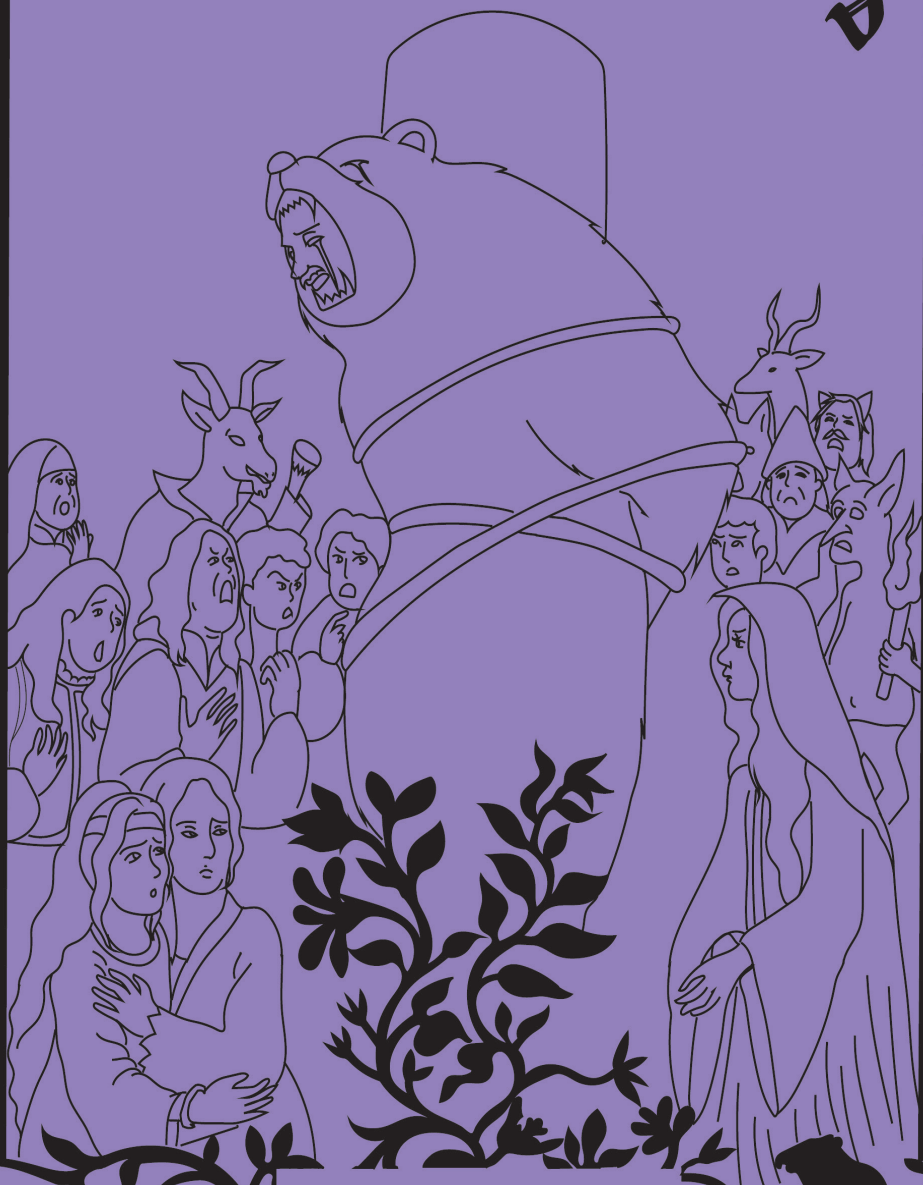


The Violet City



Longwen Miao

The Violet City

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In a corner of the world, there lies an ancient city embraced by mountains.

Its streets wind like a labyrinth, church spires pierce the sky, and at its center stands a stone pillar that no one dares approach. Each year, when the violets bloom, an atmosphere of unease descends upon the city. The elderly whisper legends about the pillar, while the young scoff in disbelief. So one knows the truth, until those who disappear never return.

This is a story of transformation, but not merely of the body. It tells of how souls twist under the pull of oppression, tradition, and the yearning for freedom: how power corrupts humanity; how truth, though veiled in layers, can never be completely hidden. In this world, everyone lives behind masks. Some have worn their masks for so long they've forgotten the true face beneath. When the power of the pillar reveals their essence, when the boundaries between human and beast blur, how many will dare to face their reflection?

As you turn the first page of this story, remember: sometimes, we need to become something entirely different to see who we truly are, the real curse has never been magic or supernatural forces, but the truths we refuse to face, and the shackles passed down through generations without question.

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Prologue

In an ancient Central city called Queyack, nestled among mountains, the building spires pierce the sky like needles, and streets wind like a labyrinth. At the city's heart lies a quiet area enclosed by wrought iron railings. Despite being located in the very center of the city, few people ever venture into this small enclosure. In the middle of this silent place stands a sturdy stone pillar that has endured for centuries. The hexagonal pillar, about three meters tall, appears older than any monument around it. The stone bears no inscriptions, standing silently in place. Though unshaded by trees, which should allow ample light, no vegetation grows nearby, and the soil often emits a damp, moldy odor. Typically, stone pillars commemorate departed leaders who contributed to or sacrificed for the entire city. Yes, for some reason, this pillar emanates an aura of death, and people regard it not with respect but with fear. Locals call it the "Mirror of the Soul," claiming it can reflect one's deepest desires and fears.

Most younger residents dismiss this legend as merely a story to attract tourists. But the older generation still maintains a reverence for the pillar, even displaying an unusual fascination with its existence. It's as if it embodies the glory, art, and soul forged by their generation. According to legend, many strange occurrences happen around March, when violets bloom. Thus, later generations place violet wreaths around the pillar on that day and perform an ancient ritual.

"This is to appease the soul within the pillar," eighty-year-old Grandpa Max often explains to curious children. "Many people disappeared after the ritual night, never to be seen again. Some say they were led by a witch along a path away from the mortal world."

The children ask curiously, "Grandpa Max, why would a witch exist?" Grandpa Max replies, "Long ago, a purple-robed witch was unjustly executed. Before her death, she sealed her soul into this pillar, vowing to reveal the darkness in people's hearts."

Nearby, Professor Thomas, a historian, shakes his head gently: "This is just an exaggerated folk tale. Children, you shouldn't believe these strange stories too much, lest you end up like some people who become superstitious and accomplish nothing." As Thomas speaks, his eyes glance contemptuously at Grandpa Max.

Hearing this, Grandpa Max merely smiled mysteriously. "Many legends aren't unfounded. Children, only by seeing with your own eyes will you understand."





Chapter 1

The House of Steinbach

On the city edge, at the highest point of the tallest mountain, lives an ancient family The Steinbach family, though few visit them now. Their gate, not renovated for a long time, makes an unpleasant sound with just a slight push, making anyone believe it tells something bad is about to happen. The house is built according to terrain contours. From far away, it looks like just a three or four-story building, but when you approach, you discover how massive this mountain house truly is. The roof has spots where tiles keep falling, giving the impression of collapse coming soon. Family ruler Albrecht Steinbach holds a position in the city council with only ceremonial power, typically given to unpopular people. His bad temper and arrogant attitude left him without any close friends. However, this does not reduce his obsession with power and social status. He is tall with a loud voice, always wearing sophisticated but old-fashioned suits, as if this could hide his unimportant position in politics. Albrecht had two daughters: 24-year-old Hildegard Steinbach and 18-year-old Greta Steinbach.

