inside her, wanting, needing to come out, but she swallowed it down. Vulnerability was no longer an option. She couldn't show it, couldn't let her rage get the better of her. The Vulture flapped in at that moment. "What's going... ON-HERE, what's going... ON-HERE!" it screamed, sticking its neck out as it waddled towards its perch. "Order-in-the COURT! Order-in-the COURT! AAAAWK!" Fuyu turned to look at it, and it

did the same. Sticking its bare neck out to stare at her, it screamed, “Fuyu... Persimmon. Fuyu... Persimmon! AAAAWK!”

“Yes, that’s me,” confirmed Fuyu quietly.

“You’re... not DEAD, not DEAD! AAAAWK!”

“True.”

“IM-POSSIBLE! IM-POSSIBLE!”

“It’s possible. Not anymore, though.”

“That’s... GREAT. GREAT. AAAAWK!”

“Not really...” Fuyu muttered under her breath. She didn’t want to argue with the Vulture, though. She couldn’t waste her time like this; she had to find a way to defeat her brother.

“Who’s-on TRIAL. Who’s-on TRIAL.”

“Kanna,” responded Fuyu, sighing. “Kanna’s on trial for trespassing.”

“Tried-for-the-same-crime! Tried-for-the-same-crime. That’s... ILLEGAL! ILLEGAL! AAAAWK!”

“Yes, but my brother” – *or whatever’s inside of him*, thought Fuyu silently-- “makes the rules now.”

“That’s-true. That’s-true.”

I don’t have time for this, thought Fuyu. *I need to get away...* “Where’s the jury?” she asked the Vulture, looking up at its beady eyes and pinkish bare neck.

“Indisposed. Indisposed. AAAAWK!” replied the creature. Fuyu looked it in the eye again. “What do you mean, indisposed?” she asked it. “Doing-their-jobs,

doing-their-jobs!” responded the Vulture with a little bit of pride at knowing exactly what someone was asking it. “Why-do-you-ask? AAAAWK!”

Fuyu sighed. “When is the trial again?” she asked the Vulture. It ruffled its wings and jumped several times, sticking out its neck as if to reach the chandelier above it, before replying. “Summon-the-jury! Right-now, Right-now! AAAAWK! AAAAWK!” it screamed. Fuyu shuddered and looked back and forth, looking for something that she could bash the Vulture’s head in with – a crowbar, perhaps, or a loose floorboard. Unfortunately, she found none and instead let her eyes rest on her feet. Strange things they were, feet. She couldn’t quite figure out why they had all the strange lumps on the tip when one never seemed to use them for anything. Her hind paws, in her cat form, were much more efficient. As an experiment, she wiggled her toes. The lumps writhed like snakes but did not seem to have the same flexibility as fingers. Especially thumbs – now *those* were neat! Given that she was a polydactyl cat, Fuyu had them on each paw in cat form, but when they were fingers, they were much more accessible than if they were on paws. Fingers were good inventions, she thought, but not toes. *If feet were flat*, Fuyu thought, *I could smack the Vulture with one and it would hurt a whole lot more than it would now. But then the feet would work strangely. Humans have a lot of flaws in their personalities and flesh.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the Vulture, who was squawking into a loudspeaker. “Hey-you! Hey-you! Time fer... COURT! Time fer... COURT! AAAAWK!” The words seemed to reverberate around the hall, and suddenly there was the sound of garden boots entering the court. Soon after, a red-faced frog holding a tangle of roots showed up in the courtroom, followed by the rabbit baker and a variety of other animals. Slowly the courtroom started to fill up, like a glass of orange juice that a child is pouring for the first time. Fuyu noted that each individual seemed to come in corresponding to how close they had been to the courtroom, and their seats were arranged in a similar fashion. When there were about two dozen people in the courtroom, the Vulture

screamed its four favorite words: “Order-in-the-COURT! Order-in-the-COURT! AAAAWK!”

All of the animals in the stands sat up straight. Fuyu could see their obvious panic, as they were still wondering why they had been summoned to court in the first place. “Order-in-the-COURT!” the Vulture screamed redundantly.

“Witnesses, please STAND! STAND UP! AAAAWK!”

