



Return from Death.

I Kicked the Bucket and
Now I'm Back at Square
One With a Girlfriend Who
Doesn't Remember Me

2

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Return from Death: I Kicked the Bucket and Now I'm Back at Square One With a Girlfriend Who Doesn't Remember Me Volume 2

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Return from Death: I Kicked the Bucket and Now I'm Back at Square One With a Girlfriend Who Doesn't Remember Me Volume 2

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Chapter 1: Return from Death, Return to School Life

“**EXCUSE** me, could I have a moment of your time?”

A head of beautiful blond hair swayed as the person she had called out to turned to face her. Almost immediately, Oriana’s stomach dropped.

There were only two students standing in the middle of Lagen Magic Academy’s deserted courtyard. The handsome face of the one who had turned around contorted in surprise. He stared at her as if he’d seen a ghost—as if he couldn’t believe what was happening.

You idiot, she cursed herself. Why did you have to call out to him of all people?

Oriana was shocked at her own lack of judgment. She had only glimpsed him from behind, so she didn’t know who he was until he turned around. Still, this was the pinnacle of stupidity. If only she’d strung together what little intelligence she had, or if she’d at least worked on developing her powers of observation a bit more... Even a monkey would have recognized him sooner.

“What is it?” he asked.

Well, now I’ve done it.

Oriana drew her brows together as the person she’d called out to—Vincent Tanzine—strode over to her.

Since they were now third years, there was a noticeable difference in physique between the girls and the boys. Vincent was naturally tall anyway, enough that he towered over her. That, combined with his dignified way of speaking, only served to intimidate her. A cold sweat trickled down her forehead.

Vincent was a fellow student at the magic academy, and he was in the same year as Oriana. In the three years that had passed since their enrollment, the two had never had any relation to one another beyond being students in the

same year. Vincent was a handsome, morally upstanding student with exemplary grades. He was also the heir to a ducal house. Meanwhile, everything about Oriana was average—her appearance, her background, her scores. It would be odder if the two of them did have anything to do with one another.

He's like a flower on a peak, high above everyone else's reach, and I'm the brainless buffoon who just casually struck up a conversation with him!

Her eyes felt like they were spinning as she stewed in regret.

Vincent, however, gently said, “Calm down. Did something happen?”

His voice hit her right in the chest. The way he spoke was so kind and encouraging that, as intimidated as she was, Oriana couldn't help but speak. “I-I was hoping for some help...”

“Of course,” said Vincent. “What can I do to help?”



Despite how reluctant she was to ask, Vincent didn't hesitate to oblige her request.

But this is only our first time speaking to each other...

Not only that, Vincent probably didn't even know who she was. Oriana knew who he was because he was so famous. While Oriana did pride herself on her own established reputation and connections, it wasn't as though all of those in her academic year were acquainted with her. Vincent didn't spurn her even though they were practically strangers, however. He was perfectly willing to extend a helping hand as a fellow student.

Oriana was left gaping for a few seconds, but she quickly recovered and bowed her head. "Thank you, Mister Tanzine!"

For a moment, she could swear she heard him sucking in a breath, but by the time she lifted her head, he was wearing a perfect smile on his face.



"A stalker, you say?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, exactly... He's my father's apprentice, so the two of us are acquainted. He's requested to meet with me numerous times though, and when I go into town on the weekends, he'll suddenly show up and follow me around..."

"Then he is most certainly a stalker."

Oriana pursed her lips. Perhaps she had led him to that conclusion by what she'd said, but it pleased her to hear Vincent confirm that the man was a stalker. She'd felt so guilty turning down someone who was so closely associated with her father, which was why it was such a relief to hear her discomfort was valid.

The stalker in question was an apprentice of her father's named Rysted. He was a passionate man, overflowing with ambition. Her father had noticed his talents from an early age and started training him. With a little more time, he would soon be her father's right-hand man. Rysted was in his early twenties, and he seemed to be intent on marrying Oriana in the future, so he could

inherit her father's business and all that came with it. He had never explicitly said as much, but his aims were clear from the way he conducted himself. Oriana had realized early on what he was after.

For her part, Oriana wanted to be of service to her father, so she wasn't entirely displeased with the idea. After all, her father was such a hard worker, who'd started from humble beginnings and built such an impressive business empire. On top of that, he had lavished her with enough love to make up for her absent mother, and she loved him deeply in return. She and Rysted had met a number of times since she was a child, so she wasn't exactly opposed to the arrangement.

At least, that was how she'd felt up until last year, when Rysted suddenly changed. They had only met maybe a few times a year up until that point, but suddenly, he started going out of his way to come see her for whatever reason. His actions quickly escalated from there, and now, he was trying to come see her, claiming to be "family."

This last time, he almost touched me.

Rysted was clever enough not to let his interest in her show when he was in front of her father. He kept on a mask, acting the part of her father's foremost apprentice, which in turn earned her father's complete trust. That made it impossible for her to consult her father about the matter, though. It was embarrassing in the first place for a daughter to discuss men with her father, but moreover, she was scared he'd dismiss her worries as exaggeration.

I managed to run away last time, but I'm sure he's probably angry about that. I'm terrified of being alone with him.

Rysted had made an official request through her professor, which made it impossible for her to refuse on her own. Worse yet, the professor probably didn't think too fondly of her because of how many times these requests had come in. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place, feeling as defenseless as a deer caught out in the open, with no other choice than to make her way to the meeting room.

If possible, I'd like to settle the matter peacefully before my father catches wind of it.

Why had it even come to this?

As Oriana bit down on her lip, Vincent came to a stop beside her.

“That’s a bad habit,” he said.

“Huh?”

“You’ll split your lip doing that. Don’t worry. I will do something about this, so no more biting.”

Vincent’s voice was far kinder than she would have anticipated. That, combined with the shock she felt knowing he’d been staring at her mouth, made Oriana quit her habit in a surefire hurry. She made sure her lips were perfectly visible, like a dog trying to show off to its master that it had obeyed—*See? I’m not biting anymore.*

Vincent smiled softly, nodded, and continued walking. Oriana scrambled after him. Any outsider watching would mistakenly think she was the one accompanying him and not the other way around.

“You made the right choice by asking someone to come along with you. It would be a bad idea to meet a dangerous man like that by yourself,” said Vincent.

Oriana was relieved to hear that. She was terrified of going alone, which was precisely why she’d come up with the idea of asking a male student to go along with her. With someone else present, she hoped Rysted would come to his senses and restrain himself. It went without saying that she couldn’t take another female student along, lest she expose them to the same danger she was facing.

She’d wasted no time looking for someone as soon as the teacher contacted her, saying she had a visitor. Unfortunately, today was Fruit Day (Sunday), which meant most students were out and about or holed up in the dormitory.

The first person that sprang to mind was Yana’s—her roommate—bodyguard, Azraq. She figured she could rely upon him, but at the same time, Yana was the princess of a neighboring country. Status was supposed to be irrelevant on school grounds, but if Rysted got involved, the matter could go well beyond the school. Oriana couldn’t bring herself to involve him in her personal matters

given those possible repercussions and gave up on the idea.

She was close with two male classmates, but to her chagrin, they had gone out for the day. After crossing all those candidates off her list, she was starting to run out of time, which left her desperate. If she made the professor wait too long, she risked invoking their anger, and Rysted would likely go off on her as well. Terrified by that point, she started scouring the school for anyone who looked like they could help her, which was how she ended up calling out to Vincent.

"I really can't thank you enough," she said. "It's reassuring to have you with me."

"Not a problem. The meeting room door is just up ahead."

There was a specific area set aside for people coming to visit from outside the school. The meeting room was located right next to the staff room. As soon as she spotted it, Oriana's expression hardened. Rysted's voice echoed in her mind.

"It's fine. I know you better than anybody else."

"I'm sure your father wants us to get closer. You see that, don't you?"

"I feel like it's high time you started giving some thought to my feelings."

On the surface, he hadn't really done anything violent or coercive, but no matter what she said, he brushed her off. Rysted treated her like a child, trying to force her along the path he desired. It made her feel small and irrelevant. It was so suffocating she could barely breathe.

As far as Rysted was concerned, Oriana's feelings didn't matter. He didn't come to talk *with* her, but rather to tell her whatever he wanted to say. All the joy flooded out of her when she met with him.

Oriana took several deep breaths. The moment she found herself thinking that she couldn't back down and let him get the upper hand was the same moment she realized she already considered him an enemy. Rysted was older than her and had taken good care of her when she was younger. It wasn't a good feeling, resenting him now the way she did.

As Oriana went silent, Vincent glanced over at her and quietly said, “I’ll enter the meeting room alone. I would like you to wait outside.”

“What...?” Oriana jerked her chin up, shocked.

“There’s a possibility he might fly into a frenzy because you have brought me along.”

Her face paled. She shook her head. “No, there’s no way it could devolve into violence...”

“It’s simply a precaution,” Vincent explained.

“In that case, that’s all the more reason I should go with you. I couldn’t live with myself if he punched you. If it comes to that, I’ll take his fist instead.”

Vincent smiled. “For your own well-being, it would be better not to make such foolish remarks.”

“Eep...” Oriana squeaked, her back shooting up straight. Vincent was no longer the calm boy he’d been a moment ago; though he still wore a smile, the anger seeped into his voice as he spoke.

“Please don’t think of me as such a coward that I would use you as a shield,” he told her. “Besides, even if a fist does go flying, I won’t be the one getting punched.”

“No, no, no, no!” Oriana flailed. “Doing the punching is bad too. If you were to do that, your reputation would take a hit...”

Vincent was a kind, handsome, and well-behaved duke’s heir with top grades. He’d entered the Academy as the head of their year, and she’d heard rumors that he continued taking first place during every term exam. It was impossible to imagine how his image might suffer if he got involved in a violent dispute.

Perhaps she hadn’t given this enough thought. Oriana never dreamed he would have to shoulder that kind of responsibility. And of course, Vincent didn’t have any obligation to go that far for her.

I guess I should have been the one to deal with this by myself.

Vincent had just reassured her a moment ago that she’d made the right choice bringing him along. She’d been so happy to hear that, but now she was

beginning to regret her decision. If she'd only known how much trouble it would cause, then she could have just put up with her disgust and discomfort instead.

"In that case, would you be willing to do me a favor?" Vincent asked.

"Huh?"

The Amethyst Dragon Duke's heir wants to ask a favor of me, of all people? A mere merchant's daughter? Oriana gaped at Vincent, which prompted him to chuckle. His eyes were so warm that it only left her even more dumbfounded.

"If I manage to drive off your stalker, I would like you to call me Vincent instead of 'Mister Tanzine.'"

His request blindsided her so much that her mouth remained ajar as she tilted her head to the side. "Uh, um... If you're sure that's what you want, of course."

"Then that settles it," Vincent declared.

"It does?"

"Indeed. Rest assured and wait here for me." No sooner had he said that than he disappeared inside the meeting room, leaving Oriana behind.



THE door to the meeting room began to swing shut with Vincent inside. Without missing a beat, Oriana scrambled closer and thrust her foot in the door. It slammed into her shoe, but she successfully stopped it from closing on her.

Shocked, Vincent whipped around and yanked the door open. "Hey! What are you doing?!"

Oriana's foot was throbbing inside her shoe. Her eyes were probably welling with tears, but she was too distracted by the matter at hand to notice. "I'm going too." She tried to stare up at him with determination, but it came across more as her glaring.

For a moment, Vincent scrunched his face in an unreadable expression, but with no other choice than to acquiesce, he pushed the door further open.

Oriana wasted no time slipping inside. She tried to step in front of him so she could lead the way, but he grabbed her by the arm and stopped her. He used his body to block hers as he moved forward.

“Hey there.”

“Oh? Is this an admirer you’ve brought along with you, Oriana? No need to do something so cruel to him.” Rysted clearly looked displeased as he glanced between her and Vincent. He was probably irritated at her for making him wait, on top of bringing another man to their meeting. Rysted was in his twenties, and so naturally, he took a condescending attitude with Vincent, who was nearly a decade younger. “I came here to meet with *you*, Oriana. You know that, right? If you wanna go on a date, do it some other time. Right now—”

“Who you have come to meet with is of little relevance. I am here because I want to speak with you,” Vincent said. He was speaking not as a student of the Academy but as a duke’s heir.

Rysted was left speechless.

Oriana managed to take a step forward as she said, “I apologize for the late introductions. This is Rysted Jarl. He helps my father with his work. And this is...” Oriana hesitated and glanced up at Vincent, unsure of how best to introduce him.

We’re in different classes, and he’s a boy. I’m not sure if he’d feel comfortable with me calling him a friend.

Completely undaunted by the older man in front of him, Vincent cracked a smile as he noticed Oriana’s gaze. Her whole body froze.

Just guessing here, but I’m preeeetty sure no human is supposed to stare directly at a smile this dazzling, she thought.

They were standing so close that she was left flustered.

Vincent’s face was the picture of cool and composed as he said, “I’m Vincent Tanzine. Oriana and I are quite close. My father is the Amethyst Dragon Duke, and once I graduate, I will become marquess of Irides.”

“Haha, what a funny joke.” Rysted chuckled and looked at Oriana. As soon as

he realized she wasn't giving him a teasing smile, his face drained of color. He probably never dreamed she was close enough to a noble of such high stature that they'd actually accompany her to the meeting like this. Pale, he gaped at Vincent. "Don't tell me...it's actually true?"

"Yes, of course it is."

Although still dumbstruck, Rysted straightened his posture. Even Oriana's father, whose name was becoming more widely known, still hadn't gotten the opportunity to speak to anyone from a ducal house yet, and Rysted was still merely an apprentice. He froze up.

The school was a place of equality where outside status wasn't supposed to have an impact, but Rysted wasn't a student of Lagen Magic Academy. The attitude he had given Vincent a moment ago was impertinent, given he was part of the working class while Vincent was high nobility. Though Rysted had made her uncomfortable, Oriana didn't hate him so much she couldn't still sympathize, especially since she was working class, too.

As Oriana's stomach flip-flopped, Vincent grabbed her hand and lifted it up.

Huh...?

Vincent planted a soft kiss on the tip of her fingers. Her eyes went wide with shock. He glanced up at her, his lips still close to her hand as he spoke in an exceedingly polite tone. "It seems like Oriana has been troubled as of late. Since she considers you to be practically family, I thought you might have an idea as to the cause of her distress." Vincent lifted his gaze.

Oriana's face flushed as she stared down at her hand, and when Vincent looked at her, shock registered on his face for a split second. Almost as quickly, he broke out into a warm smile—the gentle kind one would only ever show their lover.

"I'm worried," said Vincent. "She's extremely precious to me."

The blush spread from her face to her entire body. Vincent Tanzine was the object of everyone's envy, and here he was, giving her the sweetest, most affectionate smile. She could hardly be blamed for turning red as a tomato.

Oriana did her best to feign composure as she glanced at Rysted. A cold sweat

was pouring down his face as he paced the room aimlessly. He seemed to want to move for the door, but alas, Vincent was standing in front of the only one in the room, so he couldn't escape even if he wanted to.

"I-I couldn't say," Rysted babbled. "If she's got something troubling her...I have no idea what it could be..."

"Oh, really? In that case, I suppose there's no need to discuss it further." Vincent wrapped an arm around Oriana's waist and stepped away from the door.

Rysted breathed a sigh of relief, like a fugitive that had finally found his escape route. "Please excuse me then," he said, hastily making his way to the door, having completely forgotten that he'd come here to meet Oriana.

"Oh, by the way..." Vincent spoke up casually, just as Rysted's hand reached for the doorknob. "If you happen to learn any clues as to what's troubling her, please inform me right away. I will be sure to deal with it accordingly."

"Your Excellency, I can only pray that no further issues crop up that might weigh on your heart."

"No," Vincent corrected, "it's not *my* heart that it will be weighing on. Can I assume you understand my meaning?"

"Yeah... I mean, yes. Of course."

"I am most pleased to hear it. Farewell then."

Despite how persistent Rysted had been in demanding she meet with him, he showed not even the slightest reluctance to part with her as he left.



THE meeting ended without Oriana being able to get a single word in with Rysted. She never dreamed he would give up without a fight. It was almost anticlimactic.

I can't believe it. After he ignored everything I said...and after how scared I was...

All it took to drive him off was for Vincent to hold her hand and say a few words. Oriana was frustrated with how powerless she felt, but she was also

relieved that relying on Vincent had turned out to be the right choice. Judging by the way Rysted fled, she wouldn't have to worry about him coming around anymore. Anyone who wanted to be a successful merchant in the future knew better than to pick a fight with one of Amanecer's Eight Dragons. Nothing could be more foolish.

Once Vincent was sure Rysted was gone for good, he politely stepped away from her. Oriana had watched the whole exchange with her mouth half-agape, and it wasn't until Vincent nudged the door completely shut that she returned to her senses.

"Uh, um..." she started to say.

"That went smoothly." Vincent motioned for her to take a seat on the nearby couch.

Even though her visitor was gone, Oriana figured they could still afford to spend a little more time in here, so she lowered herself onto the cushions. Vincent took a spot beside her.

"I am most grateful for your help," Oriana said. "I don't even know how to begin to thank you..."

She suspected having a man with her would be enough to discourage Rysted from being his usual coercive self, which was why she'd asked Vincent to come along. She never dreamed Vincent would go as far as pretending to be her romantic partner. Fortunately, since Rysted was the only one to bear witness, it shouldn't cause them any other problems. Even if he did say something to someone outside the Academy, no one would honestly believe a duke's heir was involved with a merchant's daughter. She was fairly certain it wouldn't negatively impact Vincent's reputation, but she couldn't stop herself from apologizing anyway.

Oriana bowed her head low and said, "I'm deeply sorry for making you tell such a lie. From beginning to end, I've caused you nothing but trouble."

"There was no trouble at all," Vincent replied smoothly, voice full of authority. "If anything else bothers you in the future, turn to me immediately. We're not strangers, after all."

“Right...”

Yeah, there's no way I could do that.

As if he could read her inner thoughts, Vincent smiled bitterly. “I am genuinely happy you turned to me for help.”

The way he spoke reminded her of the sunset—warm and heartrending all at once. It struck her right in the chest. It sounded as if he genuinely meant what he was saying, too.

But Mister Tanzine and I have never talked before today, have we? Suspicious as she was about it, she chalked it up to him being the duke's heir and the perfect embodiment of a gentleman. It would be silly for her to take his polite flattery to heart.

Oriana slowly lowered her head. “Hearing you say that is a great relief.” By the time she lifted her chin, he was once again sporting a strained smile.

“I’m sure he probably won’t come around anymore. After looking so pitiful in front of you, I doubt he’ll be able to achieve what he was hoping for.”

“What was he hoping for?” Oriana asked.

“To marry you and inherit your house.”

“In that case, he’d have had a better chance of marrying me by not doing this.”

If Rysted had kept to himself and maintained the relationship they already had, things would have been fine. She would have continued her innocent exchanges with him, and once she graduated, he could have proposed. Her father likely wanted that to happen anyway, and Oriana wouldn’t be able to firmly refuse him. At least, not until he showed his coercive side.

Having said all that, it was good she got to see his true colors now. It gave her the chills thinking about a man like that taking care of her for the rest of her life, trying to dictate her very way of thinking.

“Oh?” Vincent looked none too pleased.

Oriana, who had been lost in thought, flinched. She peered over at Vincent, but he held to his reputation of being calm and composed.

"In that case, he must have had a reason for thinking that this was his last chance at being able to marry you, even if the odds weren't in his favor. Any idea why that would be?"

"I have no idea... Oh! But lately, my father has gained enough success that he's able to visit with nobles now. Maybe that's the reason."

In Amanecer, even other nobles couldn't show up at parties or events without being invited. The fence separating the nobility from the working class was significantly lower than it had once been in the past, but there hadn't been any nobles eccentric enough to extend a personal invitation to a nouveau riche merchant. That had changed recently, as her father had apparently started getting invitations. His reach didn't yet extend very far, but he still worked hard, which was why Oriana pitched in to help during her long holidays.

All that said, he was still limited; he could do little more than show up to these events. Rysted must have been worried that, eventually, Oriana would be promised to some noble's son instead. Not that Oriana thought the odds of that likely at all.

"Ah, it must be my fault," Vincent mumbled.

"What?" Oriana cocked her head, confused by what he meant.

"It's nothing. More importantly, do you remember the part about rewarding me for my assistance?" He grinned.

Oriana froze for a moment. *Of course, I remember.*

Smiling, eyes half-crinkled shut, Oriana said, "Yes, Lord Vincent."

"If you truly are a merchant's daughter, then you should also remember the specific details of our contract. Or do you disagree, Oriana?" He stared at her meaningfully, lips still curled.

Oriana couldn't escape even if she wanted to. "Yes. Of course, you're right, Vincent." Resigned, she said his name without any titles this time. She hadn't missed the fact that he'd done the same to her.