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Hildegard Steinbach

Hildegard inherited their father's decisiveness and mother's elegance. With black hair and deep green eyes, she always wears white dresses, giving a feeling of nobleness but distance. After her Mother's death, Hildegard took charge of house matters. People seem worried about her than about her mother, yet she keeps her distance from everyone, like an elegant but careful cat. Greta is different. Small with golden-brown curly hair and a round face, she is shy and quiet, always hiding in the library or her room, collecting small items: colored glass marbles, shiny buttons, beautiful bookmarks, and any tiny treasures she finds interesting. The Steinbach family's third main member—Albrecht's wife Flora—died many, many years ago because of illness. She was once an ambitious government worker, but somehow, years before her illness, she became very weak and no longer went to activities and council meetings. Flora's death does not make the townspeople sad or even notice much.

On the surface, the family looks harmonious, but inside is full of tension and pressure. Albrecht was very strict with both daughters, especially Hildegard. He does not like Hildegard spending more time in the libra-

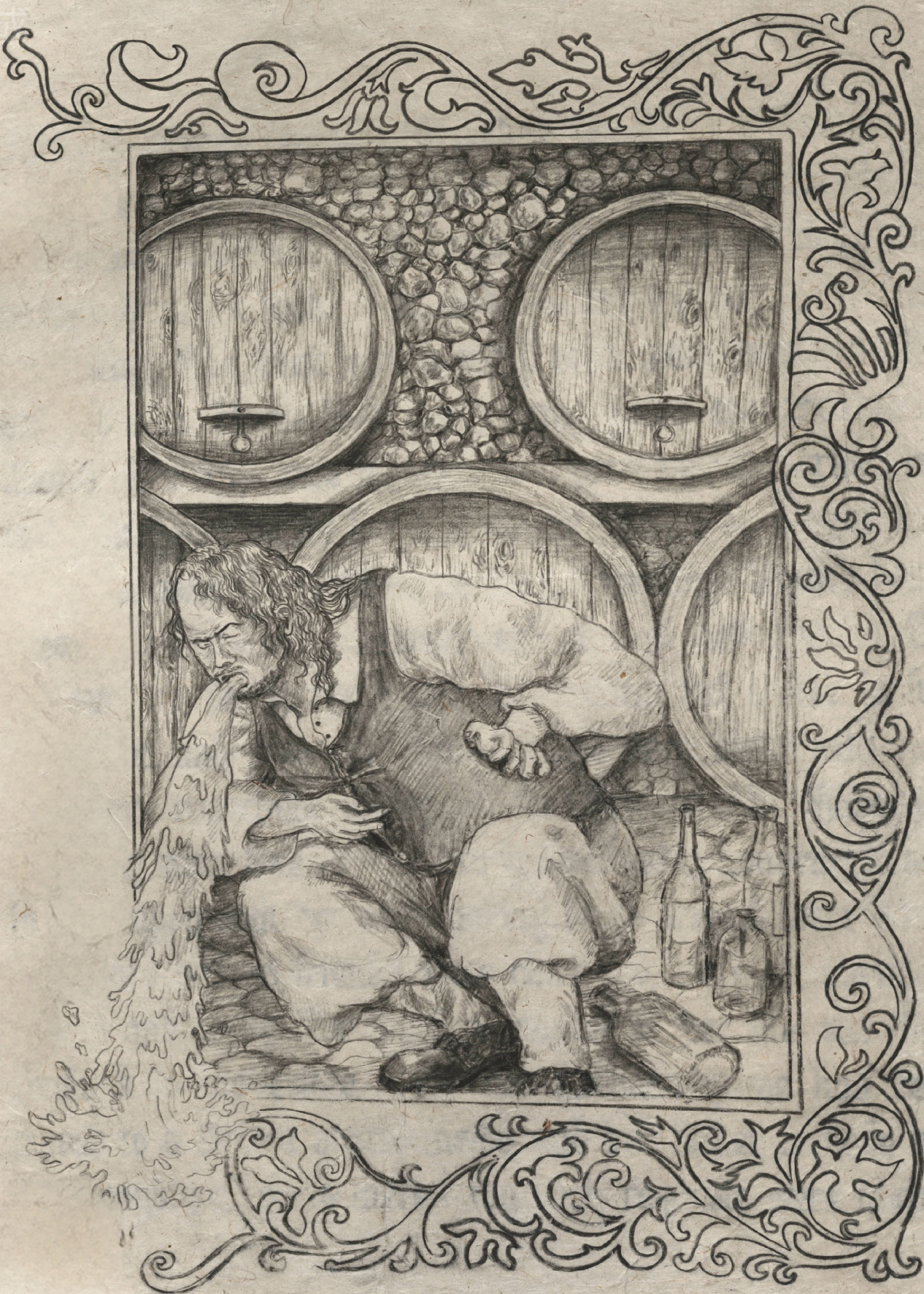
ry than doing housework and is not happy with her often asking to go around town. Thus, Hildegard had no friends since childhood, not even attending school and study. For the first quarter of her life, she lived confined to the estate. Even her mother's grave had been moved to a distant mountainside, and her father forbade her from paying respects there—any such requests were always denied.

Whenever Albrecht's applications to transfer from his current position were rejected, he would spend the evening drunk in the estate's wine cellar. In his inebriated state, he would loudly complain that everyone was dissatisfied with his efforts and ambition: "I come from a distinguished background and am the most suitable candidate for leadership. Someone must be stirring up trouble, accusing and slandering me, trying to ruin my efforts. Hmph, just you all wait—sooner or later, I'll have you all under my feet."



Greta Steinbach

After becoming completely intoxicated, he would then stagger into the garden in the middle of the night, showing off his strained, hoarse voice by singing loudly. When he reached the most intense part of the the song, his throat would temporarily choke from the excessive strain, resulting in Albrecht spending the next hour vomiting and having diarrhea. He hates his dirty, messy, smelly condition, so he immediately calls Hildegard to clean his clothes, and until the next day, Hildegard never gets the thank you she deserves.



Greta's life is the opposite. She is good at plant research and does not like noise. When family members have conflicts, Albrecht shows a scary side: his voice becomes deep and dangerous, his eyes flash with terrible light, and he seems to grow bigger, full of pressure no one can resist. During these times, Greta hid in her room, hoping someone would find her. Hildegard, however, stood silent as if she was born to stand there.

Meanwhile, the current farce at the Steinbach house was being observed by a woman in a narrow alley near the ancient city wall at the other end of the city. The sight of Albrecht desperately searching for alcohol among the broken pots mountain in the wine cellar made her chuckle with amusement. The woman named Else von Schatten, age hard to know - maybe thirty or fifty years old. She always wears different purple dresses, black hair with some silver, and eyes that are light purple like they can see through people's hearts. Else shop has no clear business. Sometimes herb shops sell dry flowers and spices; sometimes old item stores with mystery things; sometimes cafés with hot drinks that help people forget sadness. No matter what kind, shops always smell like violets. The townspeople have mixed feelings about Else. Some say she is a purple witch reborn, with magic that can trick innocent people and even read their thoughts. So, most people treat her like an invisible part of the city, just like an old stone pillar, one piece of city history charm.