The red-faced frog stood up. “Ah was working in the hen house,” he ribbited with an Australian accent, “when ah heard some terribly disruptive crashin’ noises from down the hall, like someone was bein’ chased! The hens got scared and wouldn’t produce any more eggs and that’s when ah heard the summons to court so ah--” he looked around before continuing his sentence, “--that brings us to now. Evidence for yah.”

“Order! ORDER!” screamed the Vulture, eyes bulging and banging a mallet on its perch. “AAAAWK!” The frog raised his arms in a surrendering gesture, then looked around the room to see if anyone else reciprocated the motion. They did not. The frog reluctantly let his arms fall to his side, and his face twisted into a disappointed look. Or at least Fuyu thought it was a disappointed look; you can never tell with frogs. “Any more... WITNESSES? More... WITNESSES? AAAAWK! PLEASE STAND! AAAAWK!” the Vulture squawked.

A smattering of individuals stood up, and Fuyu sighed. *What silly excuse are they going to come up with this time?* she wondered. *It doesn’t matter anyways. I’m going to have to find a way to break the spell! The courtroom, she reasoned, isn’t magic proof because if it was, then the addling spell wouldn’t work. I’m going to have to cast another spell to reverse it, but if I do that, then that’s technically altering people, which is law #2 of magic broken, which means that a fragment of my soul will be confiscated, which I do not want. But if I don’t do this then Kanna’s whole soul will be obliterated, technically. Which I also do not want. What is the right thing to do in this situation? I need some help... But*

who will help me? Kanna is unconscious, my brother is currently... I don't even know where that kid is right now, not his real personality anyways, and... my mother is dead. Taken from some 'mysterious illness'. Let's stop thinking about that. Help, somebody, help! The silent imploring did nothing to improve the situation, and the Vulture dismissed the jury to the deduction room soon after Fuyu finished feeling helpless and sorry for herself.

But then she began thinking. *Who is the master behind the spell? Is it possible that if I knock them out I can undo the spell and they'll all see how ridiculous they're being? But isn't the spellcaster the creature inside my brother? Gives me all the more reason to defeat him anyways...* She sighed. *But how am I going to do that? I have to use a spell of some sort, but what? How?*

Then she suddenly remembered the ghost that helped them across the river. And the memory she had so long tried to bury, the pancake morning when her mother didn't show up for breakfast.

Two weapons to use against her brother. Two ways to finally make him remember, to clear away the film on his eyes and make him the lighthearted troublemaker he once was.

First, though, she had to cast a sleep spell on the jurors to delay the sentence just a little further. Just a little more time. She knew she was stalling but she had to do something to stop the unchanging verdict from being administered. But she couldn't remember the spell's wording. There was something about slumber in Latin... more Witch language words that she couldn't remember... *Queverence Willivern... Somnus...* Yes, "somnus", that was it! She remembered! She retreated to the corner of the room, raised her finger (which still fascinated her), and recited the spell:

Eratukles Minagiaraka Tyrnaka

Monsef Somnus Juvkalona

Queverence Willivern

Zukk Uxkiiv.

The jurors began rubbing their eyes and yawning. One of them said, “It’s that dirty Vulture casting this spell!” to which the Vulture retaliated “I-don’t-know-who-did-it, it wasn’t-me, wasn’t-me, AAAAWK!” before its eyelids drooped and it screamed one final “AAAAWK!”, falling asleep at the magic perch.

Which then fell onto the ground with the Vulture. It was in such a deep sleep, though, that its snoring was louder than the crash when it fell to the ground with the hard piece of polished wood and metal. “AAAAWK...” it said softly. “AAAAWK... phooooo. AAAAWK... phooooo.” Fuyu watched as feathers went up into the air and fluttered softly down onto the ground again. The courtroom fell silent as the Vulture fell unconscious. “So...” said one of the jurors. “What should we do now?”

“Oh, I think that we have enough evidence to prove they’re guilty,” ribbited the frog, who was wearing a tight expression and glaring fiercely at Kanna.

“You don’t even *know* her!” yowled Fuyu, but the jury was getting restless and was murmuring among themselves. Fuyu quieted herself in order to hear the conversation. A crane was saying to a human: “Guilty if I ever seen it.” A bat was perching on the window and screeching: “GUILTY! GUILTY!”