Vincent let out a small noise, like a grunt, and leaned back into the cushions. His voice was quiet enough she couldn't hear it as he mumbled, "Ahh, it took so

long to get to this point."



VINCENT Tanzine awoke from his first life—or rather, came into his second life—at four years old.

After losing consciousness in one of the magic academy's lounges, he opened his eyes to find himself in a countryside house. Specifically, a familiar kid's room. His hands were far smaller and chubbier than he remembered. Instead of gripping Oriana's stone-cold body, he was grasping wooden building blocks in his hands.

It took little more than a split second for him to realize that time had rewound itself. He also knew it was up to him to break them out of this loop they found themselves in.

Vincent hadn't doubted Oriana when she spoke of her original timeline, but hearing about something was completely different from experiencing it for oneself. When she told him, he interpreted it as her having memories from her past life, but that's about as much thought as he gave it. He never realized how much more there was to it. He was no longer the same four-year-old now that he was yesterday, before he had these memories of another lifetime. Now he knew what the future held, but at the cost that no one would know the real him.

Vincent was beset by two things: a fear of the future he'd now have to face and an unfathomable loneliness. Never again would he be able to form close friendships, nor would he be able to receive Oriana's exaggeratedly affectionate overtures. He was more aware of people's circumstances and hidden motives. The seventeen-year-old Vincent couldn't get accustomed to the affection his four-year-old self received. He viewed the whole world with a darkened lens.

No longer did he revel in the praise he received when solving simple mathematical equations or the sensation of his mother patting him on the head as she spoke to him. He was more interested in discussing essays about magic circles. And of course, more than anything else, he wanted time to research the Dragon Tree.

There were many good things that happened in this third timeline—third, that

is, if he included the original one Oriana talked about that he had no memories of. This countryside house had a study with a number of forbidden tomes.

Thanks to his youth, he was able to dig through books that his older self would never have been able to touch. No one paid it any mind if a four-year-old pulled those kinds of volumes down and flipped through them. In fact, when he was buried in tomes, his mother and nursemaid saw it as a good break time and spent it idly chatting away.

After about a year of this, Vincent learned that the Dragon Tree was indeed used to curse people. But why would the very thing that gave people power, that was so revered, be so harmful to humans? Vincent tried to look into it as much as he could. He had plenty of time to think. At five years of age, he could do almost anything anyone asked of him with little effort.

Vincent recalled the day of the ball, when Oriana discussed methods of murder with Professor Heinz. *"Well, maybe I'd go for something that other mages—students included, of course—wouldn't know about."* Vincent had eavesdropped and picked up on part of their conversation. He never dreamed he'd find himself in another timeline where those words would actually be of use to him.

Vincent changed his target. A professor working at something like the magic academy would probably have more knowledge beyond what was written in books. The problem was, how would Vincent coax such information out of Heinz? Fortunately, as a child, he had more time than he knew what to do with to come up with a plan.

Not a day went by that he didn't think of Oriana. Vincent had never tasted greater despair than when he cradled her ice-cold body in his arms.

If only he'd returned sooner. If only he'd noticed something was off faster. If only he'd approached the situation with a different perspective when she warned him about his impending death.

There was no end to the regret that plagued him. However, Vincent couldn't allow himself to let his anguish weigh him down or stop him from moving forward. Oriana had gone through the same tragedy and had managed to stand up again and face it all by herself.

But this time, I'll be far more useful to her than I was last time.

Until the day came when they were reunited, he would do everything in his power to prepare.

As Vincent made progress, he waited—waited for the day he would turn thirteen and his first year at the Academy would begin.



EVERYTHING was proceeding uneventfully until a sudden turning point arrived in the form of Vincent's engagement to Sharon Beezel, which their parents arranged secretly.

One night, five days after the engagement was decided, Vincent found himself in a bumpy carriage. His parents were busy with a dinner party and wouldn't return until tomorrow morning. Vincent took that opportunity to slip away from their estate. He chose the butler Marcel to be his driver.

Vincent was free to visit the city if he so desired, but his previous seventeen years were enough to inform him of how dangerous it could be for a five-year-old child to venture outside alone. When he informed Marcel he would be slipping out in the middle of the night, the butler must have been shocked. In his past life, he never would have dreamed he'd be doing this either.

Whatever Marcel's feelings on the matter, he showed no surprise nor disappointment and merely obeyed Vincent's orders. Perhaps he was just glad Vincent was taking him along rather than sneaking out and going about it alone. In exchange for the trust Vincent had placed in him, Marcel swore to keep a tight lip about what Vincent was up to, and soon, the two were off.

Vincent's destination was the Elsha's stately mansion, constructed with the latest architectural techniques. Even though the duke's manor, passed down from generation to generation, was impressively large, this place was no less charming in its own right.

As Vincent waited for Marcel to finish making meeting arrangements, he found himself gulping again and again, stomach churning with nervous energy.

I wonder if Oriana is still awake. The two of them were the same age, which meant she was also five right now. I bet she's adorable even at this age.

In his past life—their second life—from the moment Oriana approached him at the entrance ceremony, she kept weighing on his mind. Vincent only realized much, much later that it had been love at first sight.

Maybe she'll notice I came to visit and will come out to see me...

“Apologies for the wait. The lord of the house said he will meet with you,” Marcel said.

This was an emergency visit with no advance notice, but apparently the head of the Elsha household was still willing to accommodate him. Vincent had requested that Marcel keep his status a secret to save Oriana’s father, so perhaps Marcel’s sincerity had won the house leader’s trust.

A servant led the way, guiding him up the main staircase. So as not to seem too uncouth, Vincent kept his head focused straight ahead, even as his gaze wandered and examined his surroundings. He did not spot anyone that resembled Oriana.

The servant led him not to a guest room but a study. Apparently, Oriana’s father understood the type of courtesy that should be afforded to visitors showing up in the middle of the night. Not surprising, given his line of work; he had likely dealt with all sorts of people from different statuses and industries coming at all hours of the day.

“Hello there. Welcome. Please, have a seat.” As they entered the study, Mr. Elsha stood from his seat and motioned them in.

This was Vincent’s first-time seeing Oriana’s father. He was a short, plump, and soft-hearted-looking man. Despite his small stature, Vincent sensed nothing unpleasant about him; he seemed to have a gentle, soothing aura around him. If this was all there was to the man, however, he wouldn’t have been able to accumulate such wealth in a single generation.

As the Elsha’s servant left, Marcel moved behind the couch and stood. Vincent had been pretending to be a servant himself until they were alone, but now that the need had passed, he took a seat on the couch. He sat up high

enough that his legs were left dangling, unable to reach the carpet below. Vincent had spent enough time in this body to grow accustomed to the size difference, but that didn't stop the anxiety from washing over him as he thought about what he would have to do next.

Mr. Elsha studied the two, bewildered as to why the older Marcel wasn't scolding his servant for such impudent behavior.

Vincent lowered the hood he'd been using to obscure his face. "My apologies for taking up your time. My name is Vincent Tanzine."

"You're...!" Mr. Elsha shot up out of his chair again, after having just settled into it moments ago.

In the same instant, Vincent hopped off the couch.

Mr. Elsha was utterly flabbergasted that the next heir of the Amethyst Dragon Duke was standing in his study. His warm expression changed into one of shock, but it was Vincent who was surprised by how much the man resembled Oriana.

Mr. Elsha bowed toward the five-year-old boy, no doubt taken aback by how unbelievably mature he acted for his age. "Allow me to welcome you to my humble home, Lord Tanzine."

"No, please. Call me Vincent."

Likely already accustomed to dealing with nobility, Mr. Elsha replied without hesitation, "In that case, Lord Vincent, please give me a few moments. I will have some hot tea prepared."

"Much as it grieves me not to be able to accept such a courteous gesture, I will have to take my leave momentarily," said Vincent. His way of speaking was entirely uncharacteristic of a five-year-old, but Mr. Elsha didn't seem to mind it.

Vincent didn't have the luxury of time. He quickly sat down, and Mr. Elsha soon did the same.



"WELL then, without wasting any further time, why don't we get to the heart of your business here?" Mr. Elsha spoke in such a serious tone; it was hard to believe he was addressing a five-year-old. Apparently, Vincent had won him

over by divulging his true identity. If Vincent didn't have any trust in him, he could have still made the same request without sharing his true name.

But I want to try trusting Oriana's father.

Besides, Mr. Elsha would likely live up to whatever faith Vincent placed in him, since any merchant would kill for the opportunity to establish a connection with a duke's house.

"I would like you to keep this a secret," said Vincent. "Do you know of the Beezels?"

"As I remember, they are related to you, Lord Vincent."

"Correct. These past five days, I have been looking into merchants leaving and entering the Beezels' estate, as well as anyone trying to cut a deal with them, and I discovered a product I would like to get my hands on."

Mr. Elsha listened solemnly from beginning to end.

In this lifetime, there wasn't anyone in Vincent's family who knew what was happening yet, but Vincent did, thanks to his past memories. The Beezels were stealing jewelry from their estate and selling it off. The real culprit was Sharon's mother, but the one pulling off this little heist was the young Sharon. As her mother commanded, she had carried off a case full of jewelry and taken it home with her. Vincent didn't know exactly how she had received these instructions or what she'd felt while carrying them out, but from what he'd heard in his last lifetime, Sharon thought she was merely borrowing them from Vincent's mother. Sharon's mother would secretly sell off whatever accessories her daughter brought home that same day.

The Tanzines' vault was overflowing with expensive jewelry. A few missing pieces might raise an eyebrow, but they wouldn't truly notice anything amiss for several years most likely. Even if they discovered the issue sooner, it would likely end with one of the servants being blamed for it. By selling everything off quickly, Sharon's mother could successfully maintain her innocence even if they searched her house. She planned to pin everything on the duke's servants. Alas, things wouldn't go so smoothly for her. One of the pieces Sharon stole was extremely precious to Vincent's mother—a necklace his grandmother had gifted her.

Vincent's mother was originally from a barony on the verge of collapse; they barely had any money left to their name. Even after marrying Vincent's father, the criticism from high society was so severe that she often passed time sobbing in her room in the beginning. The only one who went in to comfort her back then was her mother-in-law, Vincent's grandmother. She would comfort his mother, admonish her, and lead her so that slowly but surely, she could integrate as a member of their family.

His mother loved and respected his grandmother deeply for having created such a welcoming space for her. She cherished the necklace his grandmother had passed on to her, and naturally, since she thought Sharon would one day be her daughter-in-law, decided to show the piece to her.

In his past timeline, the adults had discussed the situation among themselves and decided not to place any of the blame on Sharon. It was the adult who was to blame, not the child, they reasoned.

The Tanzines elected not to go public with the scandal, out of consideration for the situation, but they still canceled the engagement between Vincent and Sharon. Circumstances being as they were, they decided not to share any details of the engagement or its annulment either.

Vincent had no idea how the Beezels had explained the situation to their daughter, but following the incident, she had kept a reasonable distance from Vincent. She was extremely careful, worried that any close involvement with the Tanzines might expose her family's shame.

That was why Vincent was so bewildered in his previous timeline when Sharon tried to get closer to him than was necessary. Since he was tolerant of everyone, and she was a noblewoman, he couldn't spurn her too harshly, lest it encourage her or anyone else to start sniffing for a reason why. He had no choice but to coolly engage her.

In his last timeline, it had taken them a while to discover the Beezels' treachery. That was largely because his mother frequently handled his grandmother's necklace herself. Thus, the servants thought it was safely tucked in her room, while she thought it was safely stored in their vault. It took a whole week for them to realize it was missing, and then it took another two weeks

before they deduced that the Beezels were responsible. That was more than enough time for a single necklace to be consigned to oblivion.

“Tactless as I’m sure my request may seem, once you have finished assisting me, I intend to reward you, albeit modestly.”

Nobles were loath to expose any scandals among themselves or their relatives, which was why everything had been kept under wraps. Without any cause for doubt, there was no way to investigate the matter either. The Tanzines couldn’t immediately investigate the jewels the Beezels had sold off.

To the nobility, pride was more important than money. If they had to choose between dishonoring themselves by relying on private police and detectives or dishonoring themselves by losing an accessory passed down from generation to generation, they would choose the latter.

“And after you secure this item, what would you like me to do then?” Mr. Elsha asked.

“A child has no place getting involved with matters at that point. Instead, I invite you to discuss the matter at an appropriate place with the adults of my household.” Vincent’s young face broke into a calm smile. “Don’t forget that I could have chosen anyone but specifically decided to select you for the job because I trust you to keep my involvement discreet. The duke will surely be grateful to you for your assistance.”

Things would still be wrapped up behind the scenes so that news of the scandal never saw light of day, but this would be one key way for Mr. Elsha to ingratiate himself with Vincent’s family. While Vincent’s father was a difficult man to puzzle out, one inescapable truth was that he loved his wife from the bottom of his heart.

Although the Tanzine’s extended family had been worried of word getting out about the incident, it was Vincent’s father who’d stubbornly (albeit secretly) continued the search for the missing necklace. Alas, the duke’s house resided in the light, under the authority of the law, which had no place in the shadows where black markets and the like operated. In the end, his father was never able to locate the necklace.

Vincent wondered how overjoyed his father would be to have it back in this

timeline. It was possible he might even invite Mr. Elsha to one of their dinner parties.

"If it is an item that weighs heavy on your heart, Lord Vincent, as a merchant, I am certain I can be of assistance," said Mr. Elsha.

Vincent was so relieved he almost collapsed to his knees. He was terrified Oriana's father wouldn't take a proposal from a child seriously. There was also a possibility that the Elshas already had powerful enough connections that he wouldn't be interested in establishing ties to Vincent's house. This whole thing had been a gamble, but he knew nothing would happen if he didn't try something. Yes—this was all or nothing.

"I am truly grateful that you're willing to put such faith in me." Mr. Elsha held a hand out, and Vincent shook it. Short as Mr. Elsha was, he was still an adult, and his palm felt like a giant's to Vincent. That didn't stop Mr. Elsha from giving him a tight squeeze, though. It was as if he was trying to assure Vincent that the two of them were equals.



"DOES His Grace know that you are here, Lord Vincent?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, my father is currently at the Ferveira estate, likely three sheets to the wind."

"In that case, assuming it doesn't offend you, why don't I see you off from the back entrance?"

"I trusted you would suggest as much." Vincent lifted himself off the couch. The anxiety had weighed on him so heavily before, but now his feet were so light he almost felt like he was floating on air.

Mr. Elsha made his way to the door, but as he rested his hand on the knob, he paused to look back. "One last thing..."

"Yes?"

"Might I inquire as to why you decided to bestow such an honor upon me, of all people?" He kept a smile on his lips the whole time, but his eyes were gleaming sharply.

The duke's household already had a number of merchants tied to it. Many of them would be willing to take on the same request Vincent had given Oriana's father. In fact, his father had used those same people in his last timeline trying to track down the necklace. Vincent hoped Mr. Elsha would outwit them. He wasn't putting his neck on the line and going out on a limb merely to please his own parents. It was all too clear who he was really doing this for.

"Well..." Vincent started, completely caught off guard by the question. He had acted so mature and composed up until now. Perhaps it was because this body was still too young, but he had a hard time suppressing the blood that came rushing to his cheeks. His whole face flushed as he faltered with his words.

Mr. Elsha gaped, looking the most surprised he had all day. Even Marcel, who was still standing behind the couch, was left aghast at Vincent's sudden transformation.

Vincent took several deep breaths. Even as his tongue threatened to trip him up, he mumbled, "Do you..."

"Yes?"

"...believe in love at first sight?"

Marcel's entire body swayed from the shock.

Mr. Elsha looked at Vincent pityingly as he said, "Unfortunately, my heart is still with my late wife..."

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"And I have a daughter, who will be five this year—"

"I am aware of that as well." Face still bright red, Vincent lifted his chin and was about to lash out in anger, but seeing the stupid grin on Mr. Elsha's face stopped him in his tracks. His expression soured. *You...you rotten scam artist!*

Mr. Elsha gazed warmly at the flustered boy and said, "I will be happy to fill your request. I hope the two of us can continue to have a pleasant relationship as well."

"Yes, I pray for the same."

Though the two ended the conversation there, Vincent could sense that Mr.

Elsa now viewed him in a completely different light.



THE carriage they had brought here was small and didn't carry the duke's family crest on it. Since the passenger seat and driver's seat weren't separated, Vincent plopped himself beside Marcel as the latter took the reins. The clop of horseshoes filled the air as they navigated the dark capital, the streets illuminated here and there by magic.

"You're not going to ask any questions?"

It was one thing for Marcel to be silent on the way there, but he wasn't making any queries on the way back, either. It was the perfect attitude for a servant to have; servants weren't supposed to show any interest in what their masters did. But as far as Vincent was concerned, Marcel was no servant, least of all after Marcel accompanied him tonight.

"Oh? Is there something you *want* me to ask?" Marcel said.

Vincent pursed his lips. Marcel had hit the nail on the head; Vincent wanted someone to share his worries with. If confiding in Marcel would allow him to escape his days of lonely anguish, so that the two might fight side-by-side, then he would like nothing more than that. Alas, if he actually gave into such a desire, Marcel would likely realize the gravity of the situation and take the matter to his father. Vincent would be barred from entering the Academy, and as a result of them believing his story, they would probably confine him to the house, thinking it was better than him dying at least.

And if that happened, I wouldn't be able to see Oriana.

That was one thing he had to avoid at all costs. Without Vincent there, Oriana might die by herself. Most important of all, Vincent *wanted* to see her again.

Vincent glanced up at Marcel and balled his tiny hands into fists. "It's not like the Vincent you and everyone else knew and loved is gone, but I hope you'll forgive this sudden transformation."

Vincent knew that Marcel and the other servants loved him enough to keep this little outing a secret from the duke. He could even feel Marcel's affection for him. At the same time, he knew Marcel must have realized, seeing Vincent

today, how much he had changed. He was genuinely sorry for revealing that side of himself to Marcel. He could have kept it all under wraps if he'd wanted, but he didn't, showing no hesitation in using the knowledge that came from his past life. He desperately dreamed of a future where he and Oriana could walk side-by-side.

"You have always been extremely intelligent," said Marcel. "I was actually delighted to see how much more brilliant you have become lately. Nothing brings more pride to a servant like me than being able to serve an outstanding master."

"And you don't miss how open, animated, and charming I used to be?"

"Oh? I still think you are plenty open and animated. And you don't lack for charm, either." Marcel quirked a brow at Vincent, likely remembering how flushed with embarrassment he had been only moments ago.

"About that... I'd like you to forget it ever happened," Vincent mumbled.

"What about our outing today?"

"If possible, I'd like you to put that out of your mind, too. I don't want to cause Oriana—that is, Mr. Elsha's daughter—any trouble."

Marcel snapped the reins as he mumbled to himself, "So her name is Lady Oriana, hm?" He nodded to himself.

"I promise you, I will dedicate my life to serving our house and territory."

"I am already very aware of how much you treasure your family and our people, Lord Vincent. I have been serving you since the day you were born, after all." Marcel smiled softly.

Vincent lowered his gaze.

"For now, I shall keep what transpired today to myself."

Vincent lifted his chin, eyes almost sparkling as he gazed at Marcel. He'd already calculated a 90 percent chance of Marcel reporting his excursion to his father, so this was a happy surprise.

If his father became aware that he'd pushed the Elshas into action and that the Elshas were trying to ingratiate themselves, he would likely write it off as a

waste and hold no gratitude at all toward them. Worse, he might suspect that Vincent was responsible for scheming the entire theft. His memories from his previous timeline made him privy to details even the adults didn't yet know.

"In exchange," Marcel continued, "please be sure to bring Lady Oriana to visit while I'm still working at the estate."

"What nonsense are you speaking? Even when you're so old and decrepit you can't walk without a cane, you'll still be at the estate with me; I won't ever send you off to the countryside."

"In that case, I will have to endeavor to work even harder, so that I will be able to cradle your children in these arms in the future."

"Ch-Children?! Marcel!" Vincent's cheeks burned bright red once more.

Marcel glanced at him and chuckled.



AS promised, Marcel didn't speak a word to Vincent's father. Things played out the same way they had in Vincent's previous life, with the discovery of the missing necklace and his engagement to Sharon being annulled. The one difference was that this time, the necklace was back around his mother's neck that same year. Mr. Elsha must have successfully fulfilled his end of the bargain.

Things proceeded smoothly from there and the days and months passed. When his seventh birthday came around, Vincent was finally given a room of his own; he no longer had to share one with his younger brother and sister, which came as a big relief. With more time to himself to do as he pleased, he could make even more progress with his research before his time at the Academy began.

The night of his birthday, he went to his father's study.

"There is something I would like to talk to you about."