Only Albrecht shows clear hate toward Else. When he sees her, his face becomes dark, and his mouth makes a cold smile with no respect. In turn, she would gaze at him calmly with her purple eyes, as if watching a dream on the verge of collapse. No one knew about their past, and even Else herself never mentioned how close she and Flora-Albrecht's wife-once were as friends. Until that season when the violets bloomed, when everything changed.

Chapter 2

The Night of Transformation

That year, the violet season came very early. In early March, purple flowers bloomed in every corner of the city, and the smell of sweet flowers filled the air. In the square, old people arrange flower wreaths according to tradition and perform simple ceremonies.

"This year violets bloom too early, too much," Grandpa Max worried and said to people at the ceremony. "This is a bad sign. The soul in the pillar is getting restless, it wants to wake up sleeping truth." Most people laugh and shake their heads, thinking just old man superstition. Only Else stood at the edge of the crowd, looking seriously at the stone pillar.

When sunlight breaks through clouds onto the pillars, she seems to see the pillar slightly shake, with runes on the surface flashing purple l-

ight.

That night, at the Steinbach family dinner table, the mood was very tense. Albrecht was very angry because of disrespect in council meetings and directed all anger at his two daughters.

"Useless women!" he yelled, a fist hitting the oak dinner table, making plates jump up. "Just like your mother, ambition bigger than ability, finally achieves nothing. She could get a higher position through me but always wants to climb up by herself, how ridiculous!" Hildegard holds the knife and fork tight, knuckles white, but keeps outside calm. Greta looks down at the plate, trying to make herself smaller and less noticeable.

"That evil witch Else," Albrecht continued to roar, a-



lcohol turning his face crimson, "it must be her spreading rumors about me in the city, saying I'm a powerless bureaucrat. I'll make her pay for this! I'll shut down her shop and force her to leave this city amid the curses and humiliation from everyone.

I'll make the entire city know that the Steinbach family will not tolerate insults!" Hildegard and Greta remained silent beside him. In their memory, Else was someone who only appeared in the gossip of residents or their father's angry tirades. They had no idea why their father harbored such hatred for this person.

Right then, strange purple auroras suddenly appear in the night sky, shining through windows into the di-

ning room, making the whole room become a dream-like violet color.

This phenomenon is so rare that even Albrecht stops yelling and looks out the window with surprise.

"What strange light," he said quietly, forgetting his anger for a moment, "I never seen aurora like this before." When the aurora is most bright, stone pillars in the city center suddenly give off sharp purple light, then quickly disappear. At almost the same moment, three people in the Steinbach family feel dizzy and have to go back to their rooms to rest. That night, all three Steinbach family members have strange dreams.





Hildegard dreams of running on city rooftops, body light like feathers, vision becoming very clear, and seeing the smallest movements in the dark. She felt freedom never had before, but also deep loneliness.

Greta dreams she will shrink to only a few inches tall and live in a warm, comfortable small cave, surrounded by shiny items she collects. She feels safe and happy, but she also wants to see a bigger world.



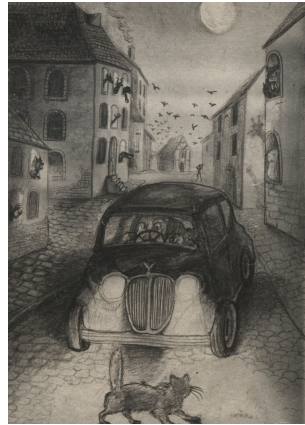
Albrecht's dream is a nightmare. He dreams he will become huge and heavy, tortured by endless hunger and anger, crashing through the forest, destroying everything in his way. He tries to control this feeling, but the more he suppresses it, the feeling becomes stronger.



When the first sunlight enters the room, the three people wake up almost at the same time but find dreams become reality. Hildegard transforms into a pure white cat, elegant and quick; Greta becomes a small golden-brown hamster, round eyes full of fear; and Albrecht changes into a giant brown bear, eyes showing confusion, anger, and fear mixed.

The whole family fell into chaos. As a bear, Albrecht cannot talk, only make low growls and roars. He tries to use his claws to grab things but accidentally breaks many valuable porcelain items and decorations in the house. His anger and fear make him more violent, almost destroys the entire house.

Hildegard sees this situation, and although not completely adapted to this body, her mind is still clear. She finds she can easily jump to high places and slip out through the window. Greta is completely overcome



by fear. As a small hamster, everything in the world looks strangely big to her, making her feel uncomfortable and scared. She escapes into a small hole in the wall and curls up in the dark, shaking with fear.

The Steinbach family fell into a crisis. At the same time, similar transformations happened throughout the whole city. Those people with strong inner conflicts, those souls suppressed by society, under the light of violet aurora all turn into animals. Although it was daytime, many terrible screams were heard everywhere.

Only Else remains calm. She stands in front of her shop, waiting for lost souls to find her. She knows transformation is just the beginning; something more is on the way.

Chapter 3

Secrets of the City

Two months had passed since the transformation, and Hildegard had grown used to her cat body. She moved gracefully across the city, her white form sliding easily between rooftops and along narrow ledges. Free from human limits, she explored parts of the city she never knew existed. From high, Quaik showed itself in a way she couldn't see before—the buildings arranged in curious ways that hinted at forgotten purposes.

The night of the curse changed more than just the Steinbach family; it had changed the entire city. The early fear had given way to an eerie calm. The city council rooms were empty, government offices abandoned, and the social order was falling apart. For Hildegard, this new reality offered unexpected freedom. She could walk the empty streets without feeling judged—no calculating looks, whispers, or fake sympathy.

The violet season's curse had affected much more than her family. Hildegard guessed that at least a third of the city's residents had been transformed, especially those who had misused their power, lived dishonest lives, and lost touch with who they were.

During her walks, Hildegard discovered something amazing: the stone pillar in the central square had become a meeting place for the transformed. Animals of all kinds—both pets and wild creatures—gathered there at sunset and dawn. Cats, dogs, birds of prey and songbirds, even foxes and deer from the nearby woods would gather in a strange assembly. They approached the pillar with both respect and fear, drawn to it but keeping their distance.

Most surprising was the clear humanity in their eyes. These weren't just animals; they were citizens in changed form, keeping their human minds while living in new bodies. They talked, argued, and shared information, creating a new society within the ruins of the old.



When Hildegard first approached this gathering, an old gray owl turned his head toward her slowly. The bird's amber eyes fixed on her with clearly human awareness.

"Another awakened soul joins our group," the owl said in a teacher-like tone, his gaze looking down on her. "This year's awakening has been especially thorough. I thought the people might have learned their lesson by now."

"What exactly is happening here?" Hildegard was surprised to find that not only could she understand the owl perfectly, but she could talk easily with all the transformed beings. "Are you all former humans, too?"

The owl adjusted his position, his feathers rustling as if he were straightening invisible clothes. "Indeed. This happens about every few decades from what I've seen, usually in years when the violets bloom unusually strongly. The stone pillar—or more precisely, the spirit living within it chooses those who need to see the

truth. Those with deep inner conflicts, those crushed by society's rules, those prevented from being themselves..." He paused meaningfully. "And especially those who keep unfair systems in place."