Fuyu sighed; apparently the sleep spell had not worked on the rest of the room. *Am I just going to have to cast it on them again and again? That seems inefficient.* But she knew she had to, so she repeated the spell and crossed her fingers in hope that it would work out this time.

Eratukles Minagiaraka Tyrnaka

Monsef Somnus Juvkalona

Queverence Willivern

Zukk Uxkiiv.

The air was filled with a cacophony of mumbling as the spell washed over the room. Fuyu felt it like an ocean wave crashing over her while she was standing on the bottom of the sea; she could feel it, but she wasn't affected by it. The black film in her brother seemed to be having the same luck, which Fuyu was both glad and disappointed to see. It struggled for the tiniest fraction of a second, then turned to face her again. "***Sister dear, why delay fate?***" It smiled. "***You know your little friend here is going to go into the guillotine. Why try to turn back the clock? Accept it. Walk away. Then I'll let you live.***"

"So that is what you would have me do." Fuyu spoke at last. "But I'm afraid I can't do that."

"***That's truly a shame...***" It smiled again. The black film on its eyes seemed to pulse with a glowing black energy, if it was even possible for black to glow. Fuyu's eyes widened to see that it was gathering energy and chanting a Dark Magic spell under its breath. She could make out parts of it, but never a whole word, the whole picture. It just sounded like a cacophony of mumbling.

Then she noticed that in its paws a small sphere of light had begun to form. It got bigger with each line chanted, and the creature's arms fell away from it until it stood there in the corner of the courtroom, pulsing, glowing, waiting for a moment to strike.

"What are you doing--" Fuyu barely had time to get the words out before the black cat raised a paw. Black light was streaming out of its eyes and to Fuyu's horror the sphere of energy moved with it. The paw was thrust forward, and so was the sphere.

Only until she was unconscious would Fuyu realize that it was headed straight for her.

There was a deafening noise.

The red-faced frog popped out of the ruins, looking sleepy and apparently awakened by the loud noise. He saw that there was no one in the front of the courtroom. They had all disappeared. All of them. Kanna, Fuyu, the creature.

He yawned and went back to sleep.



Kanna awoke. *Was I asleep?* She couldn't remember. All she knew that it was strange, foreign, to breathe, to feel her heart beat. To be aware of those things was a strange thing, because the body does it without thinking while your mind is on other things, such as death, or taxes, which are really the only two certain things in life. It used to only be death until government showed up. In the Cat world at least, there didn't seem to be any taxes, so really the only thing certain in life there was death. Kanna thought about this, then decided she didn't want to die and focused on breathing and trying to open her eyes. It was hard when you were in what seemed like a writhing mass of tar. Or at least that's what it *felt* like -- Kanna couldn't see it since the tar had stuck to her eyelids. She lifted her hands and pried her eyelids open. Her eyes immediately began to water so she couldn't see much even with her eyes functioning. She tried to swat away the smog around her, waving her arms like she was at a Coldplay concert.

Unfortunately, the tarrish thing just stuck to her arms and she found herself stuck again. She struggled a bit more, then tried to open her eyes again. She was unsuccessful. She remained motionless externally. She tried again and found that the strange tarrish thing had bound her in a kind of hovering state, keeping her where she was. *Wherever* she was. She couldn't see her surroundings, so she had

no idea if she was in an orphanage, a candy factory, or a combination of both. If an orphanage was combined with a candy factory, the state of the building would depend on the orphan children's accessing the sweets inside the factory. If they were not allowed to eat them, then it would be a *sad* combination; however, if they could eat candy to their heart's content, it would be a *happy* combination. A blind Kanna plus foreign surroundings equaled a *sad* combination.

Kanna tried again to open her eyes and found that the muddy tarrish thing was drifting around her, making it possible for her to open them when larger masses of it weren't near her. She tried when she felt that less globules than usual were drifting over her. She blinked several times before opening them at last to rid them of the tarrish substance. When she was able to open them, however, all she saw was the black smog. Well. At least she knew it was black.

Meanwhile, Fuyu was staring at the thing in her brother. Its black eyes were irritating her. She stared back at it, not willing to show it how she was feeling. She would not betray her emotions now. She had to get it to crack first.

Unfortunately, it was smiling again. This might prove to be more of a challenge than she thought.

"Remember," she told it, "when Taro threw water on me while I was reading? That wasn't you, was it? Taro's in there somewhere, isn't he? When? When did you take him?"