"Hm? What's this about, all of a sudden? You want a new pony?" his father asked. He'd been nursing a glass of whiskey, but he now regarded his son's serious expression with a raised brow. He was still only in his thirties at this point, which made him resemble Vincent's seventeen-year-old self all too

closely. It was discomfiting.

“Shall I have some hot chocolate brought for you?” his father offered.

“Yes please.”

Vincent figured it was best to put his father in a good mood. He took a seat on the guest couch and waited as a servant left to fetch him some hot chocolate. The seventeen-year-old Vincent preferred coffee to hot chocolate, but the latter was more appropriate given his current age.

After a servant handed him a cup, he took a small sip and turned to his father. “I intend to enter the magic academy.”

“I figured as much.”

“And I have a proposal.”

“Yes?”

“I plan to maintain top scores so as not to bring any shame to our house. Assuming I am able to achieve results that will please you, I would like you to grant me one wish in exchange,” said Vincent.

His father eyed him curiously. “If there’s something you want, I’d be happy to grant it to you now. What is it?”

“There will be something I want after I graduate.”

“I didn’t peg you for a child who would ask for something so ambiguous and uncertain.”

His father’s astute observation threw him off. Vincent had to grab his cup of hot chocolate and use it as a shield to cover the shocked expression that briefly registered on his face.

“All right, very well then,” his father conceded. “But I have a condition.”

“What’s that?” Vincent’s joy bled through his voice unbidden even as his father fixed him with a sharp gaze.

“This wish you have, whatever it is, I will grant it for you. But just the one and no others. That seems like a fitting stipulation to have for this kind of broad agreement.”

Vincent nodded. “I have no issues with that.”

Amused by his son’s child-like response, Vincent’s father also nodded. He likely thought Vincent’s desires would change again and again with the seasons. Vincent didn’t much care what his father thought because he was always going to want the same thing.

“In that case, what kind of ‘results’ do you think might satisfy me?” his father asked.

“Since I haven’t entered the Academy yet, I honestly can’t say.”

The young Vincent hadn’t even attended primary school. Like most noble children in Amanecer, he had daily lessons with a tutor. He wasn’t supposed to know what school was like yet—not at this age, at least.

“You can decide what it is, and I will strive my utmost to accomplish it,” said Vincent. He decided it was best to leave the decision to his father, lest he stir up any unnecessary suspicion or risk his father haggling and artificially inflating his conditions.

“All right. In that case, let’s keep it simple. There are two large exams a year at the Academy. That makes ten total for the five years you will spend there. Take the number one rank in each one.”

Vincent struggled to keep his face from puckering.

His father was an alumnus of the Academy. Vincent didn’t know the exact details about his father’s grades, but despite his poor conduct, he had earned excellent marks. Vincent was told in his previous timeline that he had surpassed his father, but even so, he had never taken the top seat in their exams at any point in his five years.

It was dizzying to think of how strict these conditions were, but if he raised a fuss about it, his father might instead ask for something equally outlandish, like winning an award with an essay. Then he would be right back where he’d started.

“Very well,” said Vincent. “I will dedicate myself to fulfilling your conditions then.”

“Please do so.” Pleased, his father knocked back a glass of whiskey. “Be sure to write down your wish on a piece of paper.”

“All right, but can I entrust it with Marcel after I have done so?”

“You want to give it to Marcel?” Apparently, his father had intended to keep it himself. He hesitated for a moment but soon nodded. “Fine then. That does make things more fair. This way, I won’t be able to get in the way of your wish before you graduate. Summon Marcel then.”

One of his father’s servants, who had been standing in the corner of the room, disappeared into the hallway. Soon, Marcel stepped into the study.

“I heard you called for me.”

“I did,” said Vincent’s father. “I’ll excuse myself in a moment, and Vincent will give you a piece of paper which I want you to keep for the next ten years. I don’t care if there is a fire or flood, no matter what happens, you must keep close tabs on it to make sure nothing happens to it.”

“Understood.”

Vincent’s father gave him an ink pot, pen, and stack of papers. He then slipped off his ring, passed it over, and left the study.

Left with only Marcel as company, Vincent lifted the pen in his fingers. Marcel stood behind him silently.

“Not going to ask anything?”

“Oh? I believe you asked me the same thing before,” said Marcel.

Vincent’s sharp gaze bore into the other man. “I negotiated a deal with Father. If I can keep top marks throughout my five years at the Academy, he will grant my wish. I am going to write the details of that wish on this paper, and I want you to keep it in your possession.”

“Very well.” Marcel grinned knowingly.

Vincent wanted to snap at him, but he reined in his anger and dabbed his pen into the ink. After a moment of careful thought, he began to write.

I, Vincent Tanzine, will take Oriana Elsha as my one and only wife.

If he used any other ambiguous turns of phrase, he feared his father might find some kind of loophole. To prevent that, he wrote his wish in the simplest way possible, even though his own embarrassment at doing so threatened to swallow him whole.

Marcel peeked at the paper and said, “Are you sure you don’t want to leave out the name?”

“My mind is made up. I won’t be changing it partway through.” Anger bled through Vincent’s voice.

After making sure the ink was dry, he folded the paper in three. He poured some melted wax on the last fold and pressed his father’s signet ring into it, leaving behind the symbol that his father always used. Finally, he passed it over to Marcel.

“I want you to protect this, no matter what.”

In an exaggerated motion, Marcel accepted the document with both hands, handling it as carefully as porcelain. He quietly lowered his head and said, “I promise I shall do so.”



WHEN the night before the first day of school arrived, Vincent couldn’t sleep. He was staying at their estate in the capital, tucked snugly beneath a blanket. As he lay there restless, butterflies filled his stomach—and not all of them were due to excitement.

When I finally see Oriana again, what should I say?

If she told him, “See! I told you so. I was right, wasn’t I?” then he fully intended to apologize. If she confessed her adoration for him again, he planned to throw his arms around her.

Vincent tossed and turned again and again, but it wasn’t until dawn that he finally nodded off. He was groggy the entire carriage ride there. Marcel gave Vincent a knowing, smug grin as he bid his butler farewell and slipped through the front gates.

The last time I entered these gates, Oriana bellowed my name and came flying

at me.

At the time, Vincent had frozen up like a statue. As he thought about his thirteen-year-old self being suddenly embraced by a cute albeit unfamiliar girl, he couldn't help feeling a bit of pity for himself.

I thought that was the beginning—that I'd fall in love with her.

Well, technically speaking, he *did* actually fall for her. But he couldn't deny that the process had been complicated and unnecessarily roundabout.

Walking around the school grounds once more as a first year brought past memories rushing back. It had been nine years since he last attended, but his academy days were about to begin once more.

Nervously, he continued meandering.

When—and where—will she find me and call my name? I wonder if she managed to make it to school safely. Maybe if I could find her first...

Before the entrance ceremony commenced, he decided to head for the bulletin boards where their class lists were posted. The place was jam-packed with new attendees and their older siblings. The students were broken up into different classes based on the results of their entrance exams.

Vincent was in the Special Class. He didn't have to check to know that much already. After all, he'd been in that class last time and his grades had never fallen. He'd already been contacted by the school, in fact, because he'd placed first and they wanted him to give a speech.

As he scanned the list from top to bottom, all he saw were familiar names. Unsurprising. It would be stranger if that wasn't the case. He'd already been through this lifetime once before, so nothing should have changed.

That's why there has to be some kind of mistake, he thought. He had checked the Special Class's roster three times already. Even on a fourth check, he still didn't see it. He pressed a hand over his mouth, his mind going blank. *Oriana's name isn't here.*

Vincent didn't want to think about what that meant.

Suddenly, it floated into his vision—that milk tea-colored hair he'd so

desperately wanted to see.

“There! There it is!”

Oh, how he had longed to hear her voice once more, to see her face again. His heart seized painfully, as if someone were tightly squeezing it.

Oriana was standing beside him, gazing up at the roster. She was standing in front of Class 2’s list, where her name was written.

Vincent waited, expecting her to groan and say, “Crap, I must have filled in the wrong row on my answer sheet.” He curled his fist as he waited for her to turn her head, let that hair—which was shorter this time than he remembered it being before—flutter in the breeze as she flashed a smile at him.

But when Oriana did finally notice him, her brows furrowed in confusion as she bowed her head. “Oh, was I in your way? I’m sorry.”

“No...”

“Well, I’ll be off now. Feel free to take your time looking. Bye.”

There wasn’t even a hint of interest in her eyes. She showed nothing more than slight bewilderment before taking off. Flabbergasted, Vincent just stared after her, watching until she disappeared into the crowd.



UP until that point, one of the key things that had helped him endure was the anticipation of their reunion. But unfortunately, Oriana didn’t remember their previous life. That much was apparent.

Despair hit him square in the chest. The realization that he’d never be able to meet *his* Oriana again was utterly devastating. He’d loved every minute they had spent together. Their school days, their big fight, the dance they’d shared and even the kiss they hadn’t. It destroyed him to know that he was the only one that remembered all of these things.

So this is how Oriana felt. As much as he thought he’d understood it, he realized now that he didn’t at all. Worse, he’d felt jealous of the Vince she knew. *I’m so pathetic. And utterly worthless besides.*

As hopeless as it all seemed, the one reason he couldn’t give up and abandon

everything was, ironically, the Dragon Tree. He had an obligation to keep going until he could make sure Oriana would survive.



DURING his school days, there were of course times when he and Oriana passed one another. He noticed her in front of him once and his stomach flip-flopped. He was the most nervous he'd ever been in his entire life—his first timeline included. Vincent swallowed back his anxiety, keeping a nonchalant look on his face as he strode forward.

Oriana was growing closer, step by step.

It was almost as if the hands on the clock had slowed, until one second felt like a whole minute. His heart pounded thunderously.

Oriana had Yana and Azraq beside her, while Miguel tagged alongside Vincent. The five of them had no special connection in this life. He knew they would pass one another without pause, since there was no reason for them to do otherwise.

“And then after that, Professor Wilton...”

“You’re kidding me, right? But before, Professor Quicee...”

Oriana and Yana were happily chatting with each other. As usual, Azraq showed no emotion on his face as he followed on their heels.

Which means I’m the only one who came back with my memories intact. Vincent was so tense that he unconsciously held his breath. There’s no way she’d say anything to me. I know that. She doesn’t remember. It’s pointless to hope for—

Their eyes met. In the instant they started to pass each other, she glanced at him. The shock from it was almost enough to stop his heart as well as his feet.

It can’t be. There’s no way. It’s impossible.

Had she remembered? Maybe when she was catapulted through time, she didn’t return until after they started attending school. The possibility, however remote, made his heart tremble with anticipation.

As he stood there paralyzed, unable to even breathe, Oriana nodded at him

and tore her eyes away, passing right by him.



“Vincent?” Miguel called, concerned as to why his friend was suddenly frozen in the middle of the corridor.

His expression felt stiff as marble, but he managed to get his muscles to work. *Smile*, he commanded his face. Inwardly, he admonished his foolishness, for never before had he been so disappointed in himself. *I said, smile!*

“Sorry,” Vincent said. “I was lost in thought.” His lips curled the same way they always did. He wanted to laugh at himself for stupidly expecting the impossible.



ALTHOUGH Oriana had no memories of their time together, she was always grinning cheerfully, though never at him, unlike their past timeline. The teachers never admonished her because she never stirred up a fuss or even so much as ran in the hallways, and she had dozens of friends who all adored her.

Oriana wasn’t particularly bright. Her grades were barely on the average end of the spectrum, which of course meant she would never enter the Special Class. She didn’t seem to particularly like studying. She would show up in the study hall before exams, albeit looking none too pleased to be there. He thought it strange at first, considering how much she’d frequented the study hall in their past life, but then he felt embarrassed for not realizing she’d done it for him. At the same time, his heart filled with even more affection for her.

You studied like that just so you could be with me...

The more he learned of her grades this time around, the more appreciation he had for how much work she’d put in before.

Being in different classes, there was almost no opportunity for the two of them to interact. That was especially true since they weren’t the same gender either. Vincent finally realized the lengths she had gone to in order to keep her grades up and stay in the Special Class with him.

Since then, he’d secretly noticed her in the study room numerous times, cradling her head in her hands. Each time he found her utterly adorable.



ORIANA was popular.

He had always wondered why his first incarnation—Vince, that is—had gone out of his way to relay his feelings to her while they were still students, but the answer was obvious enough now. No matter where he spotted her, she was surrounded by a large group of friends.

Oriana was cheerful, modest, and friendly with everyone, which always made her the center of attention. Everyone relied on her. Everyone went to her for help. Vincent, of course, was not among them.

Looks like the groundwork I laid was a waste.

He remembered how he'd snuck out of the house as a child, making his way to the Elsha estate. His heart ached. The promise he'd made with his father and written on that sheet of paper would likely go unfulfilled. He'd already told Marcel to burn it. He'd only made that arrangement because he still believed their feelings were mutual. Now that he knew she didn't share his feelings, it only pained him to think of what he'd written on that paper. Love had compelled him to foolishly spin his wheels for naught.

For the first three years at the Academy, Vincent gave Oriana a wide berth. Part of that was because he was busy with other things, but he was also terrified that by getting close to her, he might unwittingly put her on track toward the same future they'd shared before—one where only death awaited her.

Oriana had held memories of their first life together, and he now held memories of their second life. This strange cycle where they came back to life as their younger self had to be connected somehow.

"Vincent! I adore you!"

He recalled how purposefully bubbly she'd acted back then. Thanks to her memories of the past, she'd had to shoulder a weight far too large for her. Part of him felt apologetic for it, but part of him overflowed with affection for her.

This Oriana was even more cheerful and upbeat thanks to her ignorance of the situation. This Oriana got to stretch her wings, giving her studies a measured effort while enjoying time with her friends. It was a side of her he

never got to see in their last timeline. It was clear: this Oriana looked happy enough even without Vincent at her side. She looked so fulfilled, always laughing with friends. It made him hesitate to approach her at all.

Oriana doesn't need me. Meanwhile, he was utterly heartbroken without her. Maybe...it's all pointless.

Part of him was relieved that he hadn't saddled her with any responsibility when she didn't remember anything, but it also hit him hard knowing he would have to let her go.

There's no telling how many times we have repeated this, forgetting each other again and again. Who's to say this is only the third time? Perhaps, unbeknownst to them, they had gone through this countless times before, and this was just one of many. In that case, I wonder if there's any end to this cycle.

Vincent shook his head, convinced that couldn't be it. *No, I have to put an end to it during this lifetime, no matter what it takes. I won't let Oriana shoulder this kind of burden ever again.*

Every time he found himself on the verge of breaking, he renewed that promise again and again.



IT happened in the summer of his third year. Vincent was walking alone in the courtyard when a voice he had so longed to hear again called out to him.

Chapter 2: A Formal Pickup Line

“HEY. Is your class over for today?”

The other students traversing the hallway broke into gasps and murmurs.

Five days had passed since Vincent drove off Rysted (Oriana's wannabe stalker). His annoyingly persistent letters and meeting requests had disappeared without a trace. Still, five days wasn't long. There was no guarantee that he was done with her. All she could do was pray he'd lost interest.

Her newfound peace was all thanks to Vincent Tanzine. But on that note...

“Oriana?”

It took a moment for her brain to register that he was calling her name. She stared back at Vincent Tanzine, slack-jawed. She was so busy trying to digest the situation, she didn't even have time to care that her robe had slipped down her shoulder.

Vincent's handsome face was no less dazzling than it had been the day before. No, worse, he seemed to sparkle even more. The way he smiled at her was almost blinding, like a little boy who had discovered a flower for the first time.

Lessons had just ended for the day, and she'd left her classroom with Yana and Azraq to head for the lounge. They had barely made it down the hall when two doors down, where the Special Class was apparently holding their lessons, Vincent suddenly stepped out and spotted her.

Everyone's eyes flew wide open as they stared at Vincent. The students still in their classrooms nearby, the students from Class 2 who filled the corridor, the students from the Special Class behind him, and even Lips, the professor of Competitive Magic, who was still in their classroom.

Unable to withstand the gazes from her peers, Oriana retreated a step and

averted her gaze. “Yes... Lessons are over today. Thank you for your help the other day. Um, if you’ll excuse me...”

Having said what she needed to, Oriana hastily fled. She couldn’t stand to be there even a second longer.



VINCENT gaped at the vacant spot where Oriana had been seconds before. For whatever reason, he found himself thinking she’d run from him.

Oriana? Run? From me?

This wasn’t an emotion he’d experienced much before. For several seconds, he couldn’t even bring himself to snap his mouth shut.

“Did *the* Mister Tanzine just talk to a female student?”

“Who was that girl? What class is she in?”

“No idea. She must be a commoner.”

“Maybe my ears are playing tricks on me, but didn’t he call her name?”

Murmurs rang out in the classrooms, drifting through the hallways. Vincent realized immediately the kind of scrutiny he was under and surveyed the area. No matter where he looked, his peers were staring straight at him, gawking.

“Welp, shall we head home?” Miguel threw his arm around Vincent’s shoulder and started walking, half-dragging Vincent away from the area.

Everyone else, save Oriana, was practically the same this time as they had been in the past. Vincent, however, had changed. The way he interacted with people and handled them was entirely different from before. He kept himself busy with his studies and researching the Dragon Tree. This had created even more distance between him and the other students than there had ever been before.

Miguel, who he’d been close with since he was a child, was the only one who shared the same relationship with him as in the past. It didn’t matter to him that Vincent had abruptly become more mature one day, or that he prioritized his studies. Miguel still stuck beside Vincent as if it didn’t bother him at all.

In his previous timeline, Vincent had taken his friend's affection for granted, but this time, he treasured it like something precious. *Not that I'll ever tell him that.*

It wasn't until they left the school building that Miguel finally peeled himself away and flashed a triumphant grin at Vincent. "So, you finally talked to her, huh?"

Vincent's jaw dropped.

"She's been on your mind for a while now, right? Oriana Elsha, that is."

"You noticed?" Vincent gasped.

"Duh."

Duh? Does he mean it was really that obvious?

Vincent resisted the urge to groan. He didn't want to think his feelings were that transparent to those around him. It made him worry about how many other people knew his secret, but there was something more pressing that had his attention.

"...She ran from me."

"Yes, I saw," said Miguel.

"Why? We know each other now."

"I mean, isn't the whole reason you couldn't work up the guts to talk to her because you didn't want this to happen?"

Vincent was dumbstruck. It had never crossed his mind, not even for a second. He had watched over her from the moment he entered the school. There wasn't a day he didn't think about her, but he'd also never had any intention of doing anything either.

I don't need you to love me anymore. Just stay alive. That was what he tried to tell himself. Or rather, what he had told himself for the past three years.

But I could only do that so long as you didn't talk to me—didn't smile at me.

Oriana had pulled him in effortlessly. He wanted to see himself reflected in her eyes, to talk to her, to slip into her world.

“Yes. Of course, you’re right, Vincent.”

The second she’d said his name, he was prepared to put in the effort to overcome his own weak-willed nature. It was hard to believe he had avoided proximity with her for so long, but now he suddenly slipped on a dime, vowing to stay beside her and find a way to escape their fate.

There was no way he could ever let go of her again.

And yet...reality is unavoidable. Vincent slowly slid down into a crouch, covering his face with one hand. *I never meant to get close to her, but I’m sure somewhere deep down, I figured there might be a possibility once we were acquainted.*

Vincent had never forgotten about her, not since the day she first called out to him during their entrance ceremony in his last life. But this Oriana wasn’t like him; she didn’t get carried away by him striking up conversation, didn’t think about him all the time like he did her. Reality had come at him with its fists at the ready, and it was merciless.

“I don’t know where to draw the line...” he mumbled.

“What line?” Miguel asked. “This is only your second time having a proper conversation with her, right? Then she’s still a stranger.”

Vincent’s eyes went round as he stared up at Miguel. The word *devastated* was practically written on his forehead.

This is technically our third lifetime together. I was sure there had to be something—invisible, maybe—some kind of bond that connects us. That would be convenient, right? He wanted to laugh at himself for being so naive. No. *The one who created our bond, who did all the work in our relationship, was Oriana.*

Oriana had always smiled at him. No matter how cold he was to her, she stayed loyally at his side. How hard must it have been for her to smile even as he acted indifferent toward her—or, more accurately put, spurned her completely?

How barbaric of me.

If he could return to their previous timeline, he would change it so that he

never once rebuffed her. These regrets that he carried with him were like knives digging into his heart.

Oriana found her own way to approach me back then.

She'd done so very effectively, too. She had dedicated herself to her studies so they could spend more time together. In order to stay close, she even made an open show of her affections for him. That was the best route she could have taken.

Vincent, however, could not do the same. As the duke's eldest son, he prized obligation and tradition over all else, and his position required him to lead a disciplined life. There were other people whose lives he had to shoulder and protect besides Oriana.