"I always thought the curse was just an old story," Hildegard said, looking at the gathering of transformed citizens.

"Unfortunately, young lady, it is very real, as your current form shows," the owl replied, sounding tired as if he'd explained this many times. "And as you can see, your case isn't the first to experience the pillar's judgment. I don't even know when this cycle began." "Is there any way to become human again?" Hildegard asked, voicing the question that had been on her mind for weeks.

The nearby creatures grew quiet, suggesting this question was important to everyone. The owl tilted his head slightly, carefully cleaning a few feathers in a way that reminded Hildegard of an old professor gathering his thoughts.

"This transformation foll-

ows certain rules," he began, his tone carrying the weight of tradition. "The pillar chooses those who must be reminded of their proper place. Those who have forgotten who they truly are. Young people are always eager to change the world while failing to appreciate established wisdom." His gaze looked Hildegard up and down. "Now that you've been transformed, you would be wise to use this as a chance for reflection."

"Reflection on what? I don't understand what lesson I'm supposed to learn," Hildegard pressed.

A fox with unusually clean fur—once a prominent banker, as he told her—joined in. "Each transformation has its specific meaning. I've spent nearly five years in this form, trying to make up for my past greed. Each time I think I've finally balanced the scales, I wake up the next morning still trapped in fur, bothered by fleas and constant itching."

"But what wrong have I done?" Hildegard's voice rose with frustration.

"Why has this happened to me?"

The owl remained unmoved by her distress, having seen such reactions many times before. He narrowed his eyes, already barely visible in the daylight, and replied with forced patience: "Why do you young people always see this as punishment? The pillar maintains ancient order and tradition. Look inside yourself carefully—have you never strayed from your proper path? Never reached beyond your position? This is not punishment but opportunity—a chance to realign yourself with natural order."

He fluffed his feathers dismissively. "Patience, young lady. Some never return to human form because they refuse to acknowledge basic truths about themselves and their place. Others recover naturally after accepting their rightful role. Each path is different, but the principle stays the same—accept the established order, embrace tradition."

The owl moved closer, lowering his voice to a condescending whisper. "A

young woman like you should focus on becoming a proper cat—graceful, homely, content within appropriate boundaries—rather than wandering about asking inappropriate questions.

At your age, shouldn't you be looking for a suitable male cat's protection rather than thinking about matters beyond your understanding?"

Without waiting for a response, the owl spread his wings and left, leaving Hildegard momentarily speechless at his rudeness. She had never faced such obvious dismissal, even in human society. "Is asking questions so threatening?" she wondered aloud to no one in particular.

Meanwhile, Greta needed much more time to adjust to her small form. At first, fear had kept her in the safety of wall cracks, where she hid trembling as her father's angry roars and destructive rampages shook the household. Gradually, however, curiosity overcame fear. Her hamster form gave her access to the mansion's most hidden places—spaces untouched by humans for generations.

She developed a complex network of tunnels between walls and under floors, collecting small treasures to decorate her increasingly elaborate nest. During one such exploration, she discovered her mother's diary wedged in the narrow space between a cabinet and wall. The journal's yellowed pages revealed a Flora entirely unknown to Greta—a woman of sharp intelligence, frustrated ambition, and quiet strength. This mother was very different from the quiet, always-tired figure from Greta's childhood memories.

One particular entry caught Greta's attention:



"Today, A. exploded into another rage over a small setback at work. His fragile pride cannot handle even the smallest failure, even when such obstacles are just part of normal life. He turns his inadequacy into contempt for others, as though putting them down somehow lifts him. I see more and more clearly how deeply insecure he truly is beneath his bluster—how vulnerable. The walls he has built around himself don't protect him from others but imprison his spirit. Else was right; I should have listened to her warnings long ago..."

Reading these words, Greta felt a deep sadness. She had never truly known her mother, who in her memories was always busy with work, even at home—present less often than even her volatile father. As the family's youngest member, Greta had always remained at the edge of its storms, unable to understand her mother's endless work or her father's explosive temper.

As evening fell, the city gradually gave way to darkness. Hildegard jumped gracefully onto the windowsill and slipped through the secret entrance she and Greta had created, returning to their hideout—a cozy nest made from old blankets, abandoned drawers, and shoeboxes in the clock tower's attic. This hidden refuge had become the sisters' only safe place in their transformed existence.

Greta was carefully arranging her latest finds—their mother's photographs and diary pages rescued from the study. Her collecting habit had grown stronger since her transformation, becoming both purpose and comfort.

"Today's search was pretty good," Hildegard said, approaching her sister. She gently touched her nose to Greta's head—a greeting ritual they had developed in their new forms. These two months of shared hardship had created a closeness between them like never before. As humans, Hildegard had been busy with her interests while Greta retreated into her private world. Now, united by their extraordinary situation, they had found in each other their only remaining ally.

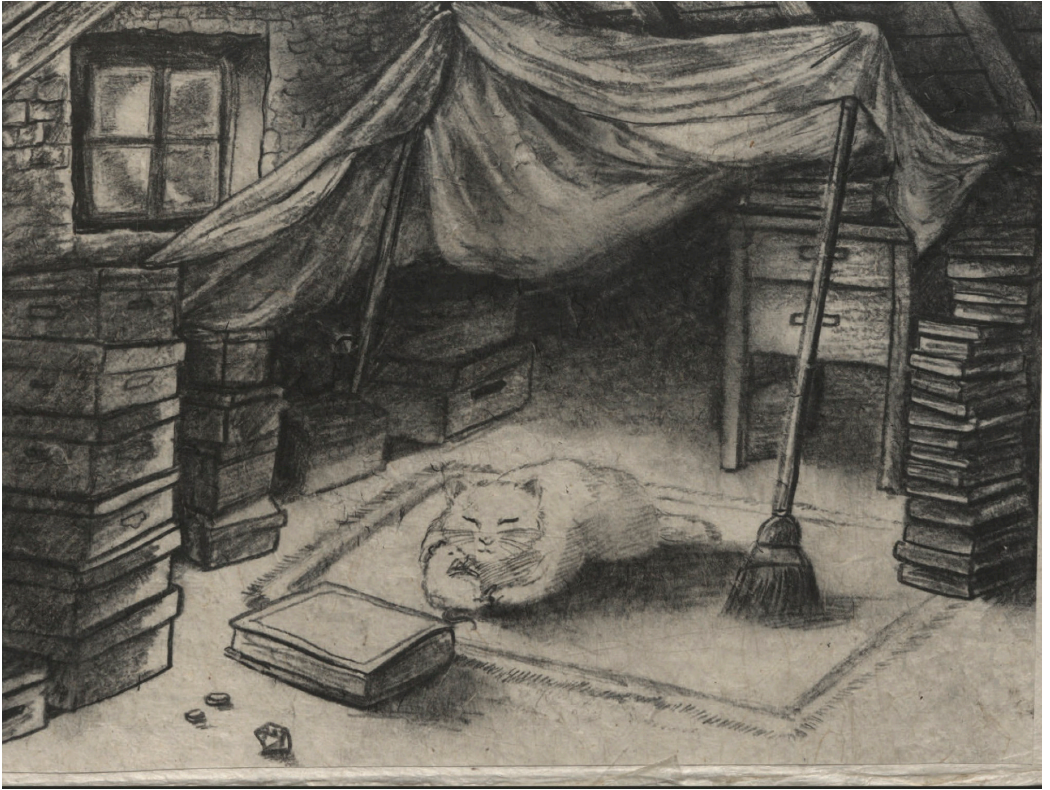
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"Father got worse today," Hildegard sighed as she settled onto their makeshift bed. "He almost destroyed the dining room and tried to charge past the gates to attack people walking by."