She looked it in the eyes. "When? Tell me!" She didn't say it forcefully, or strongly. She was just trying to ease the information out.

The thing was smiling again. She knew that it was trying not to show weakness. Unfortunately, it wasn't doing a very good job of it. It was twitching, and its eye was scrunched as if it was peering closely at something. It didn't respond.

“Come on!” Fuyu implored, trying not to sound too pleading or too desperate. “You can tell me.” She decided to play one of her cards. “After all, you can trust your *sister*, can’t you?”

It narrowed its eyes and Fuyu could see that it was thinking hard. “**How do I know I can?**” it finally asked. Fuyu had an answer for that. “Because when you spend enough time with a person, you know you can trust them.” It was her turn to smile. “Don’t you trust me? I’ll ask again...” The creature was clearly getting flustered. “**Of course, sister dear, I didn’t mean to offend you or any such thing.**” It was choosing the path of flattery. “Spare the theatrics,” Fuyu meowed impatiently, letting her emotions seep out. “Tell me where he is.”

“**He’s not dead, dear sister, I’ll tell you that much. We didn’t spend too much time together when we were younger, hmm? Shame.**” Now it had her cornered. She wasn’t going to be able to talk her way out of this. Except...

There was still one last thing. One thing she could try.

“That morning. When Mother went missing. You had maple syrup on your pancakes. Anyone who’s been around you knows you prefer chocolate hazelnut spread.”

The thing that was inside Taro seeped, black globules coming out of coal-black eyes. Before it had time to respond Fuyu quickly chanted the Sleep spell. She knew that if any harm came to Taro’s body, he was the one who would suffer for it.

Eratukles Minagiaraka Tyrnaka

Monsef Somnus Juvkalona

Queverence Willivern

Zukk Uxkiiv.

There was a burst of light and a burst of darkness and then there was steam coming out of her brother's body. *It leaves*, she realized, *when he sleeps*. "Taro," she called to her brother, who was lying on the ground of the realm unconscious.

Or falling through open space.

Fuyu's heart almost stopped. The ground beneath them rumbled and seemed to fracture as if it had been smashed. But no one had done anything! Why was it behaving this way? Then Fuyu remembered that Kanna was still being held prisoner in the swirling mass of black tentacles. She dashed toward the place where she had last seen her friend, but instead encountered her running towards her. She couldn't stop her feet from moving and she collided with Kanna just as she was trying to turn back. "UMPH!" the two of them exclaimed in surprise. "Fuyu?" Kanna asked. "Kanna?" Fuyu asked. They were both talking at the exact same time though, so it ended up sounding more like "Faya?"

They looked at each other. "Who's Faya?" asked Fuyu. "Who's Faya?" asked Kanna. Then they both remembered that the ground beneath them was quite literally nonexistent. They were falling from the middle of the sky right onto a turret on the castle. Fuyu desperately tried to explain to Kanna what had happened, while trying to recall the Net spell. "The creature left Taro, so then it was no longer around to tend to the realm it created, so it was destroyed, and your trap along with it!" she called. "Don't think it's gone yet, though. This was only part of it!" She tried to remember the Net spell, but her memory was failing her again. *Come on...* there was something related to nets, but she couldn't remember what it was. Why couldn't she remember? Did she even *know* the spell? What was wrong with her?

She tried asking Kanna, but it was quite hard when you were rushing through the air towards almost certain death. Her shouts ended up sounding like this: "K~N~! WH~ NE~ S~L~". What she was *actually* saying was "Kanna! What is

the net spell?” but that’s what it sounded like to Kanna, who was formulating a plan of her own. *If I can slow the gravity around us, it will give us more time to react and change our course so that we land on the ground... But I don’t remember the spell...* She tried, but the only instance she could remember anyone using that spell was when Fuyu had done it at the bridge. She called to Fuyu to ask her what the spell was. Her shouts ended up sounding like this: “F~U! WH~ G~V-TY S-L~”. What she was *actually* saying was “Fuyu! What is the gravity spell?” but that’s what it sounded like to Fuyu, who was, as has already been documented, formulating a plan of her own.

So there they both were, unable to communicate their ideas to each other. And if they couldn’t, they would never do so.