As the one destined to inherit the duke title in the future, he couldn't purposefully let his grades fall simply so that he could be around a girl he liked. Besides, it was a clear violation of the etiquette a man was expected to afford a woman he didn't know very well. Even assuming they were well-acquainted, if she didn't welcome his advances, then they would only instill fear in her, much like Rysted had.

The Oriana from before had stuck to him like glue, but Vincent hadn't ever found it discomforting. Even if she had ever managed to incur his wrath, he was in a position of power where he could force her back, much like he had with Rysted. Vincent overshadowed Oriana when it came to physical strength, intelligence, grades, and even status, which made it all that much more important for him to be exceedingly cautious.

From the moment he was born as the duke's heir, Vincent found himself blessed with far more special privileges than most people enjoyed. Vincent never purposefully flaunted any of it, but he wasn't such a coward that he'd hesitate to make use of it when the situation called for it. He'd shown no compunction in pulling Rysted into his world and driving him out with nothing more than a smile.

It really is a good thing she reached out to me for help.

If there was someone vying for her hand in marriage this time around, that meant there must have been in their last life too. He could hardly believe she'd

never informed him of as much, but at the very least, he didn't know of her ever having problems with a stalker before. That could only mean his actions had somehow triggered a change in their future.

Her father only had a connection with the nobles now because, when Vincent was younger, he made a request of Mister Elsha. The merchant's efforts had apparently borne fruit in the intervening years since. Pleased as he was that the Elshas had formed ties with his own house, Vincent felt terrible that his actions had caused her to experience something so terrifying. He was only glad he found out and was able to help her before it was too late.

I finally managed to get her to call me by my name again...and yet I still have to keep her at even more of a distance than anyone else?

Vincent pressed his face into his hand again. Something terribly bitter rolled across his tongue, and he swallowed hard. His entire face puckered in anguish. "Why doesn't she like me?"

"Yikes, creepy much? That's a pretty terrifying thing for the future Amethyst Dragon Duke to think."

"Why?" Vincent pursed his lips and eyed Miguel.

At this rate, he'd be no better than Rysted. The two of them had only talked a little. The last thing he wanted was to become another one of her stalkers.

"It's pretty normal that she doesn't like you. First, you gotta become friends, then you can... Well, I guess before that, you gotta get her to think of you in a romantic light."

Vincent gawked at his friend. If there was anything that separated him and Vince (and there were several), it was that Oriana already loved him from the moment they met and had pursued him. He'd never known what it felt like to start from scratch and be the pursuer.

"Now I see. That makes sense." Vincent hung his head.

The reason he'd started in such a favorable position in his last life was thanks to none other than Vince, who had worked hard to win over Oriana's affections.

No matter how much time passes, I can never even seem to hold a candle to

Vince.

Finally, he lifted his head. “So what you are saying is that it’s my turn to put effort in.”

Up until this point, he had poured everything he had into studying and investigating the Dragon Tree in hopes of preventing her death in the future. Now, at the same time, he would have to endeavor to become her friend and win her affections.

This is completely out of my field of expertise.

Vincent glanced up at Miguel. Luckily for him, that was exactly his friend’s area of expertise. Much as it pained him, he reluctantly asked, “What do you think I should do?”

Miguel slipped a lollipop out of his sleeve. As he peeled off the wrapper, he hummed under his breath. “Well, if you’re going to meet her at her level, then you should probably avoid talking to her in front of other people and take things slow. Elsha strikes me as the type that doesn’t like to stand out.”

To Vincent’s surprise, Miguel was far more reliable than he’d expected. Never before had he thought of his friend as such a solid source of advice. Perhaps much like him, Vince had revered Miguel as a teacher of sorts. After all, this couldn’t have been Vince’s area of expertise either, of that much Vincent was sure.

“All right. I’ll give that a try,” Vincent said, nodding earnestly.

Without saying a word, Miguel held out an orange sucker, which Vincent quietly accepted.

As a bit of an aside, since Vincent had crouched down and started moping at the entrance to the main school building, that meant all the other students couldn’t leave even if they wanted to. Instead, they were left to wander aimlessly through the halls, waiting for him to move.



“**ORIANA**, when in the world did you manage to tame one of Amanecer’s Eight Dragons?” They had left the main school building and were walking

through the courtyard when Yana posited her exaggerated question.

Oriana was completely taken aback. Hearing the way her friend spoke of the matter made her realize the gravity of the situation.

“Um... He just helped me out with a little something recently...”

As far as she was concerned, it was a one-and-done sort of thing. She couldn’t even begin to fathom why he’d casually struck up a conversation with her as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Is this his way of telling me I need to pay him back properly?

He’d given her the condition before that she had to call him “Vincent,” which she’d hesitantly agreed to. Since they had never had any reason to interact with each other before, she figured she’d never have any reason to call him by that name again. But still, if the opportunity did ever present itself, she planned to honor his request, even if others were present and she’d die of embarrassment in the process. That was just Oriana’s nature, to hold true to any promise she made.

Oriana was sure that quibbling about paying him back and owing him, thereby continuing their relationship, would only cause complications for Vincent. He was the duke’s son, after all. That was why she chose not to bring it up any further, but did he actually *want* her to make good on her word?

Oriana was a merchant’s daughter. While the nobles were taught to give charity to any who sought help, she had learned differently. Children of merchants were told that when they asked for favors, they were to return it two-fold. The upper crust would probably look down on such lessons as inconceivably crude.

“Azraq. You’re in the same year as us, and you’re a boy. Do you...know anything...? About Vincent, I mean,” Oriana said.

Neither Yana nor Azraq ever really let emotion show on their faces, but they were now both gawking at her. They probably couldn’t believe that Oriana had used his name without any titles.

If there was a hole, I’d want to crawl into it. No, screw it. I’ll dig one myself if I have to.

"You just said he did you a 'small' favor 'recently,' but you're already calling him by his first name? No Mister, no Master, no Lord in front of it? Hm-hm?" Yana's probing gaze might as well have been a magic beam for how much it bore into her.

Oriana yanked up her textbooks, which were secured together by a band, and used them to shield herself from her friend's watchful eye. "Th-There was a lot that happened. It's complicated!"

That didn't explain anything.

While Oriana fumbled with excuses, Yana furrowed her brows and placed a suggestive hand over her mouth. "Won't you tell little ol' me what this is all about?"

"I'll spill my guts to you." The moment she saw her friend's glossy, teary eyes, Oriana pressed a hand over her chest and bent a knee.

The edges of Azraq's lips curled into a grin. No one could blame Oriana for caving; even a woman was no match for a beautiful woman's tears.

Oriana stretched her legs out before awkwardly beginning her explanation. "To tell the truth...I've been having a bit of trouble back home with this super persistent guy. Vincent happened to be walking around nearby at the school, so I went to him for help. And then the two of us just started calling each other by our first names, I guess."

Normally, two people had to get better acquainted before they reached that step, but Oriana and Vincent had cut that process short. The problem was that Oriana had no idea what his motivations were for asking her to call him by his name, and she wasn't confident that she could explain whatever logic had compelled him either.

The name issue wasn't what caught Yana's attention, however. She scowled and said, "A persistent guy... I never heard anything about this. Since when? He didn't do anything to harm you, did he?"

"I didn't tell you because he's not from the Academy, and he's not a total stranger to me. But anyway, he'd come to hunt me down if I left the grounds, or he'd come here directly to request a meeting. Azraq is always close by when

you're around, which is why he never approached in front of you."

"If he was avoiding other men, that's proof of a guilty conscience. If you ever face something like that again, don't hesitate to tell me about it," Azraq cut in with a hardened expression. It was rare for him to ever insert himself into their conversations.

"Exactly, Oriana. Being acquainted with someone doesn't mean you should let your guard down with them," Yana said in a strict tone. That was unusual for her too, given how she was normally like a fairy dancing in an oasis—cheerful and mischievous.

The disparity between men and women was far greater in Yana's native Ete Karima than it was in Amanecer. Yana knew far better than Oriana how terrifying a man with absolute power could be. But it was for that very reason that Oriana couldn't bring herself to tell Yana about Rysted.

"I can't believe I've been oblivious this whole time to how frightened you were," Yana mumbled.

"I'm sorry. I figured it would only worry you."

"I would rather know and be worried," Yana said, speaking from the heart.

Oriana knitted her brows. "You're right. I really am sorry. I swear next time, I'll definitely tell you."

"Be sure that you do. Why do you think I brought Azraq all the way here from Ete Karima?"

"For your own sake, of course," Oriana quipped.

Yana and Azraq smirked.

Oriana was sure that Yana would do whatever was in her power to help if Oriana was in danger. Whether she could actually accept the kindness of Ete Karima's princess was a different story, but as a friend, she was grateful for the sentiment.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there with you when you needed me." Yana gave a pained smile.

Oriana grabbed her friend's hand and squeezed. She had never tried to

reaffirm her friendship with someone like this before, not even as a child, but now she felt guilty for having hidden something from her friend. So, even though she found it embarrassing to do, she shook her friend's soft, slender hand and said, "You have nothing to apologize for. In fact, when you and Azraq were with me, I wasn't scared at all. Maybe it wasn't calculated, but you were a big help in a clever way."

"Ahaha." Yana giggled as she watched Oriana wave their locked hands back and forth. The smile on her face looked more relieved than Oriana had expected.

Oriana stopped swinging her arm and started stroking the back of Yana's hand. After a moment, she strengthened her grip and pulled Yana toward her, burying her face in Yana's shoulder. "I swear I'll come to you for everything. Please let me do that." She must have sounded even more juvenile than she realized because she managed to elicit another giggle from Yana.

"Not everything. You can at least keep the number of times you wet the bed a secret."

"Then I'll also keep the number of times you have fallen off the top bunk a secret too."

"Oh dear." Yana glared at her, though it wasn't the least bit intimidating. The two broke out into laughter.

Azraq watched the pair with a gentle gaze.



VINCENT and Oriana shared neither classes nor the same gender, and they weren't involved in any clubs. All of their electives were different too. Vincent was constantly dropping by either the library or study hall, which Oriana scarcely visited. Oriana preferred lounges filled with people, while Vincent gave such places a wide berth.

There were absolutely no opportunities for the two to meet, but because they attended the same school, it wasn't as if they never saw each other. Plus, they were more aware of each other's presence than ever before.



“UGWAAAH...” The voice that spilled past Oriana’s lips didn’t resemble coherent speech at all.

She had forgotten something at the botanical conservatory during one of today’s lessons, and it wasn’t until the evening that she realized her blunder. The class had taken place in the afternoon, and she’d been in a hurry to reapply her lipstick. In the process, she had apparently dropped it.

Though it was late, Oriana might barely make it in time before the conservatory closed. She was supposed to go with Yana to the dorm lounge so they could work on their reports, but instead she was venturing off alone to the conservatory.

Fortunately, it seemed the presiding teacher, Professor Heinz, was still inside. The conservatory was enormous, so even from far away, it was easy to see whether the lights were still on. The magical lamps inside glimmered like sparkling stars, illuminating the glass walls.

Oriana dove inside like a batter trying to make home base. Knowing Professor Heinz, he would likely be exasperated at her lack of etiquette, but at least he wouldn’t be mad at her. Hence why she opted for the theatrics—just to make sure she was in time before closing hours.

That brings us to the present and the reason for her unintelligible “ugwaah,” which even she hadn’t anticipated escaping her own lips. She cleared her throat and said, “G-Good evening, gentlemen. The stars sure are beautiful out there, am I right?” She tried to sound as ladylike as she could.

Professor Heinz stared at her and broke out into a fit of coughs.

He must have caught a cold, Oriana assumed.

He turned his back toward her, shoulders trembling.

The coughing must be really painful. Yeah, that has to be it.

Vincent stared at her blankly, but as soon as he saw the awkward expression on her face, he broke into a smile.

Meeting him like this was a bit uncomfortable, especially after how she’d run from him only a few days ago. Either he hadn’t noticed or it hadn’t bothered

him at all because he didn't mention it, instead speaking to her like everything was normal.

"Indeed. Is something the matter?" Vincent asked, sounding even more like a teacher than their professor. "It's awfully late."

Oriana fidgeted like an abashed student and said, "I, um, forgot something..."

"You did? You forgot it here?"

"Probably."

"Well, I hope you are able to find it."

"Yeah. Yeah..." For some reason, Oriana repeated herself, though even she wasn't sure why. She took slow, sliding steps away from him.

For some reason, I feel super nervous around him.

Professor Feliz, who was in charge of Magic Kahn Rune classes, was infamous for being the most terrifying teacher at Lagen Magic Academy, but Oriana was far more nervous around Vincent than Professor Feliz.

As the name implied, the botanical conservatory was filled with an endless number of plants. It didn't take but a few steps for her to successfully duck behind them and hide herself from Professor Heinz and Vincent's view.

Inwardly, Oriana panicked over what she might say if they asked her what she'd forgotten, but that turned out to be a needless fear. She managed to keep herself hidden among the plants as she retraced her steps from earlier that day.

"How long do you plan to keep snickering like that, Professor?"

There were no walls to divide the vast space inside the conservatory, so it was all too easy to eavesdrop on Vincent's conversation.

"I mean, you can hardly blame me. Elsha looked like a puppy who'd just had its tail stepped on. Pfft... Ahem, excuse me. I apologize for making you do my job for me, my prize pupil."

Darn it! So he was laughing at me. He's a disgrace to teachers everywhere. Who are you calling a pup, huh?! I was just a little surprised, that's all. Sure, I made a funny, stupid sound, but still!

As Oriana moped, she started peeking through the leaves of the plants, trying to find where she might have dropped her lipstick. It was tucked into a seashell compact. The makeup itself not only had dye in it but also a bunch of moisturizing components as well, which was why she was so fond of it. She had treasured the tiny shell case, but now that she'd misplaced it, it was turning out to be impossible to find.

"Digressions aside, let's return to our topic," said Vincent. "About these support patterns and the inputs for them..."

"I have told you numerous times already, I'm no expert when it comes to magic circles. If you've got a question about that, I wish you'd take it to Professor Quicee."

Apparently, Vincent had come here to ask Professor Heinz questions.

Seriously? I figured if he was here at this time of night, it'd be because he forgot something too... No, I guess that's not likely, huh?

Vincent Tanzine was a flawless superhuman. Or at least, it was pretty standard to hear people at the Academy refer to him that way. Not only did he have a perfect pedigree, face, and grades, but he'd also never once gotten sick since he enrolled. It was as if he was a masterpiece created by the gods.

In Oriana's year, one person had consistently remained at the top academically, and that was Vincent Tanzine. No one had ever dethroned him once in these past three years. He'd taken first in every exam.

To think even someone like him had come here at such a late hour to speak with a teacher... It almost made her think of them as comrades, but she immediately scolded herself. *No... It's probably precisely because he's still dedicated to his studies even at this late hour that he's in first place.*

The notion that they were from entirely different worlds was gradually becoming more solidified in her mind. There wasn't anyone in her class as dedicated to studying as he was. Most figured if they could skate by with decent grades and have a relatively enjoyable school life, they were doing pretty good for themselves. Oriana was in the same camp.

Seriously, I'm sorry for ever entertaining the idea that we might be similar.

As she inwardly apologized, Oriana crouched down and began a careful search for her missing lipstick.



IN the conservatory, there was a space for students to gather for a light lecture. It was an alcove—a small, semi-circle space with nothing else in it—with just enough benches that a single class could barely squeeze in together.

Oriana managed to locate the spot she'd sat in earlier that day. For good measure, she checked both under and behind the bench. In the small crevice between the bench and a potted plant, she finally found her missing compact. Relieved, she stretched for it and snatched it up before tucking it safely into the folds of her sleeve.

"And so, keeping the future in mind, I think the rune for 'revolve' would make the simplest magic circle, and the students could also mass-produce it."

"In that case, what about the rune for 'leg'? Even assuming you did employ 'revolve' to specify a support pattern's movement, it wouldn't be compatible, would it?"

"Hence the need to break the experiment into steps and—"

From the alcove, Vincent and Professor Heinz's conversation continued to trickle into her ears. Both wore solemn expressions, peeking down at a sketch that was spread out across one of the garden tables.

Oriana didn't think it was a good idea to continue eavesdropping or to interrupt them, so she decided instead to make herself scarce and disappear entirely.

"Did you find it?"

"Yessuh?!"

Vincent's question surprised her so much that her reply came out garbled. When she glanced back at him, he still hadn't even lifted his gaze from the sketch on the table.

How did he notice me? I was tiptoeing and moving slow and quiet as a turtle.

As if entirely unconcerned by her surprise, Vincent put a hand on his chin, not

even bothering to look at her before saying, “It really is terribly late. I can walk you back. It won’t take me much longer. Would you mind waiting there a moment?”

“Uh, sure...”

Although he posed it as a question, it sounded more like a command to her ears, as if the only options he’d accept were yes, yeah, and yep. *But it’s not like the girls’ dormitory is that far. I could make it there in the blink of an eye.* They were born into different classes and had different values, so it wouldn’t benefit her much to say that to him, which was why Oriana wisely swallowed the words back down. There was nothing wrong with her return being delayed a couple more minutes.

As Vincent promised, he quickly ended his exchange with Professor Heinz and rolled up the sketch, carrying it in his arms as he made his way over to where Oriana was seated on a bench, waiting. “Apologies. Let’s be on our way.”

“Not at all. I should be the one apologizing for taking up your time.” Oriana stood and dusted off her skirt. She bowed her head, and by the time she lifted her chin again, she noticed a small smile curling the edges of his lips.

“That’s hardly anything to apologize for.” His cheerful reply caught her off guard.

“I realize this may be stupid to even bring up, but I’ll say it anyway: you’d better not make a pass at her after playing the gentleman and escorting her home,” Professor Heinz teased. He made sure the doors were firmly shut behind them before giving his two students a hand wave.

“I swear on the Dragon, I will deliver her safely,” said Vincent.

Oriana returned the gesture with a wave of her own. “Sorry for barging in on you so late!”

And with that, she and Vincent left the conservatory.

Though it was dark outside, Lagen Magic Academy didn’t lack illumination at night; there were a number of lamps along the path outside to guide them. If

that wasn't enough, they also had a magic lantern to light the way ahead.

As fellow students who had only spoken maybe once or twice, they maintained an appropriate distance between themselves as they walked. Each step forward, the magic lantern would bounce, causing the shadows on the ground to dance.

"How have things been since I saw you last?" Vincent asked.

"Thanks to you, I have spent my days in relative peace." Oriana intuitively knew what he was referring to, but because she was still so nervous around him, her answer came out awkward and stiff, as if she was talking to a professor. She cleared her throat and tried again, this time infusing her words with all the gratitude she felt. "He's completely stopped with the letters and meeting requests. Seriously, thank you for your help."

"He's not shown any resentment toward you for it?"

"Not at this point, no. Although, I'm sure I'll see him again when I go back home. It may be a little awkward for a bit..."

"I see. But at least you have been safe in the meantime. That's good to hear. If anything were to happen, it would be my responsibility. Please come to me immediately if anything happens to crop up."

"Thank you." She smiled at him politely.

Slowly, Vincent continued, "It was perfect timing, meeting you at the conservatory like that. There's something I want to ask you." Much to her surprise, it was Vincent who sounded nervous this time.

Oriana cocked her head. "Yes, what is it?"

"How far is too far?"

"Whahuh?" Oriana's feet froze in place. Depending on the time, place, and tone of speech, that question could be interpreted in a number of arguably suggestive ways. Not to mention that it was dark out, and there was no one else in their immediate vicinity.

"Uh, so you mean...the two of us? Right here, right now...?" Oriana asked. It went without saying that she couldn't be blunt and ask him if he was soliciting

her. Moments ago, when Professor Heinz teased him, Vincent had been most earnest in swearing that he would see her home safely. But now that seemed at odds with their current situation.

I'm sure I must have misunderstood. He'll probably go, "Pardon? Of course that's not what I meant." Yeah, that's it. And then I'll—

"Precisely."

Oriana was in the midst of contemplating how she'd respond next when he interrupted her, leaving her utterly flabbergasted.

...Huh? He looks totally upright and prim and proper, like he's never done a single impure thing in his life. Is he seriously propositioning me right now?! Oriana's jaw dropped.

Vincent gazed straight into her eyes. "I will follow your rules."

"Huh?"

Uh, no. I'm not so experienced at this kinda stuff that I have rules. I mean, I'm still a virgin. Wait...what's going on?! Should I have had my guard up?

Oriana quickly spun her head around, surveying the area. If he pulled her into the nearby bushes and tried to have his way with her, she'd be powerless to stop him. But even though Vincent was gorgeous, had an excellent pedigree and grades, she didn't value herself so little that she would go along with him without a second thought.