Worry showed in Greta's small, bright eyes. "He's getting more dangerous every day. This morning, I saw him tearing tearing up mother's portrait in a fit of rage—as though blaming her for his situation."

"He refuses to accept his transformation," Hildegard observed, her tail twitching thoughtfully. "He only knows how to direct his anger outward. I'm afraid he



might do something that can't be undone."

The sisters fell into a brief silence. Outside the window, moonlight spilled onto the stone path, and a streak of light shot through the attic window, casting long shadows of the two children deep in thought.

"Do you think we might someday become human again?" Greta finally asked, voicing the question that haunted their quiet moments.

Hildegard thoughtfully cleaned her paw. "Today, near the pillar, I heard interesting theories. The transformed ones talk about this as a test. Each person must resolve some inner conflict to regain their original form. But for those who refuse to acknowledge their flaws..."

She left the thought unfinished, though Greta understood

what she meant perfectly.

"We should find Else," Greta suggested suddenly, her tiny paws pointing toward the torn diary pages she had arranged along the wall. "Mother's journal mentions her many times. She writes that Else knows about ancient secrets, even hinting at a possible connection between Else and the stone pillar."

Hildegard's green eyes shone in the darkness. "You're right. If anyone might help us understand this situation and find a solution, it would be her. Tomorrow at dawn, we'll find her."

The sisters huddled together, finding comfort in each other's presence in this confusing new reality. Whatever waited for them, they faced it no longer alone but together.

Unlike his daughters, Albrecht had given in completely to his animal nature. As a bear, his emotions and instincts had grown beyond control. He swung between blind rage and paralyzing fear, rampaging through the mansion and reducing

generations of Steinbach heirlooms to broken pieces. The servants had fled weeks ago, leaving him to roam the crumbling estate alone.

On the edge of a complete mental breakdown, Albrecht had become more terrifying than just his physical transformation could explain. It wasn't simply his huge form that caused fear, but the concentrated hatred radiating from him, the unnatural posture of a bear trying to maintain human dignity. He stood awkwardly on hind legs for hours, refusing to accept the comfort of moving on all fours.



"It's that witch's doing," he snarled to empty rooms. "She has always resented me, envied my position. She's connected to that cursed pillar—she must be. She thinks this will destroy me, wipe out the Steinbach legacy." His claws carved deep gouges into centuries-old woodwork. "When I destroy that stone nightmare, this will end. I'll return to my rightful form, my rightful place."

Meanwhile, Else stood quietly in front of her shop, her gaze directed toward the stone pillar, her eyes filled with emotions too complex to be simply named. A white cat and a hamster appeared silently beside her, observing her with eyes that held human intelligence.

"You've finally come, later than I imagined." Else briefly closed her eyes, pretending to be drowsy.

"You understand what all this is about, don't you?" Hildegard asked, her cat voice soft yet clear. "I met that owl by the stone pillar today. He talks as if he knows everything, but isn't he stuck in this form just like us?"

The corners of Else's mouth turned up slightly, revealing a knowing smile. "You're perceptive, Hildegard. Those who believe they have all the answers often know nothing."

"Is it possible for us to become human again?" Greta's small voice trembled with hope.

Else crouched down to better converse with the little hamster. "Little Greta, it's been a long time. Perhaps you don't remember me, but seeing you reminds me of your mother." As she spoke, her eyes seemed to reflect more than just the two sisters, as if Flora were standing before her as well. She collected herself for a moment, then gathered the two adorable small animals in her arms and said, "I believe you can. The so-called curse only reveals what already exists. Though I don't like people calling it a curse—I prefer to think of it as a revelation." She thoughtfully stroked Hildegard's fur.

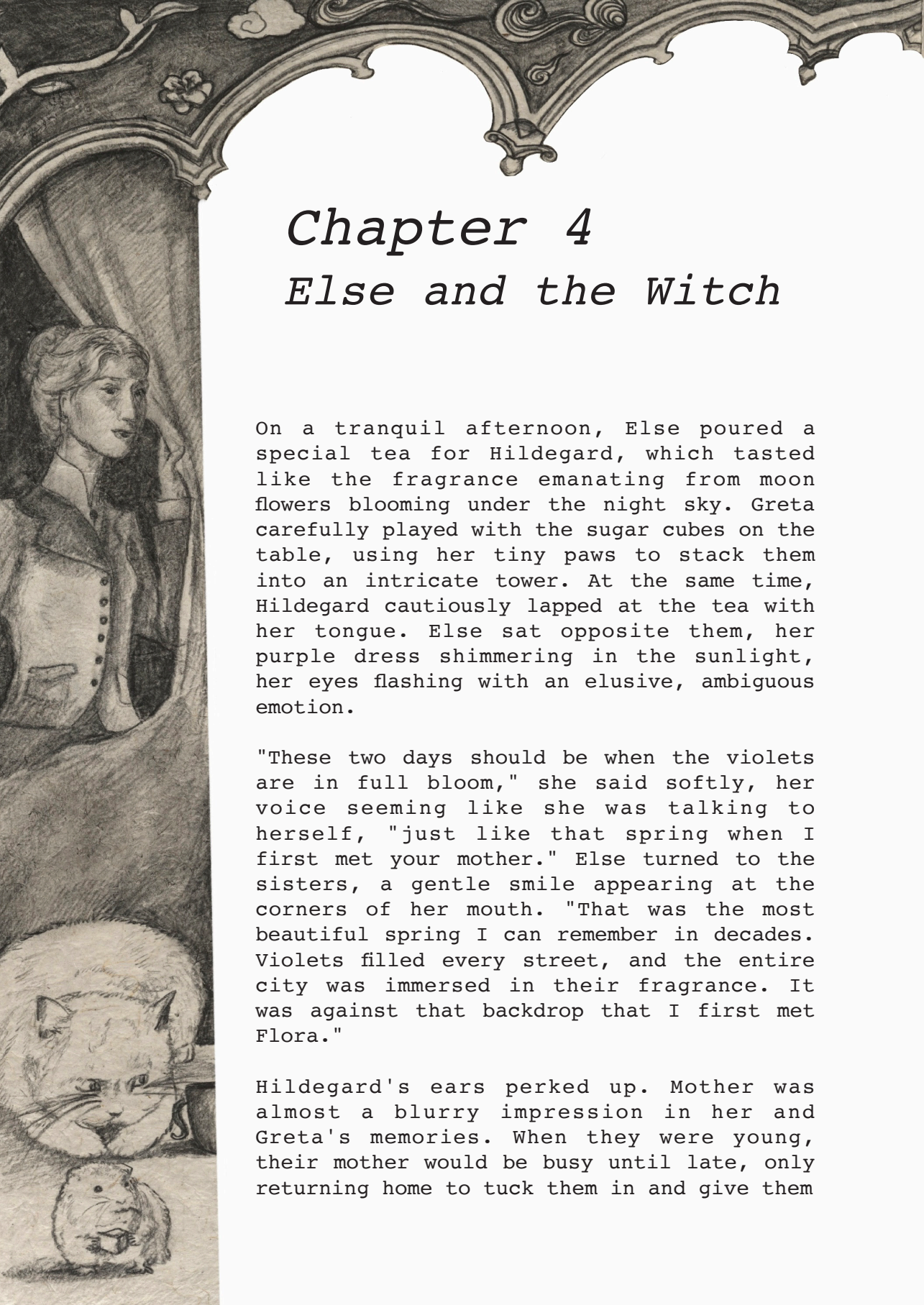
"In your father's case, whenever something happens that he can't control, he starts blaming everything—blaming your mother, blaming me, blaming everyone, even blaming the stone pillar, but never himself. That's why he remains trapped. And there are so many examples like this." She looked at the city, which had become unnervingly quiet after nightfall since the transformation day, and sighed.