The wind rushed in Fuyu’s ears, flattening them and overriding any other noise that may have been sounding under them. She shut her eyes, partly because they were dry from the wind blowing in them but mostly because she knew she was about to die a very painful, quick death. *At least I won’t be in agony*, she thought, bracing herself for the inevitable.

It came. Fuyu fell onto a net.

...wait a second...

“KANNA! FUYU!” A shout came from the ground. Kanna looked down to see that Lilly was there, waving at her. *So it was you...* she thought, relieved. “HI!” Kanna found the strength to wave to her friend. “How’d you get here?” she asked, confused. Then she remembered the unfortunate state in which she had left the barrier forest.

“What do you mean?”

Kanna sighed. She was safe and that was the important thing. For now. Who knew when Taro would wake up? Who knew if the thing inside of him could be

dispelled? She wondered if Fuyu would try to bring him back. Deep inside of her she knew she would, though she could never really understand the bond between siblings, something she hadn't envied any of her friends. She didn't really want a little brother or sister pestering her anyways. It would've just added a heavier emotional burden. She didn't envy Fuyu either for having a possessed sibling. That was something that wouldn't normally happen to anyone. Or at least she thought so.

She looked over to see Fuyu crouched down near her brother's body. He had awoken, but there was no trace of the impenetrable darkness that his eyes had once held. He smiled weakly, and Kanna could see it was an effort for him to breathe at this rate. His face was covered in scratches and remnants of the creature still remained on his fur, black spots that didn't look out of place on his dark pelt. "Nrowr," he coughed out. "Mrr mow srmanya." He lifted himself up from the net, revealing what was under him. "Taro, save your strength!" Fuyu told him. "We need to get you to the Human world and find a doctor, a vet, something! Get the castle medic! Try to rest, Taro. You've been through a lot."

Taro coughed again, his knees knocking together. Then he lifted himself up to reveal what was under him.

It was a sandy-colored blade, glistening in the sunlight. Fuyu reached for it uncertainly, bringing it up to her face to sniff. She made an odd face, then proceeded to inspect it more closely, looking at the hilt and slowly moving it across her face to the very tip. "It's made of tuna fish..." She looked at Kanna. "Why would a sword be made of tuna fish?"

"Mrr nyam brnt nrow." Taro spoke again. Kanna couldn't understand a thing he was saying but she was glad he was all right. "He says he found it where he was when he was taken over," Fuyu reported. "He says it was hidden away in the creature's memories."

“He says it’s called the Bonito Blade. He said, ‘Yoshimitsu told me to protect this.’”

Yoshimitsu? The name raced through Kanna’s mind like a car going well over the speed limit. *Yoshimitsu’s still alive?*

Chapter Twenty-One

All That's Left

“Why are we still standing around here? We have to rescue him!” Kanna exclaimed. “It’s not that simple—” Fuyu cut in, but Kanna didn’t hear her. She was oblivious to any noise. She was already whipping her head around to see if the creature had appeared again. Fuyu returned to tending to her brother, who looked about ready to collapse. He was coughing frequently and one of his eyes was twitching and getting darker and darker, as if the film would cover it soon enough. “Mrr...” he meowed, looking up at Fuyu. Then he collapsed. “Don’t fall asleep,” Fuyu implored him. “Please, you have to stay awake!” It was clear that he was trying, but his efforts didn’t do much good. His eyes shut and he fell over. Soon after, a large black river of sludge flowed through the castle wall, heading towards the net. Through the ceiling it went, causing what must have been millions of nyen in damage, and towards the body of the sleeping Taro. Fuyu gripped the Bonito Blade. She wouldn’t let it come. But the blade was unexpectedly heavy and she grunted when she tried to hold it up. Her hands trembled when she finally did hold it up, her strength wavering as she tried to wield the hefty blade. She lugged it over to her brother and raised it instinctively, a rush of energy hitting her as she saw her brother’s body sleeping. *Taro...* she implored him, *fight it.*

The sludge entered the net. It immediately made a beeline for Taro. “NO!” Kanna dashed towards it. “Kanna, stop—” Fuyu tried to say, but in an instant Kanna was at her side. “If you’re fighting so am I. We’re partners.”

Fuyu looked up at her and nodded. “Partners.”