"You speak with me normally now, but you don't like it when I try to talk to you in front of people, correct?" Vincent asked.

"...Wha? Hm? Oh! I see now. So that's what this is about. Yes, yes, Oriana. Now you finally get it." Oriana mumbled the last part more at herself than at him. She used the sleeve of her robe to mop up the sweat on her face, relieved. It was fortunate she didn't blurt out what she was thinking and reveal how silly and overly self-conscious she'd been, completely misunderstanding his intentions.

"What was that about?" Vincent quirked a brow.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all..." Oriana quietly shook her head, ashamed of the

embarrassing thoughts she'd entertained.

"You ran off on me when I spoke to you recently, remember?"

Oh. So, he did realize. Well, of course he did. Yes. I'm sorry about that.

Vincent gave a strained smile, apparently sensing her panic from the expression on her face. "If you could tell me what about it bothered you specifically, I would be happy to make adjustments."

That probably meant he planned on talking to her again in the future, right? Bewildered as to what kind of relationship he was hoping for from her, Oriana hesitated.

If I tell him exactly what bothered me, he'll make changes? Vincent Tanzine—the perfect human being—was willing to accommodate her? It wasn't as if she knew much about him herself, but from the rumors she'd heard, he seemed utterly flawless and beyond reproach. And yet he's going out of his way? To change himself for me?

Dozens of question marks popped up above her head.

Why?

It was a simple, clear-cut question. Why? That word alone summed up her confusion. After all, she and Vincent weren't close enough for him to say such a thing to her.

"Do you not like me talking to you?" he asked.

"Huh? Uh, no it's not that..." Oriana inwardly admonished herself, *Well, if it's not that, then what is it, huh?*

"Then you don't mind if I talk to you?"

"Uh, um... Weeell..."

Oriana never dreamed he was the type to cut straight to the point with someone he barely knew. She was so at a loss that it was all she could do to hum under her breath as she contemplated.

Why is he so persistent? Is he interested in me or something? No, come on. That can't be it. Oriana chewed on her bottom lip and closed her eyes, brows

furrowing. *Is there something else to this? Does he stand to gain anything by getting close to me—to my family?*

Thus, Oriana began an internal debate in her mind. Up until this point, she hadn't even dedicated one percent of her thoughts to Vincent Tanzine, but that was changing.

I can pretty much tell when someone approaches me because they're interested in Daddy's money. I'm also used to dealing with those types by now, but I get the feeling that's not his motive. Besides, he's from a ducal house, and I've never heard anything about them having financial problems. Then again, I guess such rumors wouldn't even make it to my ears until things got really bad.

To be entirely honest, Oriana was neither interested in high society nor Vincent as a person. Vincent was handsome, intelligent, and had impressive status, but it was also for those very reasons that he seemed to be in an entirely different world. Oriana didn't even entertain the idea of wanting to exist there with him.

As for the issue with Rysted, she had already paid Vincent back for that favor as he'd requested. Oriana had thought the whole reason he had her call him by his first name like that was because he didn't want to be involved with her any further once the matter was finished. It made sense; Oriana Elsha was a commoner in Class 2, while Vincent was the heir to one of Amanecer's eight great noble houses and top of their grade. They weren't even in the same universe.

You'd never put a snail in with a tropical fish, would you? I mean, okay, yeah. A snail does a good job cleaning a fishbowl, and it is actually pretty cute in its own way, but still.

Oriana recalled the fish tank they had back home. Lately, the upper class had developed a hobby of keeping such tanks, which could be perfectly controlled through magic. She imagined a colorful tropical fish swimming freely through the water, and beside it, a plain, old snail.

While she was lost in thought, Vincent stared at her. He waited patiently, never trying to rush her response. It made Oriana feel even more embarrassed for only thinking of herself.

"Mmm... I feel awful making you wait like this," she said.

He was under no obligation to show her such consideration, but he was being a perfect gentleman. Oriana felt terrible for keeping him hanging, which made her all the more eager to give him a proper answer. But the way she couldn't help but suspect him of ulterior motives made it so that she couldn't very well give him a sincere reply.

Yeah, I know. Racking my brain like this isn't going to get me anywhere.

Having made up her mind, she returned her gaze to him. "I'm sorry. I am having trouble digesting the situation. Would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"Of course. You are more than welcome to."

"Well, V-Vincent. What exactly are you wanting from me? Why do you even need to talk to me ever again?" Perhaps that had been a little too blunt; Vincent gawked at her, taken aback.

He sucked in a breath before saying, "It seems a shame not to become better friends after we've already gotten acquainted."

"Excuse me for being so crass by asking all these questions, but I hope you'll humor me a little longer. Why me? I don't feel like I have anything of value to offer you."

That wasn't depression or anything of the like talking, and she wasn't fishing for compliments either. It wasn't like she wanted him to reassure her that she had something of value to offer—she knew better than that, realistically.

It's just...I don't know what he wants, and that makes things kinda scary.

Vincent Tanzine was like the walking embodiment of good moral conduct, and for that very reason, she couldn't help but find him absolutely intimidating. Standing beside him, her whole body seemed to tremble with anxiety, making her a bit restless.

Vincent snapped his mouth closed. He seemed to seriously contemplate her question for several seconds before quietly replying, "If you wish for me to weigh the pros and cons, please allow me a bit more time. I will give it careful

consideration, summarize my thoughts, and hand it over for you to look at.”

“...Huh?”

He didn’t bother trying to dance around the question, nor did he dismiss what she was saying. He answered earnestly. That was probably the best response he could have given, at least from Oriana’s standpoint. At the same time, she never imagined she’d find someone who’d speak so candidly about the pros and cons of associating with other people. She froze in place.

In relationships, it was natural for people to want to obfuscate the merits they did or didn’t receive from associating with one another. The thought of creating a detailed analysis of that genuinely left her gobsmacked.

“If I’m able to demonstrate how we would both stand to gain, would you be willing to become my friend?”

Vincent’s words repeated in her mind on a loop, until their meaning finally sank in. She blinked at him several times. “That’s...what you want? A friend?”

“Well...yes, I suppose so. I want to get close to you. You have many friends already, yes? I’m afraid I’m not so fortunate. The only person I can proudly call my friend is Miguel. If I could add you to that list as well, I would be most—”

“S-So that’s it...” The tension fled Oriana’s body like air rushing out of a popped balloon. She swayed dangerously, and in a panic, Vincent thrust his hands out to support her by the waist. “Sorry. I was just so shocked. So that’s what this was all about... Can’t believe how silly I was being. Thank you.” Grateful he’d kept her from falling over, Oriana peeled herself away from him, feeling unfathomably upbeat and cheerful all of a sudden.

Now it makes sense. It’s true, Vincent doesn’t have many friends. Ferveira is the only one I can think of. Can’t believe how carried away I got. For as perfect as he seems on the outside, I guess even Vincent Tanzine wants some friends.

Oriana was embarrassed at herself for having overthought the situation. She was so sure he had to have some kind of ulterior motive for wanting to get close to her just because he was a noble, a genius, and popular besides.

Yeah, now that I think about it, he’s no different from me. He’s just a fifteen-year-old boy. Or wait, is he?

Now that she'd gotten over her initial reaction, Oriana turned to Vincent with a relaxed expression. "When is your birthday?"

"Pardon? It's at the end of spring."

"Then that means you're fifteen right now."

"Is knowing my birthday necessary for us to become friends?"

"No. It's just...I finally realized you're a normal fifteen-year-old. Just like me," Oriana said with a grin.

For an instant, Vincent's face went blank, but Oriana didn't notice since she was busy bowing her head.

"Sorry. I let my crazy thoughts get the better of me for a bit there. If you're fine with someone as plain as me, then I would be happy to be friends."

"You—" Vincent cut himself off, his expression turning serious. His voice hardened with determination, as if he was swearing something to himself. "I am proud to be able to call someone like you a friend. I will do my utmost to be someone you can also be proud of. Thank you."

He held out his hand toward her, and though she accepted it, she stared at it blankly at first. She soon grinned up at Vincent, hoping to soften his stiff expression. "If we're going to be friends from now on, don't you think this is a bit exaggerated? I think 'thanks' is more than enough."

"Oh, my apologies. Thanks, then."

"And thank you as well, Vincent."

His hand twitched in hers for a brief instant, but he soon tightened his grip. Oriana did the same, returning the friendly gesture.

Chapter 3: A Normal Friendship

THE past few years at Lagen Magic Academy had been full of surprises. Everyone without exception, from first to fifth years, had their dumbfounded gazes drawn to the same exact spot.

The study hall was normally completely deserted, but today, it was overflowing with people. Oriana could safely say it was the most attention she'd ever been paid in her entire life. She could hardly believe how many people's eyes were locked on her as she wetted her pen with ink.

When she glanced up, she got a glimpse of a figure sitting beside her, one she still hadn't gotten quite used to seeing. His hair was glimmering and golden, and beneath those long lashes, his amethyst eyes were focused on the report in front of him. The gazes of other people didn't seem to draw his attention at all, but the moment she looked at him, he paused what he was doing to peer over at her.

"What is it? Is there a part you don't understand?"

"Uh, yes. I mean, no."

This isn't the kinda situation where I can just blurt out the truth and tell him I don't understand a lick of this.

Vincent had tried to show due consideration by not associating with her in front of other people, but they could hardly be called friends if they kept that up. Oriana had resolved herself to be a proper friend, which meant tearing down those barriers and accepting all that came with it. In other words, she had mentally prepared herself for the whole school to become aware that she and Vincent Tanzine were friends.

But I never dreamed it would have this big of an impact.

Her name instantly spread throughout the entire school. Even the first years knew who she was now. Vincent Tanzine was infamous for having an

impregnable wall around him, and since she was the first friend he'd ever made, her name resounded through the halls louder than a crack of thunder.

Everyone was intent on watching her every move to figure out how she'd managed to win Vincent over. The pressure was so intense her pen trembled all over the place, leaving inky splotches on her report paper.

"You don't gotta be so scared. Not like they're gonna swallow you up or anything," said Miguel Ferveira. He wore a wry smile as he sat diagonally from her, putting him straight across from Vincent.

This was only the second time she'd ever spoken to Miguel. The first was in a lounge after dinner one day, but that was brief. Today marked the second; Vincent had invited her to study with him and Miguel. Although Oriana typically avoided studying on a regular basis, she reluctantly threw herself into it for the sake of cultivating her friendship with Vincent.

"It's not like I'd go quietly and let them if they tried," she assured Miguel. "It's just that I never imagined I'd get this much attention." Unlike Miguel and Vincent, she wasn't a born and bred noble, so she wasn't accustomed to being in the spotlight.

"You'll get used to it eventually, Oriana. You're gonna have to, for Vincent's sake. You guys are friends, after all."

Miguel had called her Elsha when they first greeted each other, but out of nowhere he started calling her Oriana instead, so likewise, she started calling him by his first name too.

Oriana glanced sideways at Vincent. His expression was solemn as he stared back at her. "Yeah," she said. "For Vincent's sake. Because we're friends."

"That's right. That's the attitude to have."

Yeah!

Oriana nodded firmly and dribbled ink all over her report again. Inwardly steeling herself for the angry words her professor would have for her when she turned it in, she started working on filling out the ink-dotted margins with her words.



“O-RI-A-NA!”

No sooner had she entered the classroom than people swarmed her like a violent ocean wave.

“Eep!” Oriana cried, wanting to collapse on the ground right then and there.

The students of Class 2 were all extremely close. Since beginning at the Academy, almost none of them had moved to another class, so perhaps their close bonds were due to seeing each other every single day. There were peasants and nobles alike mixed among them, but almost everyone in her grade called each other by their first names anyway. Oriana, of course, was no exception. She was buddy-buddy with every person regardless of gender, status, or social class.

“Come on, spill! What’s going on?!”

“Yeah, why is Mister Tanzine talking to you?”

“Hey, Oriana! Help introduce me to Mister Ferveira, won’t you?”

“Wait. Now isn’t the time for that.”

“I just heard the two of you were in the study hall together. No noodles for you ‘til you tell us what’s going on!”

“You gotta be kidding!” Oriana howled, unable to take the prohibition of her beloved dish.



The five people crowding around her were the people in class to whom she was closest. Among them were three obnoxious girls: tomboyish Edda Gillessen, the daughter of a scientist; the big sister of the group, Heidemarie Landheim, the daughter of a baron; and romance-obsessed Constance Bälz, the daughter of a knight. Then there were the two boys: cynical Kai Ferrer, a merchant's son, and Lucian Cortes, the son of a regional lord.

“See? I told you they’d kick up a fuss the second you got to the classroom.” Yana smirked beside Oriana. The two of them had entered together from the hall, having run into each other just moments before as Yana and Azraq were returning from dealing with one of their own little trials.

Even though Yana and her bodyguard had been outside the entire time, word about Oriana studying with Vincent had already reached them. Oriana had cradled her head in her hands the moment she heard.

Given the study hall was supposed to be a quiet area, none of the students could stir much of a commotion in there, but it was an entirely different matter as soon as Oriana left and entered the corridors. She had been careful not to let any of the students who might want to inquire about her relationship with Vincent catch her in the open. That was why she carefully retreated back to her classroom, where she’d hoped to have some time to mentally prepare herself for the inevitable grilling.

“Why are you all in the classroom today, of all days?”

Most of them went out during lunch break to mess around. After all, this was Class 2. They weren’t the types of students to knuckle down and study during lunch break. Lately, they had taken up playing the newly popular Magic Ball—a type of sport—in the courtyard. Several of them would stay behind in the classroom to chat with each other, but Lagen Magic Academy already had better places to gather for socialization, namely the lounges or the cafeteria. There weren’t many students who’d linger behind in the classroom with its meager offerings.

Out of consideration for the extra time it would take to travel back to her classroom from the study hall, Oriana had left early to give herself some leeway. She would never have dreamed that her smart time management

would backfire on her.

“Just resign yourself already, Oriana.” Edda threw herself at Oriana.

“Yana, do you know anything?” Heidemarie asked as she threw her arms around both Edda and Oriana, squeezing them. “Why are Oriana and Mister Tanzine suddenly having a secret little affair in the study hall, huh? You better spill everything, guts and all.”

“Ugh, so crude.” Kai wrinkled his nose.

Though maybe hard to believe, Heidemarie was a baron’s daughter, which meant her way of speaking was rather unbecoming of a lady.

“D-Don’t tell me he’s proposed to you or something?!” Constance squeaked.

“Constance, you’re always jumping to those kinds of conclusions. Wait...but what if...? Seriously?!”

“Haha!” Lucian threw his head back. “There’s absolutely nothing sexy about her. There’s no way...wait, unless...? Don’t tell me you guys have already done *it*?!”

The whole conversation was blowing wildly out of proportion. Oriana managed to extract herself from her two friends’ embrace and smacked Lucian over the head, glowering at him.

“We’re just friends!” she said.

“...Huh?!”

“That’s it? You seriously expect us to buy that?!”

“Hey, Oriana, get over here for a second.” Edda launched herself at Oriana again, tugging insistently at the collar of her robe.

“Whoa, whoa!” Oriana’s milk tea-colored hair swayed with the sudden motion. “I mean it. It’s the honest truth. There’s nothing more... I mean, why would Vincent—”

“*Vincent?!*” Edda squealed.

“Um, Vincent Tanzine, I mean!”

“Mmmmm....!”

Oriana stretched her neck, searching for Yana even as Edda continued shaking her this way and that. Yana had been right there beside her a moment ago, but since she'd been taken captive, Yana had taken a seat alongside Azraq, looking cool and composed. Since Heidemarie had shot a question in her direction just moments ago, she'd hurriedly retreated. Yana was clearly the type that didn't want to get involved in any unneeded messes if she could help it. That was one area where she was extremely calculating.

Oriana finally realized then that no matter what she said, it would be like pouring oil on an already raging fire. She closed her eyes, knitted her brows, screwed up her mouth, and bit down on her lip, waiting for everyone's excitement to simmer down.

If I told them the truth, that Vincent merely wanted a friend, it would probably hurt his pride as a noble.

He had probably only shown her his own weakness because he'd seen hers when he helped her with Rysted. No matter how close she was with her classmates, though, that didn't make it okay to share her new friend's personal problems.

"Leave it at that. Class is about to start," Kai said.

"But Kaaai!" Edda whined back at him.

Oriana was grateful to him. His help was like a lifeboat descending from the heavens, there to rescue her from the raging sea waves.

"Come on! Are you trying to tell me you're not at least a little curious, Kai? Well of course not, you're *so* much more well-behaved than us, aren't you? But I wanna know the truth! Oriana's my friend, after all!" Edda puffed up her (arguably completely flat) chest proudly.

Kai had androgynous facial features and a husky, feminine voice to match. His softer appearance was why Edda didn't take him seriously at all.

Kai glanced back at her, exasperated. Once he was sure she'd released Oriana's collar, he just muttered, "How ridiculous," before returning to his seat beside Yana and Azraq.

Once he had settled into his chair, Oriana raised her voice loud enough for

everyone around them to hear. “Um, you know... It really is that simple. Vincent and I are just friends. I’m only hoping the two of us can grow as close as I am to Edda and the rest of all of you.”

Normally friends only lasted as long as both parties put the required effort in and wanted to keep the relationship going, but her friendship with Vincent seemed to be entirely reliant upon her own efforts. He wanted a friend, and she owed him for the help he’d given her, so she was determined to give him what he asked for. Thus, the time they spent together would only increase from now on. It was like a contract, in a way, although since they were friends, Oriana wasn’t doing it out of obligation entirely; she genuinely did want to put in the effort to be a good friend to him.

“And so, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t make a big deal out of it as if I’ve hit the lottery or something just because I spent thirty minutes with him in the study hall. I’m sure we’ll be doing that a lot more in the future.”

Maybe it wasn’t the explanation everyone wanted, but since they all went quiet, apparently they’d taken her words to heart at least a little. Or so she believed until she took a look at her friends and saw them drop on the ground, trembling and writhing in anguish.

“Huh? What’s wrong with you guys?”

“It’s... It’s not faaaaair....”

“Yeah, it’s not fair that it’s just you! I wanted to be lucky enough to date him too!”

“And I wanted to marry him!”

Oriana sighed. “I already told you guys, we’re just friends, okay?”

With most fortuitous timing, the bell chimed.

Oriana plopped herself into a chair beside Yana and opened her textbook, certain the initial fuss was at least over for now.



ORIANA was strolling down the corridor, her friends glued to every side of her.

"Hey... Knock it off. If embarrassment could kill, I'd be a cold corpse on the floor right now." Oriana's cheeks flushed bright red, her entire body trembling.

Edda was latched onto her right arm, Heidemarie on her left, and Constance was hanging around her neck. If that wasn't bad enough, Lucian took up the rear like a bodyguard, perhaps taking inspiration from Azraq, and scowled at everyone and everything in the immediate area.

Even if any of the surrounding students tried to talk to her, they couldn't. Kai, Yana, and Azraq had formed a tight group behind her.

"Sorry, but stop it already. You guys are gonna kill me. I mean it..."

Any students passing by would pause to glance at her, wondering what the devil was going on. Perhaps it was her friends' intention to protect her, but the humiliation they were bringing her was going to kill her first.

"You can't die, Oriana. You need to write a will before you go, at least. 'I, Oriana Elsha, do hereby nominate Constance Bälz to be Vincent Tanzine's lover.'"

"Hey!" Edda snapped. "No fair, hogging everything for yourself! You better write my name too! Make sure to address it to Mister Ferveira."

"I think not. I, Oriana Elsha, will be writing *no* letters, least of all ones mentioning the names Edda or Constance!"

It was bad enough being bathed in this much limelight, but their loud voices were drawing even more attention. Oriana wanted to slap her hands over her face and hide. Alas, Edda and Heidemarie were hanging from either arm, so she couldn't even move them if she wanted.

Their tight-knit group was so embarrassing she started sniffling, tears welling in her eyes. When she happened to glance up, who else would be on the second floor peering through a window down at her but Vincent himself.

"Ugh...aaah..."

If the humiliation felt awful before, it felt ten times worse now that he'd seen her in this state. Her lips trembled, and she retreated a step.

Sensing something amiss, Edda nimbly craned her neck. Her entire face lit up.

“Oh! It’s Mister Tanzine!”

“What? Where, where?!” Heidemarie jerked her head around, scanning the area.

“Stop! This isn’t some kind of circus act! You guys are being rude. I mean it, knock it off,” Oriana barked at them. By the time she glanced up again, Vincent was no longer in the window. “See? Ugh. You drove him off!”

“Why?! We’re obviously your super good friends, here to protect you from harm!”

Lucian shook his head. “Tch. He coulda at least opened the window. He’s totally given you the cold shoulder. What part of that do you call a friend? Jerk.”