"What about us?" Hildegard asked. "What should we do?"

"Not necessarily..." Else began, then suddenly tensed, her attention caught by some distant sound.



"Oops, I think I hear the call of a wild beast."



Chapter 4

Else and the Witch

On a tranquil afternoon, Else poured a special tea for Hildegard, which tasted like the fragrance emanating from moon flowers blooming under the night sky. Greta carefully played with the sugar cubes on the table, using her tiny paws to stack them into an intricate tower. At the same time, Hildegard cautiously lapped at the tea with her tongue. Else sat opposite them, her purple dress shimmering in the sunlight, her eyes flashing with an elusive, ambiguous emotion.

"These two days should be when the violets are in full bloom," she said softly, her voice seeming like she was talking to herself, "just like that spring when I first met your mother." Else turned to the sisters, a gentle smile appearing at the corners of her mouth. "That was the most beautiful spring I can remember in decades. Violets filled every street, and the entire city was immersed in their fragrance. It was against that backdrop that I first met Flora."

Hildegard's ears perked up. Mother was almost a blurry impression in her and Greta's memories. When they were young, their mother would be busy until late, only returning home to tuck them in and give them

a goodnight kiss. She rarely had free time, and during the few occasions when the whole family was together, she would argue with her father, after which both would retreat to their respective rooms for the entire day without coming out. This continued day after day until suddenly,

Mother fell ill. She stopped going to work and became bedridden. Each time, it was Hildegard who personally brought medicine to her mother's bedside and helped her take it. At first, she didn't understand why her mother seemed so melancholy every day. Wasn't staying home a good thing? She could be with her and Greta, but why did her mother's expression always make her feel so sad? Even as a family, they had never truly known each other. Hildegard had sometimes resented her mother, angry that her departure had left her in a hopeless hell, her ideals and aspirations unable to be realized under her father's violent control. "Perhaps they will never be realized," she thought. "Mother, what kind of person was she?"

"Your mother, one could say, was greater than this city itself." Memories seemed to invade Else's mind like a mist descending, enveloping the originally scorching sunlight and filtering it into a softer glow. "When she entered government service, women at that time were almost all in insignificant positions. But Flora was different; her outstanding abilities and vision quickly earned her a place for herself, which was extremely rare at that time."

Else's fingers lightly tapped the edge of the



teacup, making a faint sound. Perhaps because she had added too much sugar, Else's eyes seemed to hold additional displeasure. "Your father began to notice her around that time. Albrecht, though still in a sinecure, was in a better position than now, and his family background gave him enough confidence. The first time he saw Flora, he was attracted by her beauty and even more by her excellent social skills, but unfortunately..." Else's voice carried a hint of bitterness, "he never truly recognized that her talents and aspirations were far greater than what he saw. He valued her only as a decorative piece and social tool, rather than as an independent individual."

Greta silently put down her sugar cube tower and said, "Father never described her like this." Having heard Else's narrative, she also recalled the contents of her mother's diary.

Else gently shook her head, her eyes revealing complex emotions. "He would never admit that Flora's talent surpassed his own. Honestly, I haven't seen someone like Flora, who would make efforts..." Else gently shook her head, her eyes revealing complex emotions. "He would never admit that Flora's talent surpassed his own. Honestly, I haven't seen someone like Flora, who would make efforts for fairness for disadvantaged groups, appear for a very long time. She thought that through this marriage, she could obtain more resources and opportunities to advance her career and ideals. She believed she could manage Albrecht, using his position to realize her aspirations. I tried to warn Flora, telling her Albrecht was not as simple as she thought. But Flora at that time..." Else paused, as if searching for the right words. "Something proved my concerns correct. After marriage, Albrecht quickly revealed his true nature. He preferred Flora to stay at home as his object of admiration. Whenever she tried to fight for opportunities for herself, he would find ways to obstruct her, belittling her in various ways. This daily confrontation eventually wore away all her fighting spirit and vitality."

Hildegard and Greta silently digested these stories.



Even coming from someone else's mouth, it brought regret and sadness - their mother was such a complex and brave woman.

"What kind of relationship did you have with my mother?" Hildegard asked, keenly noticing the light that flashed in Else's eyes whenever she mentioned Flora.

Else smiled and said, "Flora was the only person in hundreds of years who made me feel hope again. Over the long years, I've witnessed many similar tragedies—intelligent women constrained by social rules, destroyed by male arrogance. Eventually, everyone fell into the curse, and gradually, even I became numb. But Flora... she truly stirred my heart, which had become as dry as a desert, making me unconsciously try to enter her life, to protect her."

Hildegard narrowed her eyes. "Hundreds of years?" she repeated, sharply catching the anomaly in Else's words. "You speak as if you've lived for a very long time."

Else was silent for a moment, her gaze turning toward the window. Then she took a deep breath, as if resolving to reveal a long-kept secret. "Before I explain more to you, tell me," she turned to the sisters, "have you heard of the legend of the purple witch? The one who was unjustly executed and sealed her soul into the stone pillar?"

The sisters nodded. Every child in the city knew this ancient legend: centuries ago, a woman dressed in purple was sentenced to be burned at the stake for

being accused accused of witchcraft. Before dying, she cursed the city, saying her soul would dwell in the stone pillar in the central square, and every so often, the curse would be fulfilled, bringing calamity.

"It's not just a legend," Else said softly. "It was a real tragedy. there was a woman named Cordula who was condemned for her transcendent independent thinking. The powerful in the city feared her wisdom and influence would shake their standing in the hearts of the common people, so they categorized her as a spreader of cults, a witch leading people to hell, and ultimately sentenced her to death by fire." Else's voice sounded so indisputable and carried details only a witness would know. Hildegard and Greta exchanged glances, simultaneously realizing the implication in Else's words. "You... are you Cordula?" Hildegard tentatively asked, her voice filled with disbelief.

"Yes and no," Else softly answered. "I can indeed be considered an extension of Cordula, but after hundreds of years of cycles, I am no longer that soul full of hatred. Time has changed me, smoothed my edges, and taken away my passion. In the first few decades, every time I saw the fear and chaos of those arrogant men after their transformation, I felt a sense of revenge. But as time passed, I realized this cycle was meaningless. Humans seem destined to repeat the same mistakes—power leads to corruption, arrogance leads to blindness, the desire for control leads to destruction."