She passed the Bonito Blade to Kanna, who didn't seem to mind its weight nearly as much. Gripping it, she slashed at the oncoming sludge. It retaliated for a minute, stunned. Then a voice resounded in both of their minds.

WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?!

Kanna and Fuyu hesitated for a moment, surprised, and that was when the darkness engulfed them.

Kanna had never felt anything quite so... *dark*. It was like all hope had been drained out of her along with her vision. She lifted her arms, intending to feel around, but felt them sagging back to her side. *Give up*, they seemed to say. *Surrender to the darkness*. Kanna focused on trying to look at her surroundings. It was immensely dark, pitch black like the inky skies of night, like Fuyu's pelt, but Kanna could see the faintest hint of light. She squinted, trying to find its source, but it suddenly vanished as suddenly as it had come. Kanna sighed. *What if I use the Light spell?* she wondered. But without any knowledge of her surroundings, she had nothing to draw energy from. This was a strange new world, one that might be full of unseen dangers.

A voice came out of the darkness. A light. "Kanna!" Fuyu called, gripping the Bonito Blade. "Do you have any idea where we are?" Kanna was relieved to see her feline friend. "No, I don't," she told Fuyu as she approached her. "We were hit by the thing's sludge, and then... I think we're *inside its mind*." Voicing her theory made it seem ridiculous, but Fuyu made an understanding face. "Could be."

Where are they? The creature's voice came out of the dark. ***Show yourself!***

Stop it, said a tinier voice. *Don't do it*. Kanna recognized it. *Where have I heard that voice before?* she thought to herself. *It sounds oddly familiar*.

... You can't! I haven't been for centuries and I know you won't listen to me but please. You came from me. Listen to me for once. They don't deserve to die.

Kanna ran over to the origin of the voice. “Yoshimitsu!” she cried. “Thank you, thank you, I’m coming.” Her legs had found the strength to move and she trudged through the darkness. Fuyu followed her uncertainly. “I’m not so sure this is a good idea.” Kanna looked back at her. “I *know* this person!” she protested, and continued trudging. But the darkness soon enveloped her legs and she found she couldn’t move. *No...* she thought wearily. *Not again...* Her head jerked upwards. *Not again.* She strained against the weight of the black, pulled in by the stickiness. “**Ah...**” came a voice out of the dark, “***Trying to help the princess, are we?***” Yoshimitsu began to glow with a strange light. His face contorted, and a strange smile began to creep over his face. His eyes slowly glazed with the terrible black film and he began to speak in the terrible voice that Kanna and Fuyu knew belonged to the creature. “I’m afraid I’ll win this round.”

“Fuyu!” cried Kanna. “Use the Boni--ACKPBTH!” The writhing mass of darkness, sticky, burning, closed around her mouth, letting itself in.

Her vision dimmed. Her mind didn’t seem to work. Her body didn’t respond to anything.

It was over. The creature had won.

A thought remained in Kanna’s mind, a light in the darkness, a beacon. An image of Fuyu, lifting the Bonito Blade. *There’s still hope.*

Draw strength from yourself.

Kanna found a small light, shining deep in the darkness, and she swam -- that’s what it was, now that she was inside a glove of darkness -- towards it. She could tell that she was going up, up, but then she hit the wall. *Ow.* She changed direction, and the light seemed to move away from her. It was the only thing she could see. But as the light moved, she began to see in focus that sticks littered the ground that it was trailing. A large tree trunk. Perseus Mycelium.

We're in the forest.

Kanna took a deep breath, though her lungs were pressed by the terrible darkness. She found what little enchantment was left inside of her and recited the Light spell, willing the darkness to flee.

Ichi Kanaka Muraki

Sikupo Deroro Me

Queverence Willivern

Illumina Limbina.

Her palms glowed. Kanna felt an overwhelming sense of delightful accomplishment and she placed her hand on the darkness. It subsided. She then began to realize that it wasn't just her palms, her *entire body* was glowing with a light that looked like a lamp's feeble, strong glow. A warm, yellow hue, pulsing, making a way out of the dark.

"Fuyu!" She called her friend. "Kanna!" came the reply. "Fuyu, can I see the Bonito Blade?!" Kanna inquired as soon as Fuyu was near. Not waiting for a reply, Kanna grabbed the blade. Fuyu almost collapsed from the sudden lack of weight on her shoulders. Kanna closed her eyes and her light flowed into the Blade. It glowed with a brighter light than her, perhaps because of its lack of flesh. Kanna knew that this was the only weapon that would be able to defeat the darkness.

