

Her grandmother's usual aphorism, "We are students for life", were the last *Yayue* words Cherry would ever hear for a long time. Of all the people in the village community, her grandmother believed in her the most. Her grandmother squeezed Cherry's hands with pride.

"You will never understand everything, and that is why you study," her grandmother said. "That is how you will live your life."

These words continue to resonate with her, even after a month has passed. Cherry is now on the last leg of her voyage. The merchants traveling with her are kind and gave her a small cabin to study and sleep in with little cost. While the space is not too shabby, the rocking of the ship can make her feel dizzy. But as the days went on, the stench of the sea and rotten wood have become familiar to her.

The lamplight above her flickers. Cherry knows reading under this light is bad for her eyes, but every second not reading is a wasted second. The tides are low and she has been seasick from reading dense textbooks for days. It is the perfect time to study the art of Attunements. But as she flips to the next page of her textbook, the gravity of her grandmother's words is becoming realer to Cherry:

"The first of such prismatic dimensions may be connected to..."

She can understand the sentence, but she cannot understand the words. The Celestian-Yayue dictionary she currently has says very little about "prismatic". She circles the word with her pen to indicate she has no clue what it means. The previous pages are no better, with circles decorating every paragraph and page. Cherry sighs and wonders if there will be a better bilingual dictionary for sale on shore.

After a few hours of circling words and scribbling the usable definitions on the book margins, she goes out to the deck to breathe in some fresh air. The breeze cools her warm cheeks and she hears the waves crashing into bow. She walks to the handrails and tries to see if she can make out anything in the distance. Nothing yet, it seems. She looks up and thinks about how Yayue is a small mass of land compared to the massive night sky. But she knows that her month-long trip on the seas is almost at an end.

In some short hours, she will reach Celeste Academy. Cherry will become the fifth Yayue international student in the academy ever — and one of the few privileged international students learning the esoteric art of Attunements. But as she rubs her eyes with her left hand, she realizes they were getting damp with tears.

Cherry's Story

Is it all right to have this dream come true?

Dreams have weight, and the weight she carries overwhelms her. Her parents, her teachers, and her friends in the village have invested all their hopes and aspirations into her. When the village elder asked Cherry what she would like for her eighteenth birthday, she said that she would like to study Attunements (or as she put it, “magic”) overseas. Everyone was surprised by her interest in it, but she loved reading books about how people would perform “magic” in multiple capacities. She wanted to use the “magic” to help develop the village, especially her parents’ business in sundry goods somehow. She just thought it was a silly dream and mentioned it as a little joke. She had no idea that for the past two years, the whole community created a fund for her studies in secrecy. On her twentieth birthday, they surprised her with that gift.

Her shoulders feel every ounce of that trust depressed upon her mind. All Cherry can think about is how to make them proud. She cowers at the idea of betraying them, which makes her even more anxious.

I am strong. I must tell myself, I am strong.

Cherry squeezes the handrails as she tries to believe her own words. This is not the time to despair. The semester has not even begun. There is no time to be nervous about this. She must succeed at all costs.

“Cadence Isle in one hour's time!”

A sailor on the crow’s nest has screamed his lungs out. Cherry squints into the horizon. It is still too dark -- three hours before sunrise -- but there seems to be some faint yellow-colored dots in the distance.

In less than an hour, the ship will reach port. She will change into her qipao, the traditional Yayue clothing, to make a good first impression on people. Then, she will carry her thatched briefcase off the ship. Every scenario, right and wrong, passes through her mind.

What if I say a word weirdly? What if people look at me and think I’m weird? What if I am just in the wrong place and wrong time? Will I end up becoming a disappointment to the school that has welcomed me? A disgrace to my own family and friends?

What will I even say to my grandmother if I come back with nothing?

Squirming, Cherry holds onto the rails as she tries to maintain her composure. She is just afraid of this *change* -- the island appearing before her -- entering into her life.

All she can hope is to meet someone who will alleviate her fears.