Oriana narrowed her eyes at Lucian. *And whose fault do you think it is that he left?!* She wanted to smack him over the head.

“I was hoping by offering you up as a sacrifice, he’d at least introduce me to a girl or two. Might be handsome, but he’s useless as far as I’m concerned,” Lucian grumbled.

“Shut it, you filthy virgin. It’s only guys who don’t get any that assume other guys are popular just because of their looks.”

“You said it. This is why virgin guys are such creeps.”

“Come now, girls. You can hardly blame him. He’s just a poor, pitiful little virgin who hoped he might be able to score with a high-ranking noble girl if Mister Tanzine helped introduce him. You can’t fault him for having futile dreams.”

“Okay, you rotten wenches!” Lucian roared, enraged at Heidemarie, Edda, and Constance’s merciless digs at his character.

“See? Lucian sounds like an absolute fool yelling at the top of his lungs. I’ll bet that’s what drove Mister Tanzine off.”

“That’s because he’s an arrogant virgin who thinks that just because a girl glances his way, she’s gotta be interested in him.”

“Yeah, I mean he’s so naive he thinks if a girl picks up a ball he kicked, that means she’s willing to go out with him.”

"I bet when a girl lends him magic paper and their hands touch, he uses that at night when he—"

"Heeeeey! Stop it already, please!"

The rambunctious threesome had landed such devastating blows on Lucian that he was nearly at death's door by this point.

That's what you get for trying to use me for your own gains, Oriana thought as she stared at him. The arrogant jerk now looked like an empty, hollow shell of a man.

Edda suddenly yanked her right arm. "Oriana! Oriana, he's here!"

"Huh?" Oriana followed her friend's gaze to find Vincent was walking toward them. Apparently, the reason he'd disappeared so suddenly was so he could hurry down the stairs to come see her.

"Hey, Oriana. It sure is lively out here," he said, eyes crinkling as he smiled at her.

Everyone froze solid. Not just Oriana or the rambunctious trio—even Lucian was paralyzed. The girls slowly slid back, slipping behind Oriana to hide in her shadow. Even Lucian, who'd acted so big and mighty moments ago, retreated to the back of their lineup.

Seriously? After acting like a bunch of clowns, now they're going to hide behind me when the man in question actually shows up?

With all four of them in a line behind her, they looked like a caterpillar with Oriana at the lead. She briefly glanced over her shoulder at them, but they only waved her on, as if telling her to ignore them and pay attention to the man right in front of her.

I sure do have myself a selfish group of friends.

"Hello, Vincent. I'm sorry it's so noisy out here."

"I'm pleased to see you having such a good time." He continued smiling as he stepped closer, but the obnoxious party animals she called friends scrambled away in a panic. They found themselves some pillars to hide behind and cautiously gazed out at Oriana and Vincent.

“...Did I do something?” Vincent asked.

“No. Ahaha...ahaha...” It was all she could do to laugh, feeling terrible for the way things were turning out. *Maybe this is the exact reason why he wanted a friend so badly.*

All Vincent did was smile and approach, but that was enough to make his peers so nervous they’d head for the hills. Part of her felt pity for him and how isolated he had to be because of it, but part of her also understood where her classmates were coming from.

I was in the same boat as them until I realized all he wanted was a friend. In fact, all he did was call her name before and that was enough to send her running away. *That’s how distant he felt, even though we’re actually students in the same grade.*

Where Vincent Tanzine had seemed so aloof before, he now resembled the moon—close and yet so forlorn all by itself. It was strange how her impression of him had changed so completely.

“Think of them like fairies. If humans look upon them, they go poof and disappear,” Oriana explained.

“Fairies? Well, that does sound quite adorable.” Vincent glanced at the pillars where they were hiding. “Hello there. Mind showing yourselves?”

All four of the “fairies” hiding behind the pillars collapsed in place. Vincent’s overwhelming charm had done them in, like a direct hit from a cannonball.

Oriana scowled at them before turning back to Vincent and forcing a smile. “Those are my friends.”

“Yes, I know. You always seem to be having so much fun together.”

Wait... He knows? Does that mean he was hoping to join us? Be still my heart. That is so freakin’ adorable! It makes my chest ache! Oriana gawked at him. She never dreamed a day would come when she’d find Vincent Tanzine cute.

“They’re all really sweet people,” she assured him. “If you’d like, I could introduce you to them.”

“Thank you. I was hoping to meet them, which was why I rushed out in such a

hurry and left Miguel behind.”

Whaaaat? So I was right on the mark? Oh my gosh, that is so cute.

As much as her heart ached from how endearing he was, she kept her true thoughts hidden behind a composed smile as she began introducing her friends to him. Miguel arrived belatedly, and she introduced him to her classmates as well.

Edda, Heidemarie, and Constance acted like a group of wary cats meeting a couple of strangers the way they nervously exchanged greetings. Constance even fumbled when trying to say her own name. Despite Lucian badmouthing Vincent earlier, he was putting on such an impressive show he might as well have been a top-tier actor. It made Oriana want to expose him for the fraud he was. It wasn’t surprising to Oriana that both Yana and Azraq kept a cool head as they exchanged greetings with Vincent and Miguel, but what she didn’t expect was for Kai to be so straightforward with them too.

“So you are from a merchant family as well?” Vincent asked.

“Yes. I am most delighted to make your acquaintance, Mister Tanzine and Mister Ferveira. I do hope we can be friends from now on,” said Kai. He was always being defiant, always acting like everything was such a pain to deal with, but in front of Vincent and Miguel, he was suddenly friendly and inviting.

Oriana expelled a breath of disbelief, the air whistling past her teeth.

When Kai turned back toward her and the others, he plastered a smile on his face so intimidating that she had to avert her gaze. There was an astronomical difference between his usual self and the mask he was wearing right now, but she could understand why. As someone who was also born into a merchant family, she knew how desirable it was to form connections with nobility, especially for the son who would one day inherit it. For the sake of his future, Kai had to make the most of whatever connections he formed.

After chatting for a bit in the courtyard, the group split apart to go to their respective classes. Edda and the others waited until Vincent and Miguel’s figures had completely receded before they started squealing.

“Did you see them? They were so...amazing!”

“Is it just me or was the whole atmosphere around them sparkling?!”

“And they kind of smelled good too...”

“They shook my hand... I’m definitely not washing it for the rest of the day now!”

Lucian and the rambunctious trio had been a fidgety mess moments before, but now they were back in their element. Oriana stood beside Yana, watching them, when Kai suddenly approached her.

“Notice how he said ‘so you are from a merchant family *as well*?’”

“Huh? What about it?” Oriana tilted her head.

“The fact that he knew and the way he said it... Don’t you think maybe he *does* have an interest in you?”

He probably just knew because we’re acquaintances, right?

Oriana blinked at him several times. Kai thought there was more to it than that. “How unusual. I’d expect that kind of comment from Constance, but not you, Kai.”

“Yeah, well, maybe her romance-addled brain rubbed off on me.” He snorted with laughter, and the two started toward their classroom.



“**AZRAQ?** What happened to you?” Oriana’s eyes went round as she stared at him.

Azraq was sitting there, covered from head to toe in mud and leaves. There were a number of cuts on his solemn face, and in his hands, he held a raging furball.

“One of the janitors I owe for looking out for me asked me to look after it for a bit. The second I look away, it takes off and perches somewhere out of reach. This was the only choice I had.”

“Mreow! Mew!” cried the adorable kitten with white fur and brown patterned coloring. It was clawing at his hands, trying desperately to break free, leaving his skin covered in scratches.

As Yana's bodyguard, Azraq was free to roam about the grounds as he pleased, which meant one of the janitors often looked after him. Azraq didn't have any real friends to speak of, and Oriana secretly suspected that Azraq probably let his guard down the most with this janitor—a man who was probably pushing sixty this year.

Yana and Azraq were generally always together, but strictly speaking, they weren't completely joined at the hip every hour of the day. They were separated by gender and had different classes to attend, and since Azraq was enrolled as a student, he had his own duties here as well. In order to fulfill one such obligation, he had left for a brief period only to return with this amusing surprise.

Oriana's eyes lit up as she gazed at her depressed, hulking male friend and the berserker kitten in his hands. Despite how skillfully Azraq completed any and every task given to him, he was apparently terrible when it came to handling tiny, adorable animals.

Yana had been standing beside Oriana as the latter watched Azraq with amusement, but she finally jumped into action; she squatted down, bringing her gaze to eye-level with the kitten as she mimicked the same noises it was making.

“Mew.”

She didn't sound the least bit like a cat at all, but it was still insanely adorable.

“Mew?”

Yana's alluring black eyes were glowing with curiosity and affection. The slight blush on her cheeks was evidence enough of how excited she was.

Oriana gawked a moment at her friend before turning her gaze to Azraq. His almond-shaped eyes were round with surprise.

As playful as she was, Yana never normally behaved in a way that wasn't befitting of royalty. But as she knelt there, trying to meet this little house pet at its level, she couldn't have looked more unprincess-like.

“Mew mew.” She extended a finger, bringing it close to the kitten.

Azraq soon returned to his senses and panicked, moving the kitten away from her. “Princess Yana, you mustn’t.”

“Just a little bit,” she insisted. “All I need is a moment. I just want to get a tiny feel of that fluffy fur.”

“You do realize how incredibly dangerous this creature is, don’t you? I absolutely cannot permit it,” Azraq said. The fact that he was covered in cuts was testament to how savage the little creature was.

“Won’t permit it, you say?” Yana eyed him. “Azraq, you are being awfully impertinent.”

“Regardless of what you say, I will not change my mind.”

“Oh, I see. You are worried the kitten might steal all of my affection. You’re jealous, hm?”

“I am not so weak-minded a bodyguard that I would lose my composure to such a simple jest like that, and I would thank you not to treat me as such.” Azraq was being uncharacteristically stubborn, and Yana was being unusually combative. Oriana watched the two anxiously.

If Yana really wanted to touch it that badly, part of her didn’t see the harm in letting her have her way for just a moment, but she hesitated to suggest as much, seeing the dozens of scratches covering Azraq’s hands.

“You have always been like this. Any time I want to do something, you swoop in to tell me I can’t do this, or I can’t do that.”

“I do it for your sake, Princess Yana.”

“It happened when I was four, too. Remember? My elder brother, Shinra, was keeping a pet he called Sinti, and when I tried to touch its tail—”

“You seem to be forgetting this fact, but at that time, Sinti was already larger than you. Not surprising, given it’s a tiger.”

Yana shook her head. “But this kitten is tiny.”

“Yes, but it is far more ferocious than Sinti.”

“In that case, you had better not try to stop me when I next try to touch

Sinti."

"That is an entirely separate matter from this one," Azraq said solemnly.

"Why you...!"

As Oriana sat anxiously on the sidelines, Yana and Azraq continued their spat, with Azraq never budging on his choice not to let Yana touch the kitten. As the minutes trickled by, the old janitor finally returned with a bunch of cat care items in hand.

"Hm, what's this? Did something happen?"

"Mister!" Oriana cried, almost moved to tears as she gazed at the janitor. He looked like a savior to her right now.

The janitor was gawking at Azraq's hands. "Oh dear. Seems you don't get along well with animals. Sorry 'bout that. You should get to the infirmary right away. Thanks for looking after it for me."

He lifted the kitten out of Azraq's hands and wrapped a towel he was carrying around its body. The furball immediately settled down, nestled in his arms, and eagerly gulped down the warm milk he offered it. He was using a rag to feed it, dipping it in milk before lifting it to the kitten's mouth. The janitor seemed like an old hat at this.

Yana stared from start to finish, swallowing hard. Oriana and Azraq watched quietly as well.

"Aren't you going to go to the infirmary?" Oriana asked.

"I can't leave yet."

As the two of them whispered to one another, Yana suddenly looked up at the janitor and said, "Um...would it be possible for me to try that?"

"Sure, I don't mind. You saw how to do it, right?"

"Yes."

Azraq tried to stop her, but Oriana pinched the hem of his robe. She quietly shook her head, and though reluctant, Azraq backed down. That was likely because the situation was far safer for her now than it had been a moment ago.

Yana obediently mimicked what she'd just seen, looking far more serious now than she did during class as she gave the kitten its milk. It eagerly suckled on the damp cloth. Yana held her breath, staring down at it unblinkingly like she was afraid of missing even a second of this. The kitten soon started crying for more, indicating there was no more milk on the rag. Yana quietly passed it back over to the janitor.

"Had enough?" he asked.

"I apologize for the added trouble, but I am genuinely satisfied now."

"Really? Want to watch a bit longer before you go?"

"Yes, please." Yana didn't try to put her hands on the kitten anymore after that, but she did keep her eyes trained on it as the old man looked after it.

"This is the one place where she can honestly say what she wants," Azraq mumbled quietly to himself. His expression soon turned self-mocking. In reality, he likely wanted to do whatever he could for her, to let her do as she desired, but Yana was far too precious, so he had a tendency to be overprotective of her.

Azraq watched her for a few minutes as she gazed fixedly at the kitten, but then he wiped the self-derisive look off his face and turned to Oriana. "Sorry, but I need to go to the infirmary. I'll be back."

"Got it."

Any time Azraq got hurt, he made a point of visiting the infirmary. It was less out of concern for any wounds he had sustained and more to give Yana peace of mind, or at least that was how it looked to Oriana.

"Yana and I will head back later," Oriana told him.

"...Sorry."

"We're friends," she assured him. "It's nothing."

The edges of Azraq's lips curled in a grin. As unsociable and unaccommodating as he looked, he had a super endearing side to him too. That made him rather popular with the ladies.

Even after Azraq left for the infirmary, Yana kept her attention glued to the

kitten. It was hard to believe she was obediently keeping her distance now when she'd fussed so much with Azraq earlier, but she seemed to have gotten her fill from cradling it in her arms once.

Ete Karima was also known as the Nation of Gold. Oriana would have thought the daughter of a king from such a country would never want for anything, but the way Yana gazed so yearningly at the kitten made Oriana's heart ache.



THERE was a forest beside Lagen Magic Academy, and at its entrance was a conservatory used for magical herbs as well as several fields beside it.

"Yo!"

"Hey, what a coincidence seeing you here."

Miguel and Vincent were hanging by one of these fields. Each of them had a towel wrapped around their head and was wearing work clothes.

Oriana, Yana, and Azraq had visited the janitor's office regularly to check in on the rapidly maturing kitten. Soon, it would leave for a new home with one of the man's janitor acquaintances, so they had gone to bid it farewell. The janitor had entrusted them with a small task while they were on their way back, which was why they were headed to see Professor Heinz at the botanical conservatory.

"Hello there," Oriana greeted. "What are you doing?"

Vincent had some kind of enormous contraption in his hands that was continuously vibrating. Whatever it was, it was long—matching Vincent's impressive height. Judging by the way it moved, it was probably a magical implement, though Oriana had no clue what kind exactly.

"Special Class had Herbology today?" she asked.

The facility for Herbology was located a fair distance from the main school building. Students would have to change into work clothes depending on the class's schedule, and given the extra time for commuting and changing, outside classes in Herbology spanned half the day.

"Yeah, we did this afternoon. I decided to stay over since there is an

experiment I want to do.” Vincent used his sleeve to wipe the sweat off his face. Being naturally handsome had the added benefit that anything and everything he did looked ridiculously sexy.

“Perfect timing,” said Miguel. “I actually have something to do, see. Sorry to ask this of you, Oriana, but mind switching with me?”

Oriana’s eyes widened. “What? Me?”

“Sorry to trouble you, but it’s a bit inconvenient to do this alone,” Vincent chimed in. “I would greatly appreciate it if you could assist me a bit.”

“Well, sure. I don’t mind at all. But is it really something I can help with?”

“Yes.” Vincent nodded eagerly.

Encouraged by his words, she glanced over her shoulder at Azraq and Yana. “Well, sorry you two. Mind taking care of that errand by yourselves?”

“Certainly. As soon as I am done, I’ll head straight back to the dorm.”

“Great, thanks. Sorry about this, Azraq.”

He shook his head. “I don’t mind.”

After splitting ways with Yana and Azraq, Oriana joined Vincent in the field. She peeled off her robe and hung it on the fence since she suspected she might get it dirty in the process otherwise.

“Okie dokie, I’m leaving this to you, then.” Miguel patted Oriana on the head before strolling off toward the main school building.

Oriana rolled her sleeves up. “All right then, how should I help out?”

“Could you hold this for me?”

Vincent passed her the device he had been holding. The moment she put her hands on the handles of it, her entire body began to vibrate along with it. Since she couldn’t control it, the device slipped across the field, sending plumes of dirt flying everywhere.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

“Oh, apologies. Would you mind drawing instead, then?” Vincent quickly swiped the device from her, since her arms sadly lacked the muscle necessary

to keep it from going berserk. The moment he took it, it stuck firmly in the soil, as if it hadn't just made a mess of everything in her hands moments ago.

Vincent kept one hand on the device and passed her a stack of magic paper and an ink-filled pen.

"Huh?! You want me to draw a circle?!"

Absolutely not. I refuse.

To even begin drawing a magic circle, one first began by drafting it in class. In order to make sure they could erase whatever they drew, they used a writing implement made of a kneaded mixture of graphite and clay. They would use that to create the general shape of the circle, filling in the finer details afterward. Only the finest mages could draw one successfully off the top of their head. For a mere third year like Oriana, that was impossible.

The fact that Vincent had passed the pen to her had to mean he was capable of drawing with no preparation at all, and considering Miguel had been acting as his assistant, he could likely do it too. They were still only in their third year. Just how insanely talented were these two?

"Calm down. I don't mind if you draw it slowly. First, start with the circle used for 'Run'..."

Well, I am the one who said I'd help out.

Half filled with despair, Oriana squatted and spread the magic paper out over her thigh. She began drawing exactly as Vincent dictated. It was a simple circle, to be sure, but knowing he was staring at her hand the entire time she drew made her nervous. It didn't help that she was balancing precariously or that she was using her own leg as a writing board. Given the rumbling of the device nearby on top of everything else, it was little surprise that she wasn't able to draw it well.

"Urgh! I'm so sorry, Vincent!"

"It's fine. You still have paper, don't you?"

Alas, her next attempt fared no better. A shiver ran through her, and this one wasn't caused by the persistent vibration of Vincent's contraption.

“Have mercy,” she said. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I’d just be wasting more paper by trying.”

“You sure do take things seriously, but there’s no reason for you to be so dejected. I don’t mind at all. If we run out of magic paper, we can simply buy more. Don’t worry. You are doing your best to help me out. I would never get angry with you for that.”

Despite the fact that she turned into as much of a trembling mess as the device he was holding, Vincent didn’t show any disgust as he spoke to her. In fact, he was overflowing with compassion.

Although she had felt awkward and guilty for her blunders, his words lightened the load on her heart. “You don’t mind even if I suck?”

“Not at all. If you can get this going for even a few seconds, that will be more than enough.”

“Okay then.”

Now that the hurdle didn’t seem so insurmountable, Oriana was somehow able to complete her drawing. Vincent slapped it on his device and waved his wand—which still mostly looked like a branch—and activated the circle.

It was generally forbidden for students to practice magic outside of class hours, but if he was doing this openly, Oriana could only assume he’d gotten permission from a professor.

Vincent had somehow managed to activate the circle Oriana drew, but it was a short-lived victory, lasting only several seconds. Considering the paper itself was top quality, the fault had to be with her poorly drawn circle. The shame was so intense she felt on the verge of collapsing and writhing right there.

After carefully observing from start to finish, Vincent said, “Oriana, next write the one for ‘Expel.’”

“Sure.” Oriana squatted down again, hurriedly scribbling it out.



THE sun was already beginning to sink beyond the horizon by the time Vincent’s experiment drew to an end. The magical implement, which had been

vibrating the entire time, must have run out of juice completely because it wasn't making so much as a peep anymore.

"Thank you. I was able to get some good data from this." Vincent scrunched his face up and glared at the implement, but when he turned back toward her, his lips pulled into a smile.

"Happy to have been of service." Oriana dusted off her dirt-covered clothes. It was no surprise she'd gotten some on her, considering she'd been messing around in a field this entire time.

"I am sorry for getting your clothes dirty."

"Nothing to worry about. I have another change of clothes, so it's no problem." Oriana laughed and waved him off.

Vincent reached a hand toward his pocket, but his smile soon turned bitter as he said, "I nearly forgot... I'm still in my work clothes. I don't even have a handkerchief with me. How pitiful."

"Ahaha! Don't worry about it, please."

Despite Oriana's assurances, she did genuinely feel grossed out by the sweat covering her forehead. It was like an adhesive that glued her hair to her skin. She had used her own handkerchief earlier to mop up some milk that the kitten had spilled when they were playing with it, so she definitely didn't want to use it to wipe her forehead.

Oh well. It's not far from here to the dorm. I can get changed real quick before dinner.