A blade of light, shining through.

The darkness retracted as she walked through it. She knew it would obey her, now that she had found its better. She strode towards where it was retracting. A body lay limp in the air, eyes closed and black. Everything about the body was pitch black – its clothing, its hair, its eyes. It turned to look at her and Kanna

saw tears pool in its eyes. In that instant she knew that it wasn't Yoshimitsu who was the creature, it was something inside of him. Something – something that was part of him, but not him. *Like in his brain.* Kanna suddenly had a striking realization. *A tumor...*

Kanna gripped the Bonito Blade ever tighter and cried a deep, sad battling cry.

The light burst into the darkness.



Kanna felt around, but there was no need to. It was late afternoon, and the sun was there, sinking lazily closer to the horizon. She looked around to see that she was standing in front of the Crystalline Castle, like she had been just a few minutes earlier. Only the crystals were shinier, as if they were new. *Is this... I've seen this before!* She raced to look inside, seeing Yoshimitsu. But this time, his eyes were black.

And then the darkness came out of him, out of the castle, surging towards Kanna. She grabbed the Bonito Blade, intending to take it out of Yoshimitsu, to end it. But it was inside Yoshimitsu, and if they were in his brain...

If she hit him, he would die.

And so would she.

Suddenly Fuyu appeared as well. Kanna dashed over to her. "Kanna!" she cried. "Where are we?"

"We're in the darkness -- or, more accurately, in the creator of the darkness. But he doesn't mean any harm, he's just a fox. The darkness came from here, his mind, and he's there, in the castle--" Kanna tried to emphasize her point with

exaggerated gesturing-- “and we need to get the darkness out of his brain before it destroys him.”

Fuyu blinked. “I’m not sure exactly what you just said, but okay. And we’d better hurry because it looks like there’s someone coming toward us.”

“Ah!”

“Wait, why are you racing towards them?”

“It’s *him!* I need to save him!”

Kanna aimed the blade as Yoshimitsu’s blackened body came towards her, pointing it at the slight bulge in his head. She gulped, and almost dropped the blade because of her sweat. She was shaky, scared. *I can’t do this.*

But she remembered how she had gotten out of death so many times before, and that gave her strength. She gripped the blade ever tighter.

Yoshimitsu’s forehead connected with the Bonito Blade.

There was a buzzing noise, and a flash of light.

And then? Kanna gripped the Bonito Blade as the darkness was absorbed by the light. The creature screamed and then faded as the light glowed ever brighter.

Kanna breathed in, afraid as the darkness kept flowing out of Yoshimitsu, who was lying on the floor unconscious. After all the darkness was absorbed, Yoshimitsu sighed. A long, happy sigh.

And then Fuyu and Kanna found themselves falling...

Falling...

Falling...

The darkness was gone. All that was left was a young boy.

Kanna leaned over Yoshimitsu, who was lying in the grass next to Lilly. “Who’s this?” she asked Kanna suspiciously. *We’re back!* Kanna felt a wave of relief surge through her, and she fell to the ground. The Bonito Blade was no longer in her arms but in Yoshimitsu’s mind, locking the darkness away for good.

“He’s a friend. Don’t worry.”

Yoshimitsu opened his eyes. “What... happened...”

Kanna informed him of everything that had happened on the whirlwind ride that had been the past few days. After she had finished, much later, he smiled. “I’m sorry... for bringing you to the past. I was trying to make you understand that my tumor, the one that grows in every fox’s brain when they turn ten, had gotten out of control.”

“You see, when we’re young, we’re given a tumor in our brains that only we can vanquish. That must be why I had the Bonito Blade in my mind – to defeat the dark. But I couldn’t, after my father abandoned me. I had to get a job at the castle, and I got so preoccupied that I forgot all about it. That’s when it took over. The castle medics took it out, but it wasn’t defeated, it wasn’t. It was sent to watch over the forest instead. I felt it coming back, and when it did, it absorbed me and locked me inside of it, instead of the other way around.”

I see... Now everything made sense.

“But I don’t know what I’ll do now... I’m hungry and tired. Do you know of a place to sleep?”