Else stood up and walked to the window, her purple dress swaying gently behind her. "Transformation is not the most terrifying disaster; it is more of an opportunity. It reflects people's long-hidden true nature and manifests it in a new animalistic form. Cordula initially just wanted to give those who fabricate lies and even deceive themselves a chance to repent and change. But I no longer believe change will occur, so naturally, she and I are no longer the same person."

Hildegard finally understood the nature of the transformation. But a more urgent question arose in her

mind, "If the stone pillar is destroyed, can we change back?"

Else's expression suddenly became serious, the serenity on her face replaced by worry. "Over the centuries, many have tried to destroy it, but that's where the real disaster begins. Some hope destroying it will change the curse, while others fear that if the pillar is destroyed, all those who've transformed might never regain their human form. The residents split into factions, people fighting bloody battles with no one yielding, with woeful cries reaching the skies. I don't know if destroying the pillar would also mean destroying Cordula's soul. Even if it did, it doesn't necessarily mean the curse would be immediately lifted."

Just then, a commotion came from outside. People in the street were running in panic, with shouts rising. A fearful voice penetrated the chaos: "Bear! There's a crazed bear in the square! It's attacking the stone pillar!"

Hildegard, Greta, and Else exchanged glances, immediately understanding what had happened. Albrecht must have blamed all his misfortunes on the stone pillar and decided to destroy it to break the so-called "curse."

"We need to stop him," Hildegard said. "If he destroys the stone pillar, who knows what more serious consequences might follow?"

Chapter 5

The Price

When Hildegard, Greta, and Else reached the square, they found nothing but chaos. Albrecht Steinbach, now fully adapted to his bear form, was roaring around the stone pillar, attempting to attack it with his powerful claws. His massive figure cast a grotesque shadow across the cobblestone ground, with moonlight making the rage in his eyes particularly striking.

The square was crowded with citizens and various animals, watching the scene with both fear and morbid curiosity. Some recognized the bear as the beast that had been haunting the Steinbach estate and began to flee in panic, frightened by his aggressive movements. However, others remained firmly in place, forming an impenetrable barrier around the stone pillar.

Hildegard noticed the elderly owl she had met earlier standing at the front line, his feathers puffed up with self-importance as he directed other animals into defensive formations.

"The sacred pillar must be protected at all costs!" the owl proclaimed with astonishing authority. "This destructive beast represents humanity's worst failure—blind rage without reason!"

The beasts responding to his commands tried to control Albrecht, and Hildegard realized they were the former city council members, judges, wealthy merchants, and other authority figures. They hadn't disappeared after the transformation night by fleeing the city as rumored; on the contrary, they had maintained their old habits, recruiting followers through their excellent oratory skills to form a powerful organization.

"Listen to me, citizens of Quaik!" the owl continued, addressing the fearful human onlookers. "This bear is

merely a beast—it is the manifestation of Albrecht Steinbach's corrupt soul! His attempt to destroy the pillar is undoubtedly a desecration of the witch's curse, an attack on the peace we have guarded for thousands of years. His actions will only bring us disasters worse than transformation!"

Murmurs of agreement occasionally rose from the crowd, their fear gradually transforming into righteous indignation. Years of conditioning to respect authority figures made them susceptible to the owl's manipulative rhetoric.

Else walked toward the center of the square, her purple dress flowing in the breeze. As she approached, Albrecht turned toward her, the fury in his eyes intensifying. He let out an ear-splitting roar and charged at her.

Hildegard instinctively leaped in front of Else, her fur standing on end as she hissed a warning. But to everyone's surprise, Greta also rushed forward, positioning her tiny hamster body protectively near Else's ankle. Her eyes no longer showed fear, but rather firm determination.

"Look!" the owl shouted. "He has gone mad, even attacking his daughters! This beast must be subdued, or he will destroy everything!"

"No!" Hildegard cried out, but her cat's voice couldn't reach the human spectators. "You don't understand!"

Else stood calmly, extending her hand toward Albrecht. "Enough, Albrecht. Destroying the statue is not the solution. Why put yourself in this position?"

The bear halted, his eyes first showing confusion but gradually returning to their angry, bloodshot state. He growled softly, seemingly trying to speak, but could only produce animal sounds. "I know the relationship between us is destined to be antagonistic," Else continued, her voice steady and clear across the silent square. "You blame the pillar; you blame everyone except

yourself. But you need to face the truth. Not about me, but about yourself. You chose to pursue an unreachable, unrealistic dream of power; you chose to be someone who controls rather than understands others. Look at what you've lost because of this. Flora was so brave and kind; if not for your arrogance, how could she bear to see you and her daughters suffer like this? They are all victims of your decisions. Don't you understand? The real answer lies within your own heart, not in violence."

"Lies!" the owl interrupted, flying down to perch on a nearby streetlight. "Everyone, do not listen to the witch's deception! She's stalling for time. Yes, everyone, she is a witch! It's her fault our town has become like this. She will continue to do evil things, just as she has for centuries!"

Other transformed officials joined in:

"Kill Albrecht! Capture the witch! Admit it. Let us be the town's only guardians, protecting everyone."

Albrecht roared again, charging into the strange-looking beasts with their air of hypocrisy and grayish, decaying fur. At first, sounds resembled human speech, but later, only animal-like howls remained.

Hildegard and Greta watched as their father, despite his enormous size, could not overcome the numerical advantage. The brown fur finally showed signs of blood seeping through, and their father let out an agonizing cry. Unlike before, his voice was no longer full of vigor but rather filled with the resignation of knowing he was powerless to change his fate.

Seeing the bear defenseless, a group of people surged forward—humans and transformed citizens acting together. They carried ropes, chains, and tools—all meant to subdue Albrecht.

"No!" Hildegard shouted, trying to push through the crowd, but her small cat form was easily shoved aside.

"Father!"



Greta also tried to reach him, darting between feet and paws, but the crowd was too dense, too frenzied.

Meanwhile, Else retreated to a nearby alley without the owl noticing, murmuring, "I knew it would end this way..."

The owl continued to incite: "Keep going, citizens! Your actions are just! We must control this dangerous beast! Tie him to the pillar as a warning to all. Let no one dare to continue destroying!"

Several people efficiently threw ropes around Albrecht's massive form. Though he could have resisted, something within him seemed to have surrendered. As they bound him tightly to the stone pillar, his back pressed against the cold surface, he offered almost no resistance.

"Father!" Hildegard cried out desperately, finally breaking through to the inner circle.

"No!"

But Albrecht didn't look up at her. His expression—was it remorse? Was he regretting his rashness, or regretting not killing these damned old creatures earlier? Whatever it was, he could no longer avoid facing his failed outcome. The ropes cut into his fur, drawing blood where they were pulled too tight.

The crowd cheered, their faces transformed by collective madness. Hildegard found this more terrifying than any physical transformation. These weren't beasts but humans committing cruel acts in the name of justice, guided by leaders who maintained control through fear and manipulation.