Oriana gathered her hair in a fist and lifted it up from her neck, letting the cool breeze tickle her skin. It helped her body cool down quickly.

Vincent watched her as he unfastened the hemp towel from his head and brought it to his nose. "I suppose this probably reeks of too much sweat."

"Do you mind lending it to me anyway?" Oriana asked.

"The sweat smell doesn't bother you?"

"Not at all."

As she promised, the thought of it didn't repulse her at all. She would never have accepted another male student's used towel, but for whatever reason, Vincent's sweat didn't bother her in the least. It reminded her of what people often said on the streets—that the only sweaty man women didn't find disgusting was a good-looking one, which she was now finding to be true.

"In that case..." Vincent passed it over to her.

"Thank you," Oriana said, using it to wipe her forehead and neck. She caught a whiff of an unfamiliar boy's scent, mixed with the fragrance of cedarwood. As sure as she was that it didn't bother her, it was suddenly very embarrassing. She worked quickly, wiping herself off, and started to return the towel before she froze in place.

"Do...you mind if I wash it first before I return it?" she asked tentatively.

"If you would prefer to do it that way, by all means."

It was bad enough that she felt restless having breathed in his scent just now, but that was all the more reason why she couldn't pass him a towel that had the smell of her sweat mixed in it. Fortunately, Vincent was generous enough to accept her request.

"Shall we head home then?" Oriana suggested.

"Yes, but would you mind if I return this to the storehouse before it gets dark?"

So he actually does plan to walk home with me.

The girls' dormitory was in the opposite direction of the boys' dormitory. Vincent really was a gentleman for being willing to escort her. If Lucian was so desperate to be popular with the ladies, he ought to take a page out of Vincent's book.

No, I guess that wouldn't work for him. He wears his desires on his sleeve. If he walked a girl home like that, it'd only put her on guard.

Becoming popular sure was hard.

Oriana accompanied Vincent to the storehouse beside the observatory, where he returned the magical implement. All the while, she lamented how

pitiful Lucian was.

“What? You have a key?” she asked.

“Please keep it a secret,” Vincent said, grinning as he tucked the key away. Apparently Professor Heinz had prepared a spare for him. That just showed how much trust he placed in Vincent.

For him to have a key... Has he been doing these experiments for a long time? Once the doors to the storehouse were safely closed and locked, Vincent turned to leave with Oriana close behind him. *This makes me realize that I really don't know anything about him.*

Why was he performing such experiments? Why was a mere student being entrusted with such an important key? Just how much must he have studied his butt off to be able to draw magic circles like that with no preparation? Oriana had no idea.

Even though we're friends, I'm totally in the dark.

That was a given, though. Oriana was the only school friend he had, and their relationship had only just begun. It would still take some time before they were really close enough to share those secrets.

The one thing I can tell for sure is that if I don't do something, I'll only ever be a school acquaintance rather than a real friend.



VINCENT was walking a half-step ahead of Oriana. When she glanced up, she noticed sweat dripping from the hair hanging around his ears. It sparkled as the light from the setting sun reflected off of it.

Oriana sped up her pace. She lifted her hand, the towel she'd borrowed from him clenched in her fingers. Vincent must have sensed her because he paused. Silently, she stretched her arm toward his head. Vincent bent down a little, until she was able to properly wipe away his sweat. He stayed absolutely still as he waited for her to finish.

I wonder if he dislikes me doing this...if my smell bothers him at all. I can't even begin to guess what he's thinking.

Oriana stepped away from him and asked, “So that experiment just now, what were you trying to do?”

“Hm? Oh, I’m developing a magical implement that can till fields.”

“What?! That’s incredible!” Her eyes flew wide open. She would never have guessed.

Oriana had never heard of a student inventing a magical implement before. As for magic circles, there was a club dedicated to the research and development of them, but such an advanced implement would require expert knowledge from a number of different fields. Baby chicks like them who were just beginning to study magic wouldn’t even be able to step foot in those kinds of advanced subjects.

“My original intent was only to help out Professor Heinz a bit, but I found it pretty interesting the more I did it. Turning it into an actual product may be beyond my capabilities, but I would like to at least improve it to the point that the students here at school could make use of it.”

“So that’s what you were talking to Professor Heinz about before. That’s amazing.” Oriana exhaled slowly, impressed. She stared at him. “I can’t believe you’ve got such an impressive goal. Honestly, I’m completely stunned. I’ve just been trying to enjoy each day of my life here...”

Oriana had never stopped to consider her own goals before. Helping others out and working toward an objective was something she expected she wouldn’t do until much later. Up until this point, she’d figured she would either end up marrying someone she fell in love with or someone her father picked for her, and that she’d live a quiet life as the madame of their estate. She’d never really pictured anything more for herself, which was why she was so deeply moved as she stared up at Vincent.

“That’s one of your strengths, and it’s because you are the way you are that I wanted to be friends with you.”

“Makes sense. Being positive is important, after all. But I do think I could stand to put a little more effort in.” Oriana brushed his flattery aside, but the last part of what she said was genuine; his passion *had* reached her.

Vincent gaped at her in disbelief.

Oriana frantically waved her hands at him. “Oh, no, no! I realize that even if I put effort in, it won’t amount to much, but...”

“That’s not true at all.”

“Huh?” Now it was Oriana’s turn to stare at him in surprise.

“I believe you are an earnest, hard-working person. If you put the effort in, I am sure you won’t be disappointed by the results.”

Much to her shock, he was being genuine. It made her heart flutter in an odd sort of way—she felt simultaneously uncomfortable, delighted, and...strange all at once.

“If you really believe that, then I think I will try putting more effort in. I’ll be sure not to get in your way, so would you mind if I join you in the study hall again?”

“Of course. You are more than welcome.”

“At the very least,” Oriana continued, “I’d like to be able to draw whatever circles you ask for off the top of my head. Though, I realize I’ll never compare to someone who’s consistently been at the top of our year like you, Vincent.”

While she was helping him today, she’d struggled numerous times to recall the circles he’d asked her to draw. Each time it happened, her ink strokes were filled with shame and guilt.

“Staying at the top is merely my way of struggling in vain,” Vincent spoke self-mockingly as he stared ahead. As dignified as he looked from this angle, there was something about the way he spoke that seemed like he was holding her at a distance.

Maybe it was better not to comment on his grades.

The two may have managed to become friends, but things were still rough. Oriana had no idea what kind of topics were off-limits, so her only choice was to grope through the dark and find out. She’d feel terrible if she hurt him in the process though, and even ruining his mood was enough to make her suffer as well.

But I guess it's fine that way. She lifted the towel in her hand and pressed it against her nose. Seeing the way Vincent gaped at her made her grin. I'm rather fond of this cedarwood scent, so I don't mind being put through the wringer a bit for you.

Chapter 4: You and Me and...

“**EVEN** though Oriana doesn’t have feelings for me anymore, she’ll still smile at me.”

“What’s the matter with you, Vincent? I’d expect that kinda line from Lucian Cortes, but not you.”

“That’s humiliating...” Vincent mumbled as he slumped against the window frame. If Lucian could hear their exchange, he’d probably cry and blow up in a rage.

The moon was a tiny sliver in the sky outside, periodically dancing in and out of a thin veil of clouds as it peered in through their bedroom window. Vincent had drawn his chair over to the windowsill, so he could peer out. Miguel, meanwhile, was already sprawled out in bed.

“Why do girls smile at guys in the first place if they don’t have feelings for them?” Miguel grumbled.

Out of consideration, he’d swapped places with Oriana so Vincent could spend some time with her. Then, while Vincent and Oriana were on their way back to the dorms, she had started sniffing the sweat-soaked towel he had lent her, promptly flashing a smile at him afterward. He couldn’t get the sight of it out of his mind.

“Does it bother you?” Miguel asked.

“Of course not!” Vincent said without missing a beat. He rested his elbows on the windowsill and covered his face with his hands. “But no matter how cute she is, I can’t hold her hand.”

Because, as I said, she doesn’t have those kinds of feelings for me anymore. Growing more and more depressed by his own inner monologue, Vincent clenched his fingers around the window frame, his arm trembling.

“Enough,” Miguel’s exasperated voice echoed from the bed. “Messing around

like this will only hurt you more.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Vincent was happy being able to speak to her again.

But I’m simply not accustomed to this version of her that doesn’t already adore me.

It wasn’t as though he wanted her to flock to him and throw herself on him the moment she saw him. Of course, he would be delighted if that were the case, but he wasn’t even hoping for that much. Though it bothered him how formally she spoke to him, it was nothing he couldn’t handle.

In their previous timeline, he had never once felt nervous speaking to her. Nor was he ever afraid she might not listen to what he had to say. She made it a point to show how accepting she was of him from the moment they met. No matter what he spoke to her about, the thought that she might hate him or be agitated by something he said had never even crossed his mind before.

“Of all things, I never dreamed I’d want so desperately to be close to a girl.”

Even if he searched the whole world, Vincent was quite sure that Oriana was the only person who could awaken him to this side of himself.

“I mean, isn’t she a little *too* intimate with the rest of Class 2? No one could really complain if their parents moved along with a marriage arrangement between any of them.”

“That’s just how commoners are,” Miguel said dismissively.

“But Cortes in particular is far too close to Oriana. He touches her without a second thought. Ferrer presents his own issues—he’s far too handsome. Oriana has a soft spot for beautiful men like him...”

“Vincent, you really have become a hot mess.”

Oriana had been kind enough to introduce her friends, to give him a place inside the world in which she lived. But even so, that was all it was. If Vincent disappeared tomorrow, she might be surprised, but she wasn’t attached enough that she’d mourn, sob, and scream for him.

That’s why I was so surprised that my words spurred her to action—that she

said she would try to put in more effort.

“But I do think I could stand to put a little more effort in.” Oriana had casually slipped those words into the conversation as they were returning home from their fieldwork. To her, there was probably no particularly deep meaning to it, but Vincent’s entire being was shaken; he didn’t think he exerted enough influence over her to trigger such change.

Every time I see you surrounded by Class 2 and enjoying yourself, it makes me realize how much you sacrificed trying to protect me.

Oriana hadn’t possessed any such friends in their previous timeline. In order to stay by his side and protect him, she had cut them off. If she hadn’t been desperate enough to make that choice, she probably couldn’t have maintained her position in the Special Class.

Which is why it’s my turn to look out for you and those around you. I want to protect everything you hold dear. I mean that, truly, but according to Miguel, I’m too close-minded and a “hot mess” besides, so I can’t help wanting to rush things. Ridiculous as it is, I can’t stop myself from being jealous—wanting you to think about me for even a second or a minute more than you do them.

“Well, you have a long time yet to go. Why not take it slow?” Miguel suggested.

Vincent wasn’t sure whether the time he had left really was long or not, but he nodded nonetheless.

Getting impatient isn’t going to get me anywhere.

Logically, he knew that, but love was anything but logical.



BACK when Vincent first entered Lagen Magic Academy, there was one person he’d been planning to make contact with for some time: Heinz, the Herbology professor. When class had finished one day during his first year, Vincent left a report behind. He made sure the other students wouldn’t spot it, but he left it in plain enough sight that it would catch Professor Heinz’s attention. Then, after school, he went back to get it, pretending he’d forgotten it.

“Sorry, it seems like I left something behind earlier.”

“Ah.” Professor Heinz’s eyes had been glued to the report, but he ripped his gaze away to look at Vincent, wiggling the roll of tobacco protruding between his lips. “So this is yours, Tanzine? Here ya go. Don’t go bringing unrelated stuff to class.”

“Of course. My apologies.” Vincent accepted the report before saying, “Um, Professor...”

“Hm?”

“There is something I would like to ask you.”

“C’mon... You aren’t a girl looking for an excuse to admit she has a crush on me. If you have something you don’t understand during class, just come and ask me like a normal person.” Professor Heinz saw right through Vincent; he realized Vincent had purposefully forgotten the report.

Vincent smiled. “So that’s how the girls express their feelings for you. Interesting.”

“Anyway, what’s your question?”

Amused as he was that the professor didn’t deny it, Vincent stared the other man straight in the eyes as he said, “Can one use the Dragon Tree to kill a person?”

“Like hell. There’s no way.”

His response was instant. It had to be rehearsed; most teachers would show some suspicion toward a freshly enrolled first-year student for asking something so crazy out of the blue, but Heinz didn’t.

Vincent’s thoughts turned to the report in his hands. It documented some forbidden tomes he’d gotten his hands on, referencing the Dragon Tree he’d so desperately researched. To summarize his findings: The more deeply one became involved with *it*, the more they lost their mind until death eventually took them. Yes, that’s right; he used the word “it” without ever referring to the Dragon Tree directly.

In spite of the lack of reference, Professor Heinz had read the report and

knew immediately it was about the Dragon Tree. That was proof he was privy to secrets of the Dragon Tree that the rest of the world was not.

“In that case, can a person use it to go back in time?”

Seeing how earnest Vincent looked, the professor loosened his lips, causing his cigarette to fall. “Ack, crap!” Panicked, he quickly stomped it out. “What a waste...” he grumbled as he glanced back up at Vincent. “So you’re starting all over again, huh?” His voice was unusually low and sharp, which hardly suited a professor speaking to a lowly first-year student.

“Ah, so people refer to it as ‘starting over.’ She spoke of it as going back in time, so I followed that line of thinking,” Vincent replied.

Professor Heinz raked a hand through his already disheveled hair. “Yeah, well, this is my first time ever actually meeting someone who’s done it.”

“I would like you to tell me all you know about the Dragon Tree. There’s a limit to how much I can research about it on my own.”

“...Jeez, seriously? You didn’t *have* to leave that report lying around here for me to find, y’know.”

Vincent shrugged. “I figured I wouldn’t get a straight answer if I spoke to you directly about it.”

As if he’d hit the nail on the head, Professor Heinz groaned in resignation. “Did you break off part of the Dragon Tree?”

“No... But while we’re on the topic, would it kill someone if they did?”

There was a rule that any blessings from the Dragon Tree would have to be taken from the ground rather than the tree directly.

“Nah. Never heard of being cursed just for breaking something off.”

“Indeed...” Vincent mumbled. “But it’s possible that *thing* may have been broken off the tree.”

The one edge of the burning Dragon Tree branch he’d seen had been awfully jagged and rough. Now that he thought about it, it had likely warped when someone forcefully broke it off.

"If you're not the one who broke it off, how'd you even see it?" Professor Heinz asked.

"It was in the fireplace, burning," answered Vincent.

The professor's eyes flew wide open.

To a mage, a wand was as important to them as their own life. Burning such vital material as a Dragon Tree's branch was normally unfathomable.

"It was clearly not burning in any normal way," Vincent explained. "It also had this sweet, intoxicating smell to it. And while it was burning, she and I..."

It was difficult for him to explain exactly what had happened. While he accepted it as the truth, it was terrifying to come out and admit that both he and Oriana had died.

"If you know that much, then you really are starting over," said Professor Heinz.

"Hm?"

"The Dragon Tree always kills two people, and it's always a man and a woman."

Vincent's face contorted. Up until that point, he had never held any ill feelings toward the Dragon Tree, as it was what had blessed them with mana to begin with, but now, he loathed it from the bottom of his heart.

The professor must have sensed the anger smoldering inside of him. Heinz's face tightened as he patted the still thirteen-year-old Vincent on the top of the head. "Work on making a magical implement. One that can till the fields."

"Pardon?" Vincent was utterly taken aback. He furrowed his brows. Those words were the last thing he'd have expected to come from Professor Heinz's lips.

"My lower back's been bothering me lately, see, and it's become a pain to till the fields. On the condition that you do that, I'll look into the Dragon Tree for you." He paused. "So don't cry, 'kay?"

Vincent held his breath. He wasn't crying, but he was relieved enough that he almost wanted to break down into tears.

Oriana tried so hard by herself. That was why he felt compelled to do the same. But now he had an adult—and not just any adult at that, but rather an expert in Herbology—on his side. Calling that reassuring was an understatement.

“...Thank you.”

“Yep.” Professor Heinz lazily waved his hand.

Vincent bowed his head the lowest he’d ever bowed it before, either in this life or his last.

If it means making sure you survive, Oriana, I’ll do whatever it takes.



“AHAHA!”

He recognized Oriana’s laughter immediately. On his way back to his dorm from study hall, he passed by the lounge where Oriana and the others always gathered. His feet froze in place. As he anticipated, her classmates were gathered around her at a couch in one corner of the room, engaging in light-hearted banter. Yana and Azraq were nowhere to be seen, likely attending to one of their trials.

Glad to see the two of them smiling at each other again.

Vincent had no special feelings toward either Yana or Azraq, but he knew that if things went well between them, Oriana would be happy. There was no way of knowing what trajectory they would go down in this timeline, but at least for now, he’d already told Miguel not to participate in vying for Yana’s hand, regardless of the circumstances.

This time around, Vincent almost never visited the tiny lounge at the corner of the eastern building. When, on occasion, he felt the urge, he would go there to clean it, but he kept his distance for the most part, lacking the time to indulge himself in taking a break there. Since the wood by the fireplace was periodically replenished, he could only guess some of the other students were using it on occasion as well.

Whenever Vincent had time, whether it be in the early morning, during

breaks, or after school, he spent all of it either in the library, study hall, or one of the Herbology facilities. Even though this was his second go-around, it still wasn't easy maintaining top scores the entire time. Perhaps the promise he'd made with his father was ultimately meaningless, but striving to maintain that position helped keep his spirits up.

On top of that, any time he didn't spend studying, he instead dedicated to performing experiments in the Herbology fields. In all, he was dedicating almost every hour of the day, every single week, to Oriana. That was why, up until this point, he'd never had the spare time to spend dropping by one of the lounges or trying to make friends.

"Oh, Vincent! Miguel!" Oriana waved at the two of them, pointing to the couch as if it was the most natural thing in the world to invite them to join her.

It's fine, he reassured himself. I'm doing the right thing.

Every time he saw the smile on her face, it was as though he was getting her seal of approval. It lightened the immense anxiety he'd been juggling since he'd started his life in this new timeline.

Miguel slipped inside first, and Vincent followed behind him.

"So, what were you talking about?"

Vincent kept a respectable distance as he settled down on the couch beside Oriana. Proper etiquette came second nature to him. It was only when it came to Oriana that he found his sense of reason wavering, and found himself thinking, *Just a little more. It couldn't hurt anything for me to be even an inch closer.*

Vincent had to resist the urge to grab and hold Oriana's hand as it sat there on the cushion beside him. He pretended not to notice that her thighs were literally right there next to his. If he gave it too much thought, he wouldn't be able to keep his eyes on her.

"We were discussing pen nibs."

"Say, Mister Tanzine, Mister Ferveira, what kind do you use?" Constance asked from the seat on the opposite side of Oriana, leaning over so she was nearly on top of her friend.

Stationery was evolving, and that wasn't limited to Amanecer; it happened in all countries where magic flourished. Namely, because writing utensils were essential to drawing magic circles. Consumers, manufacturers, and of course mages everywhere had their own specific preferences.

"Hm. I'm using one of the Lazisha types," Miguel said.

Heidemarie nodded eagerly. "The ink flow on those is tailored perfectly."

"Really? Then maybe I should buy one next time. I bet it would help my popularity if I told everyone I'm using the same one as Mister Ferveira, don't you think?" Lucian grinned.

"Just the opposite. If you started using them, their whole reputation would probably crumble."

"Edda, you wicked girl..." Lucian grumbled.

"What about you, Vincent?"

"I am using one manufactured by one of the merchants my family employs," Vincent answered with a strained smile.

Edda and Constance sucked in a breath, gulping. They leaned closer, whispering to themselves. "See, just what you'd expect from one of the Eight Dragons."

"He's on a totally different level!"

"Think there's any way I could get my hands on even one?"

"It would cause a huge uproar even if you somehow managed to. All the female students would be so overjoyed about it, they'd probably put it on an altar to worship."

"See, that right there. That's disturbing."

"Heidemarie! Don't you dare try to act like you're above us!"

"Yeah! Well, remember whose pen nib we're talking about here. The man's from a duke fam—no, it's less about what he is than who he is. Even you have to admit you'd want to get your hands on a pen nib Mister Tanzine had touched himself."

"Well, yes. If given the opportunity, I could hardly say no, could I?!"

While the three rambunctious girls suddenly started fussing among themselves, Kai turned to Miguel. "What type of Lazisha pen is it?"

"Wanna see? I have it with me."

"Yes, please."

"Me too, me too!"

Miguel slipped off the pen that was fastened to his book band and held it out for Kai and Lucian to see.

"That one I borrowed recently—the converter-type—that was made by your merchant as well?" Oriana asked.

Vincent finally turned his gaze toward her and nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"They made everything personally? From the barrel to the ink chamber?"

"They have their own workshop. The man's son is almost entirely responsible for creating the chambers."