“Well, I guess I know a place.” Kanna gestured beyond the broken forest.

Epilogue

After the battle, Kanna returned to Fernshire along with Lilly and Yoshimitsu, who enrolled very quickly, having a great aptitude for magic. Taro apologized for his wrongdoings and gave Kanna the permanent cure for magic Fever, which turned out to be a chocolate bar with a caramel filling. Fuyu stayed on as Queen and Grand High Witch of the Cat world for a while before deciding that she wanted to learn magic instead of being master of it and passed the roles to her brother, trying to enroll at Fernshire. The forms were quite tricky to fill out, and Fuyu masqueraded as a human for quite some time. Eventually she was allowed to get a dormitory and study magic with Lilly, Yoshimitsu, and Kanna in the same year. Over summer break, Yoshimitsu stayed in the castle, Lilly went to her vacation house, Fuyu slept in her own room again, and Kanna got to see her parents, who prodded her with a lot of questions about the divorce. “Which house do you want to stay at? For how long? What do you think about getting a cat? What would make you feel better about this?” Kanna shrugged to most of them and said, “I’m okay with anything.” The only question she didn’t answer this way was “Are you sure you’re all right with all this?” Her answer was always: “I think that, after school, I’ll be all right with anything...” Her parents were perplexed but didn’t pry. And Kanna kept her adventure in the Cat world quiet.

And through the plane ride to Canada, through the train ride to the ferry stop, through the ferry ride to Lockwood Island, through the gates of Fernshire, there lay Kanna’s best friend, the black cat witch.

Acknowledgements

This book started, as all books do, as a little inkling of an idea in my head. It was sometime in the first couple of weeks of sixth grade, around eight A. M., and it was Computer Literacy class with Mrs. Gregori. I was bored (yes, that's why I wrote a novel, don't laugh) and I decided to write a short paragraph, intending to make it a little fairy tale about a magic school. It went like this:

There once was a beautiful black cat who lived I'm very sorry to say in a glass case. She would stare out of the frosty windows every day, waiting for someone to find her. Now a few days later there was a young witch, looking for a black cat, who wandered too far from home. Coincidentally she happened upon the kitten and she used her magic to free her.

Sound familiar? I was never really intending to make it into a full novel, but here we are, so I guess I was wrong. The 'book' idea came out of a novel I had listened to on audiobook a couple of months back ('The School Story' by Andrew Clements, narrated by Spencer Kayden, from Listening Library). To that possibility I owe a great debt to:

Maria Tarapova and Clara Baur, my friends, who read this book early on and believed in it from the start.

My family: My younger sister Eleanor, my older sister Beatrice, and my parents, who supported me and provided food and shelter while I was writing it, and comfort while our house was undergoing a remodel and everything in my life

was falling apart. In truth, that's probably why this book became as long as it did.

“Mushrooms of the Pacific Northwest”, a book which gave me some of the ‘real world’ mushrooms mentioned in Chapter Ten.

Thank you to the King County Library System, which not only provided the aforementioned book but also plenty more, which fueled my writing energy.

Thank you to the Kamiakin Middle School librarians, Cindy Simon and Jess Williams, who kept me reading when I hit a writing slump (which was, admittedly, several times a month).

I find it necessary to mention Maria Tarapova again, who is not only the first reader of the story but also my enthusiastic editor. This book would be a hot mess without your guidance. Any mistakes are my own.

The name ‘Kanna Sugimori’ has its roots in both a Netflix film called ‘Child of Kamiari Month’, in which the protagonist both has the name Kanna and travels with a talking animal, and the famed illustrator Ken Sugimori, who illustrated the original 151 Pokémon, which are still my favorite.

Also, I'd like to thank all the people who I've met over the years, who all inspired the protagonists or secondary characters in some way. You know who you are, and if you're reading this, thank you.

Last but not least, thank you to God, who is always there even if it doesn't always seem like it.

If I forgot anyone, I'm sorry. I'll include you in a future edition. Also, I'd like to apologize for thinking that “Fuyu” was just a kind of persimmon -- it actually means “Winter” in Japanese. This story takes place in the spring, and so the cat's name may cause some confusion. I'm sorry, but I like the name and it has stuck itself in my brain to the point where I'll never change it.