* * *

In the kitchen of a cafe trapped in the vestiges of time, Mima is trying to remember the taste of a chocolate latte she had from her late mother. It was bitter and rough at first, the unfiltered coffee powder would make her whole mouth feel coarse from drinking it. But the aftertaste was what made the chocolate latte special: a sweetness so intoxicating it was like drinking liquid chocolate. Her mother never gave her the recipe and the drink has been lost to time.

However, Mima wants to recapture that taste. Not only will it be a good homage to the previous owner of the cafe, but could also be the unique selling point that will bring customers in and keep the business afloat. This signature drink will be what makes people come in and out of the cafe!

And her mom *did* intend to sell the drink on the menu.

It was their shared dream to own a cafe in the middle of Cadence City. It's just an exciting city to be in. Although they're from Baroque, the capital city of Rococo Islands, it's only here that they would see the magic of Attunements — especially on coffee. Nothing tastes like coffee brewed by baristas well-skilled in Attunements. Enhancing the flavors of coffee with a little incantation is impressive enough, but the ability to adjust the heat at will was what made Mima interested in Attunements. Her mother encouraged her to attend Celeste Academy, and bonded by their love of coffee, began dreaming of a cafe to open together.

Her mom would've loved to see the students and staff of Celeste Academy fill the store to enjoy their brews. They shopped together for the furniture and debated over decorations for the cafe. Mom wanted something closer to a bar setting, while Mima loved open-air environments and glass doors. The combination of both disparate wants resulted in the cult classic cafe, The Rouge Cafe.

But before the cafe was finished, her mother passed away. She was never able to see her dream come into fruition. Mima stopped her studies in Celeste Academy and decided to focus all her attention onto the cafe.

Business, however, has been bad lately. It's trendier for students to go to more upscale cafes and the Rouge is too tucked into the alleys of the city for tourists to find. There are regulars who appreciate the café's unique approach to coffee, but too few to sustain it.

So now, Mima's trying her luck on this drink to keep the three year old business running. She loves making chocolate lattes and hearing stories of people discussing their adventures to each other. To close shop would be a tragedy for everyone and she feels obligated to try her *darndest* to find out what the recipe for her mom's drink is.

It's just that... she's not sure why the aftertaste tasted like alcohol.

Cherry's Story

While Mima can't recall if her mom used alcohol in the recipe, she's certain that her mom wasn't a drinker. It's unlikely her mom even knew what the taste of chocolate liquor was like.

Mima sighs. "I am so confused," she mutters. Maybe she'll call it quits for the day.

The bells at the front jingle. She hears a little squeal before some muttering of a language she doesn't recognize. And then: "E-excuse me?" The voice echoes in the cafe. "Is anyone there?"

Mima stops what she's doing.

She rushes out of the kitchen to the storefront — and sees a young woman holding her briefcase with her two hands. Mima's never seen such floral threaded clothing before, and the woman's cheeks blush like ripe peaches at the sight of her.

"I-I am sorry," she says before bowing. "I am aware it is not opening time. But, but I am lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes." The young woman is taking a step back and looking at the floor. "Where is Celeste Academy?"

"It's uphill." Mima gestures Eastward.

"Okay, thank you." The young woman turns to leave immediately, bowing quickly with her words.

"W-Wait!"

The young woman halts. Mima stands awkwardly — her voice was louder than she intended.

"It's dark outside," Mima says, "and sunrise is in an hour. You'll be able to see the academy easier."

The young woman tilts her head in confusion.

"Why not, um, have a drink with me?"

"Tea?"

Mima shakes her head and says, "No, better: coffee."

* * *

Cherry is sipping the chocolate latte this stranger has made for her. It is delicious and powerful. That said, it is embarrassing to speak in a language she does not know too well. She can only come up with curt, brief sentences of assertion when the beautiful woman who seems to own this store asks her questions:

"Are you studying?"

"Yes."

"Where are you from?"

“Yayue.”

“Where do your clothes come from?”

“Silk.”

Cherry has difficulty looking into the woman’s eyes. It is not just because this is her first ever conversation with someone in the language but because the woman is so pretty. If she takes a look, she gets the feeling she will be entranced and not be able to speak. And the sweater she wears is really cute and different from what she sees other people in her hometown wear.