For the next three days, Albrecht remained bound to the pillar. Guards were established in rotation around it, ensuring he couldn't escape. They gave him no food or water; some citizens mocked him as they passed, spitting on him. Some threw stones, others hurled insults. Children were brought by their parents to see

the "monster"—the father had completely become the shame of the Steinbach family, a negative example for all parents to use when educating their children.

After that day, Else appeared on wanted posters; she disappeared along with her shop, accused of sympathizing with the beast, casting curses, and disrupting peace and order, among other charges.

At dawn on the fourth day, Hildegard and Greta arrived at the square to find their father motionless, his massive head hanging lifelessly on his chest. The great bear was dead—not killed by a hunter's knife or executioner's axe, but by slow torture, public humiliation, and the collective cruelty of a society more afraid of change than injustice.

The owl stood atop the pillar, addressing the gathered crowd: "The threat has been eliminated! Natural order preserved! Let us remember this victory as proof that tradition triumphs over chaos!"

As people dispersed, many beginning their morning routines as if nothing extraordinary had happened, Hildegard and Greta remained, staring at their father's lifeless form.

Hildegard looked around at the town where she had grown up and said, "I understand now. What traps this place isn't the curse, but these people stuck

in time. They all live in a false reality, perpetuating cycles of oppression they don't even recognize."

That evening, Hildegard and Greta packed what little they could salvage from their home. With their mother's diary and a few precious possessions, they left Quaik as the sun began to set.

They climbed the eastern hill, pausing at the summit to look back one last time. All the buildings were shrouded in twilight—it might have been beautiful if not for the things that happened in the past few days.

Hildegard embraced her sister, finding comfort in the touch of her only remaining family member. The sensation was completely different from the furry texture they had grown accustomed to. Their skin was now perfectly smooth.

"Will we ever come back?" Greta asked.

Hildegard shook her head. "There's nothing here for us anymore."

In the city below, they could just make out a small figure in purple standing in the central square. Else would remain, as she had for centuries, watching, waiting, perhaps still harboring some hope that one day, the cycle might be broken. But her posture now seemed different—more rigid, more distant. The brief warmth that Flora had awakened in her heart had cooled once again.

END



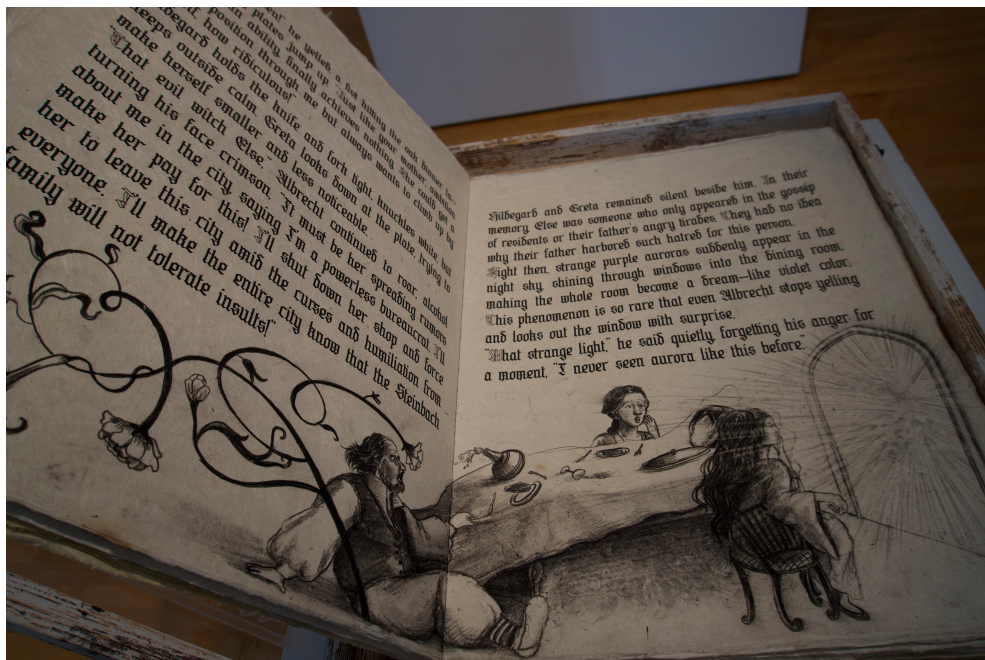


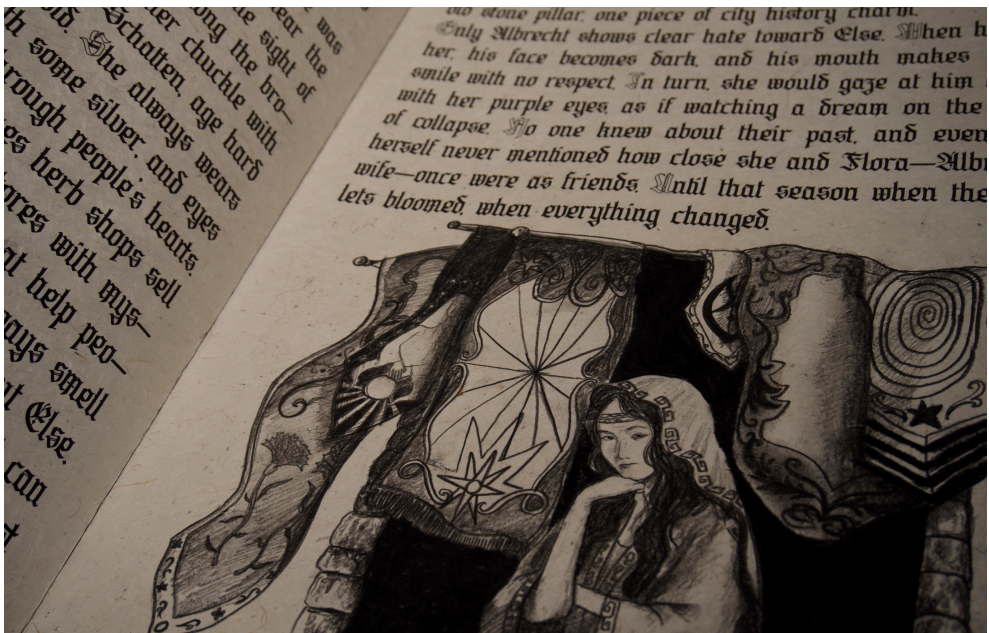
Installation

These pages reveal the journey of this story's transformation into an artist book and its spatial presentation. Created with various charcoal pencils on handmade paper, the drawings are preserved within a wooden box.









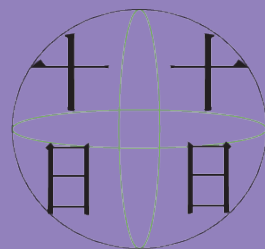




Longwen Miao

Illustrator

To me, art—especially illustration—is an intensely personal and introspective creation. Everything we experience, from eating and drinking to playing, watching, listening, and speaking, ultimately converges into our unique visual language. The real distinction lies in how an artist decodes the hidden messages within their work and shapes a style and narrative that are uniquely their own. In my artwork, narrative plays a central role. I strive not only for a visually captivating and powerful presence but also aim for my work to evoke an undeniable emotional impact in viewers—whether positive or negative—something they simply cannot look away from.



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