“What’s the matter?”

Cherry is dumbfounded. “... Matter?”

“Ah um.” The woman has a concerned expression. “Is there anything wrong?”

“No, no.” Cherry shakes her head. “My language. It is bad.”

“Hmm... Well, you should take it easy.”

“Easy?”

“Yeah.” The woman smiles before holding her coffee mug up to drink. “Cadence Isle welcomes you.”

“Welcome...”

Cherry’s eyes meet the woman’s and she jerks away out of embarrassment, preferring to instead survey around the store. The dark red wallpaper that matches the rugs feels like it belongs in a history museum. There are many plaques that are probably about the history of this place, but the words are too complicated for her to read. To her right, she sees a series of door-sized windows that reveal the silhouetted buildings of Cadence City.

“Ah, the sun is almost up,” the woman says. “You’re going to see something quite *picturesque*. Why don’t we walk outside?”

“Picturesque...?” That’s a word Cherry does not know yet.

Cherry is led by the woman to the canopy. As she steps outside, she feels the gentle rays of sunlight splash onto her. The bluegreen seas are sparkling like stars and Cherry can make out some fishing boats in the distance. Looking down, she sees the tops of buildings all arranged like the colors of the rainbow. Stone paths and dirt roads converge into one and people are beginning to go out of their houses to prepare their stalls.

“Isn’t Cadence City pretty?”

Cherry looks toward the woman who is beaming over this little town.

“Oh, you should get going,” the woman says. “Celeste Academy opens up really early and I think you’d be tired from the trip.”

“I-I will pay.”

“No worries.” The woman smiled. “Just come back here sometime.”

Cherry's Story

Cherry follows the woman back into the store while pondering about the phrase “no worries”. Does that mean the woman is not worried about her? That is a confusing turn of phrase.

Cherry grabs her briefcase and goes outside, the woman waves from the canopy. She can barely make out her saying “*Have a good orientation!*” as the city begins to wake up. Cherry waves back and slowly walks uphill.

After swerving through different paths and alleys, she has reached the gates of Celeste Academy. Cherry talks to one of the security guards who then guides her to the International Office. Before she enters, she looks back and tries to find the store by the beautiful woman again. But she cannot find it: it is lost somewhere in that labyrinth of cobblestone paths and bricked buildings.

For some reason, she longs for the woman again. Cherry wants to know her. Maybe there will be an opportunity for her to explore Cadence Isle and find her little store again...

* * *

Ah, I forgot to ask for her name.

Mima’s realization comes too late as she waves the young girl goodbye.

I’d like to know more about her. Who she is... Where she’s from... Her Celestian is quite adorable! I want to help her out.

When she was still in Celeste Academy, she was researching Attunements in the science of linguistics. Mima thinks of the textbooks she has stored in the attic and wonders if she should sweep the dust away.

I hope she comes back. I want to get to know her.

Mima considers going to the library to borrow a book on Yayue culture later. In case the international student returns to the cafe. That way, she’ll have something she can talk about with her.

Just the idea of talking to her again gives Mima the energy boost she needs to resume researching the recipe for that mysterious drink.

Dear Diary,

My teacher from Yayue has said I must write a diary if I want to improve my language skills. Language needs practice. But language is hard.

I will try my best because everyone believes in me.

I have reached Cadence Isle. Celeste Academy is there. But it was night so I cannot see it.

I was lost actually. I walk around and wonder where I was. It was scary.

But I find a store. It was by a beautiful woman. We talk in this language for the first time. She sells something called coffee. I drink it. The beautiful woman says it is better than tea, but I disagree. But I can see why.

When Sun rises, I walk to Celeste Academy. It was big and great. But I look back and cannot find the store I walked into. I want to find that store. I want to meet her again. Be a friend. I want to talk to her.

Writing is tough, but I see why my teacher wants me to write. It makes me think about words that are hard to think but easy to use. I am tired. No school tomorrow, just "orientation". But I want to take a nap first.

I want to meet her again someday.

Good night Diary.