"That's incredible. My nerves were so shot when I was using it that I didn't get a real feel for its performance, but I did notice it was so easy to write with that it was hard to believe it was an integrated model."

Vincent suspected she was remembering their time in the field together. She kept nodding to herself, a pensive expression on her face. It was so adorable.

"Shall I prepare one for you as a gift?" Vincent offered.

"Oh, please. They'd drag me and my pen off to the altar to be worshiped then." Oriana didn't even give a moment of thought before refusing him. It came as a bit of a shock.

The previous Oriana probably wouldn't have blinked twice before accepting my offer. Strange as it is to say, I suspect she'd have even eagerly accepted a blunted pen nib from me. That just goes to show that I'm not that important to her yet in this timeline.

Crestfallen as he was, Vincent did his best not to let it show on his face as he next asked, "So, what kind are you using then?"

"I'm not really that picky, so I use all sorts of different ones. In fact, Daddy has bought so many different ones that if I don't help use them up, we'll have a veritable mountain of them just sitting around."

Oriana's facial expressions changed rapidly. He was seeing far more variation now than he had seen that first time she spoke to him in the courtyard.

She's opened her heart to me a lot since then.

It was so precious when she shared things about herself with him. He found it adorable the way she pondered this and that as she spoke to him, and he nodded slowly the whole while.

"Interesting," he said.

"He recently obtained a bunch of ink samples from a new deal he made as well."

"Yeah?"

"One of the servants accidentally broke one of the containers, not knowing it had ink in it."

"Yeah?"

"They rushed to summon the cleaners since it was working hours, but the mage who was supposed to remove the stains was still half asleep, so they only made the staining even worse. It was hilarious!"

"Oh really..." Vincent's eyes were glued to her small lips as she excitedly recounted the tale, and he was midway through giving a perfunctory response when someone suddenly snatched his head. Startled, he craned his neck.

Miguel had suddenly appeared behind the back of the couch, his hand on Vincent's scalp as he gazed down at his friend. When Vincent gave him a questioning look, he leaned in close to Vincent's ear and said, "You're staring too hard."

Vincent's shoulders jumped as the meaning of those words registered instantly.

Miguel grinned wryly, pleased that his message had gotten through. "Welp, good luck. I just remembered I have something to do, so I'm gonna head back."

“All right.” Vincent clapped one hand over his face, covering it, while he used the other to give a small wave and bid his friend farewell.

“See you, Miguel,” Oriana said, waving as well.

Miguel glanced back over his shoulder once and returned the gesture before taking off. More likely than not, Miguel had no errand to attend to; he’d merely left his seat, so he could deliver a warning to Vincent since the latter was failing so utterly at hiding his romantic interest in Oriana.

Well, this is embarrassing.

Vincent lifted his chin, praying his cheeks weren’t feverishly red thanks to his friend’s words of warning/encouragement. Miguel’s abrupt departure had cut his conversation with Oriana short, so now Kai and Lucian’s chatter drifted into his ears instead.

“Yeah? I couldn’t see anything from where I was standing, so I have no idea.”

“You big dummy! What a total waste! I can say this with confidence, though: they were *definitely* white.”

Everyone else, besides Vincent and Oriana, had dispensed with the greetings and changed the topic by now, hence why Kai and Lucian were locked in a fervent exchange.

“What was white?” Oriana asked, joining their conversation.

Lucian jolted in surprise. “Wha— Don’t just suddenly hop in on our conversation!”

“Huh? What are you so on edge for?” Oriana grumbled. She was uncomfortable with the way he’d snapped at her.

“I didn’t see, so I have no idea, but Lucian swears he got a peek. At a girl’s underwear, I mean.” As if for emphasis, Kai repeated, “And I mean it, I really *didn’t* see anything.”

Vincent’s intuition had told him they were probably discussing something inappropriate, and as it turned out, he was right on the money. Exasperated, he glanced at Lucian.

Oriana’s reaction went above exasperation; she was thoroughly disgusted.

She thrust a finger in Lucian's direction and shouted, "Get him, Constance!" Her expression revealed not even an ounce of emotion, and at her command, Constance left her seat.

"With pleasure. I will be sure to pound his face beyond recognition."

"Stop it, you barbarian woman! Even just one hit from you is no joke!" Lucian's face contorted in horror as he tried to scramble away, but Edda caught him immediately. "What the hell! This has nothing to do with you guys anyway!"

"How does this have nothing to do with us when you're peeking at girls' underwear?!"

"Stuff it! It's not like I was crawling on the ground trying to sneak a look at them! Blame the stairs and the wind! It's not my fault!"

"You could have enough grace to pretend you didn't see anything or at least not talk about it, you know!" Heidemarie snapped at him. Unable to contain her anger, she threw a fist at his head while Edda pinned him in place.

"Yowch! I was only discussing it because Kai said he couldn't see anything!"

"Then tell me afterward in secret at least," grumbled Kai.

"Excuse me?" Heidemarie shot him a look, as if to say: *That's not really the problem right now, and you know it.*

Unable to withstand her gaze, Kai awkwardly glanced away.

"Lay off! All of you, shut your traps! Is there a healthy man out there who wouldn't be interested in seeing girls' underwear? Huh?! Morons!" Lucian roared defiantly, desperate to defend himself.

With a completely serious expression on her face, Oriana replied, "Vincent wouldn't be interested, I'm sure."

Wha?

Unable to comprehend how he was being dragged into this conversation, Vincent froze up. There was no custom in the world he was used to living in of having these sorts of salacious conversations. Not to mention, Vincent didn't really speak to other men.

"You aren't, are you?" Oriana turned her innocent gaze to him, eyes full of trust.

Vincent absently responded, "Uh, no."

"Uhno'?"

Lucian managed to slip away from Edda, and as he stood beside the still-paralyzed Vincent, he patted him on the shoulder and gave a thumbs up. He was grinning at Vincent, but Vincent didn't want to return the gesture.



SINCE it was nearly mealtime, Vincent and Oriana moved to the cafeteria. As they walked through the crowded corridors, the conversation somehow turned to romance.

"Romance doesn't mean squat to me. I just want to find a decent guy," said Edda.

"See?" Constance grumbled. "You're always looking down your nose at love!"

"Yeah, well, I'm not as tall or well-endowed as you."

"Well, if being tall and having big breasts is such a bonus, why hasn't it landed me a good guy yet?" Constance asked forlornly, her shoulders slumping.

The girl had a slender build and perfect posture, adding to the whole regal female knight vibe she gave off. If only she could shut that passionate mouth of hers, she would probably have a number of admirers hanging around her by now.

"What about you, Heidemarie? Do you have a crush on anyone?" Oriana asked.

Strangely, Heidemarie had kept her silence through the whole exchange, and now that the conversation had turned to her, she was acting cagey, mumbling, "Well, sort of."

"Huh?!" Constance gasped. "S-So there actually is someone?!"

Edda narrowed her eyes. "What does 'sort of' even mean? Is there more than one guy? Or is there just one, and you're not *that* into him?"

The two girls wasted no time jumping on their friend for more information.

“Who’d have thought, Heidemarie.” Lucian smirked at her. “You’d better not say it’s me.”

She shot him a cold look. “Why is it that whenever a virgin hears that an acquaintance has a crush, they immediately fantasize that it must be them?”

“Maybe it’s because they’re a pitiful species?”

“Hey, hold it, why are you calling me an acquaintance? We’re friends, aren’t we?! Or are you saying we’re not even that?!”

Vincent watched the noisy exchange from behind as they navigated the halls. He made no proactive attempts to join the conversation, but he enjoyed watching their cheerful banter—or more to the point, enjoyed watching *Oriana*.

“I guess Heidemarie really is more mature than the rest of us,” Oriana mumbled to herself from beside Vincent. “I wonder what the difference is between romantic affection and the kind you feel for friends.”

She glanced up at him innocently, hoping for him to be as equally puzzled as her. Alas, Vincent couldn’t nod along. He could hide his feelings for her, but he disliked the idea of pretending they didn’t exist at all.

“Huh? Vincent, don’t tell me—” Oriana slapped a hand over her mouth, cutting herself off. Perhaps she thought the question too personal.

If I admitted I have someone I like, I wonder what she’d feel. Would she panic? Or would she shrug it off and keep her distance, thinking she doesn’t have a chance? The latter was definitely not something he wanted, but lying wasn’t an option. Not that it mattered; she felt nothing for him right now, so whatever he said, she’d probably soon forget it anyway.

Vincent pressed a finger to his lips, smiling faintly. “Keep it a secret for me, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course.” Oriana nodded eagerly.

While the others ahead of them continued their raucous banter, Oriana went silent for a while. Just as Vincent was beginning to regret having said anything at all, she leaned in closer to him and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Huh?” Vincent froze.

Don't tell me she's realized I have feelings for her? And this is her way of turning me down before I even say anything directly?

Vincent's mind blanked as despair set in, but Oriana continued to whisper, “I felt betrayed for a moment there, even though you hadn't done anything wrong. I just figured that since you said you wanted to be friends with someone like me that we were probably alike—that you didn't know anything about romance either. Oh, I can't believe how rude that was of me...”

“Oh, not at all. I don't mind. Don't worry.”

She had me panicking. Vincent wanted to crouch right there in the middle of the hallway and take a breather because he was so relieved to know his fears were unfounded. *So she isn't turning me down, and at least right now, she doesn't have feelings for anyone else.*

That meant she didn't see Vincent that way either, but at least for now, he could accept that.

“Won't you tell me who she is?” Oriana asked.

“Eventually.” Vincent smiled at her, praying the day would come quickly that he could be honest with her about his feelings.

“Can you tell me what she's like?”



Unable to resist the way her eyes sparkled at him, Vincent lowered his voice and said, "She's extremely cute."

"Yeah, I bet. What else, huh? What else?"

"We're the same age," he continued.

"Right, okay." Oriana nodded.

"...and she's cute."

"Whaaat? Are you telling me *the* Vincent Tanzine has no other words with which to describe the girl he likes other than that she's cute?"

Say what you like, but I'm trying my best here.

It was hard enough that he was telling the girl herself what he thought about her. How did he get himself into this situation? He was chagrined, but more than that, he was utterly embarrassed.

"There's nothing else?"

Although her innocent question irritated him, those feelings were trumped by his eagerness to sate her curiosity. *I want to satisfy her inquisitive mind. I want to be the one who puts a smile on her face*, he thought. Vincent was so happy she was showing an active interest in him that he resigned himself and started searching his brain for the right words.

"Well, I..." he hesitated.

"Go on."

"Ever since I was born, I've never given myself much thought."

"Right."

"My name, my grades, my whole future was decided for me beforehand, so I had just been frantically trying to follow the course laid out in front of me. I thought that was all I needed to do."

"Okay."

"And then I met her..."

"Mm-hm."

"And that had to be the first time I ever did something of my own volition. Not one thing—I did a bunch of meaningless things that hadn't been predetermined for me."

"And?"

"I became a different person, but I didn't hate the change it caused in me. It was like this big piece inside of me that had been missing for so long had suddenly been filled, and that's how I realized: she's the only person that can make me whole." Vincent fell silent after that, well aware of how many embarrassing statements he'd just made. He pretended not to notice the heat gathering in his cheeks as he peeked at Oriana. "Does that answer...satisfy your question?"

"Yes. It more than satisfied it." Her eyes were no longer bursting with curiosity as they had been earlier. Instead, they were full of wonder, as if she'd just spent time gazing into something so vast and unknown, like the sky or the ocean. "You're not going to tell her how you feel?"

"It's complicated. The two of us were separated, so now I'm not sure how to maintain the appropriate distance between us."

Oriana nodded to herself. "That makes sense. It does sound like there's a lot to it. But one thing I did realize is just how deeply you care about her."

"Yeah."

That was one thing he could say with confidence.

You're endearing no matter what form you come in, whether it's the girl who chased me around all the time in my previous life or the one who stands beside me now, listening to everything I have to say.

Oriana glanced up, her eyes narrowed from the brightness of the lights. Vincent kept his gaze glued to her, inwardly praying. *I'll say the word "Yeah" for you as many times as you like, so please, just one more time...fall for me again.*

Noticing his gaze was fixed on her, Oriana drew her brows together in confusion.

I suppose it'd be unnatural if I continued staring at her any more than I

already have. Heartbroken, he peeled his eyes away from her. He couldn't help feeling vexed at how things were—that he couldn't watch her as much as he pleased, that they no longer had that intimate air enveloping them.

Apparently more comfortable now that he'd averted his gaze, Oriana smiled again and said, "When I find someone I like, I'll be sure to tell you."

I can only hope that person is me.

There was no way he could say as much, so instead, he forced the edges of his lips to curl. "Because we're friends?"

"That's right. Because we're friends."

"Can I be the first person you tell?"

"Sure. I'll run straight to you."

In that case, I'll just have to be satisfied with the way things are for now.

While the others ahead of them continued noisily chirping away, Vincent kept pace with Oriana, smiling to himself.



ALTHOUGH Oriana had put a little more effort into studying thanks to Vincent's influence, there was no way she would see a huge difference overnight. Nonetheless, as she gripped her report from their most recent routine exams in her hands and saw that all of her grades had improved, she breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"How about you, Yana?" she asked.

"Not bad. Although, not good either."

"What about you, Azraq?"

"I always give everything my full effort."

"Ahaha..." She couldn't help but giggle at the way he put it.

Azraq was dedicated to his position as Yana's bodyguard, so he only ever put in enough effort to achieve the same score as her. Part of the issue was that he likely didn't enjoy studying to begin with, but if he had proper motivation, he could aim for the Special Class. Oriana had overheard Professor Quicee saying

as much to him.

The atmosphere in the classroom following exam week was mixed. There were some who were relieved, some who were indifferent, and others who were overcome with despair.

"I guess that means only three of our group have to attend remedial lessons. Good luck, Edda, Constance, Lucian."

As the three representatives of the final category, they were all slumped over on their desks. A darkness loomed over them, as if any minute now a funeral procession might start.

"This wasn't...how this was supposed to go..." Tears welled up in Constance's eyes, her lips trembling as she glanced again at her scores and collapsed on her desk.

"I can't do this..." Edda lamented. "Why am I such an idiot? I even studied before the exams!"

"It's precisely because you *only* study before exams," Kai pointed out.

"Ugh, right where it hurts!" Lucian groaned. "As usual, you're right, but that doesn't make it any less painful."

"Hey! I'm already basically taking my dying breaths over here. Could you *not* try to land a killing blow on me, please?!" Edda joined him in complaining, ironic since the two were always fighting. This was the one time they could actually join together and comfort each other.

Kai plucked Lucian's report from his fingers and glanced at it. Exasperated, he said, "Not that I actually care, but if you keep this up, won't you have to repeat a year?"

At Lagen Magic Academy, if you received four or more red marks during an exam period, you were obligated to retake it. If your grades didn't improve enough during the retake, you would either be demoted down a class or you would have to repeat the year.

"R-Repeat a year?!" Lucian went pale. "That's out of the question. I wouldn't be able to go back home. My parents would be so ashamed..."

"Wait. I'd be in big trouble, too..." Edda mumbled. "If I had to repeat a year for being an idiot, my dad would end up using me as part of a science experiment!"

"My dad would have my head, I just know it. I suddenly don't want to go home during the next long holiday!" Constance shrieked.

They had it hard; a regional lord's son, a scientist's daughter, and a knight's daughter. Each one of them cried pathetically.

"Yikes. You actually have more than four bad marks," Heidemarie commented, glancing over Kai's shoulder to get a peek at Lucian's report. To make it easier for her to see, Kai passed the report to her.

"Don't tell me all of you are in the same boat," Heidemarie said with a gasp. "Are you guys actually stupid? Oh, that's right. I guess you are."

The three accused were appalled.

"You're the stupid one, stupid!"

"I never dreamed an *actual* idiot would call me out for my intelligence," Heidemarie shot back.

"Meanie! I can't believe you're acting this way just because your scores were a *teeny-tiny* bit high!"

Heidemarie huffed. "My score is twice what Constance's is. No, I actually mean it." After looking at everyone's reports, her face paled and she finally (reluctantly) said, "I guess I have no other choice. I'll tutor you, but you'd better study like your lives depend on it."

Since she was always in the top five of their class, the three idiots immediately lit up at her suggestion.

"H-Heidemarie!"

"I knew you were the best!"

"I might actually fall for you at this rate..." Lucian muttered, tears in his eyes as he gazed at her.

"No, anything but that," Heidemarie replied instantly, cutting him to the

quick.

Beside her, Kai was already getting ready to pack up and leave.

“Kai, come on! Help teach us!” Lucian whined at his friend, who was coincidentally also in the top five in the class.

“It’s none of my business. Learn to clean up after your own messes.”

“Heartless jerk!”

“Shut up, moron,” Kai snapped back at him. “Heidemarie, if you need some extra hands, feel free to call on me.”

“Thanks, Kai. And what about you guys, Oriana?”

Oriana shook her head. “I’m nowhere smart enough to join you, so I’ll bow out today.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to refrain as well. You don’t need any more students than you already have, do you?” Since Yana refused to participate, that of course meant Azraq wouldn’t be joining them either.

Heidemarie smiled and nodded. “Got it. Well, guess I’ll see you guys tomorrow. Okay, my three idiots, open your textbooks!”

“Urgh. I can’t even argue with that nickname.”

“Reality is brutal sometimes...”

Even as they sniffled dejectedly, they pulled out their textbooks and answer sheets and placed them on their desks. After bidding her four friends farewell, Oriana and the rest stepped out into the hallway.

“Your grades were pretty good this time, weren’t they? Is that thanks to the study time you have been spending with Mister Tanzine?” Yana asked.

“Hardly. There’s no way a student from the Special Class could waste precious study time before an exam tutoring someone from Class 2.”

Even though they had studied together in the past, their classes were covering completely different material. Oriana could hardly ask him to tutor her under the excuse that they were friends during such an important time. She’d rather reserve that for when they didn’t have exams looming ahead of them.

Besides, the other students at Lagen weren't yet accustomed to seeing Vincent together with a commoner, so every time they studied together, it attracted a crowd. That was why Oriana decided against studying together recently. She knew he probably wanted to concentrate, and the added attention might only disturb him.

"I don't want to get in the way of his studies," she said.

Vincent was far more serious than anyone else she had ever seen before and extremely dedicated to his education. Yes, he had provided her a tiny bit of inspiration to improve, and she did want him to recognize her efforts, but that didn't mean it was appropriate for her to impose.

"I believe you are an earnest, hard-working person. If you put the effort in, I am sure you won't be disappointed by the results."

That was the first time anyone had ever said anything like that to Oriana. Now that she thought about it, she had never really put in any particular effort into anything before. Her father had an abundance of money, and thanks to that, she'd never really had to suffer. She'd even been enjoying herself quite a bit since she entered the Academy.

Oriana saw nothing wrong with that. Had she not spent her time the way she had, she wouldn't be blessed with so many friends, and the days wouldn't be so joyful.

But I did panic, watching him.

Although they were the same age, Vincent had his eyes on the future and was steadily moving forward. Watching from the side, she couldn't help but be overwhelmed. He was so dazzling and radiant that she found herself wanting to match his pace and walk beside him.

Come to think of it, he smiled and said that staying at the top was his way of "struggling in vain." At the time, it didn't seem like he wanted to speak any further about it, but maintaining top grades for three straight years hardly seemed like struggling in vain to her. *I wonder if he'll eventually tell me why he's doing it.*

There was just one reason why she didn't ask back then and why she didn't

want to impose on his studies either. *Because I don't want to be a burden on him. Or maybe it's more like...I don't want him to think of me as a burden.* Inwardly, she had to laugh at herself for being so shallow.

"Yana, Azraq, have you guys given the future any thought?" The question suddenly spilled out of Oriana's mouth as she found herself feeling like Vincent was leaving her behind.

"I have. I plan to join Amanecer's Magic Delegation," Yana said coolly without even pausing to contemplate her answer.

"Whaat?!" Oriana's jaw dropped.

The Magic Delegation was a group comprised of representatives from different countries, coming together for the purpose of exchanging information on their respective fields of magical expertise.

"There's a scout here at the Academy. By the time I graduate, I'll be both Ete Kariman royalty and a Lagen Magic Academy alumna, making me more than valuable enough to be a member, don't you think?"

A woman should be charming, and her circumstances were of her own making. It was up to her to primp herself enough to be desired by men, and there was no shame in using her position to her advantage. Those were the words Yana lived by.

Oriana liked Yana's way of thinking. After entering the Academy and being faced with the class hierarchy, she'd lost confidence in herself being a mere merchant's daughter, but it was Yana's beliefs that had comforted her.

"I have already met with scouts a number of times. It's been arranged so that I'll join once I graduate."

Oriana gawked at Yana. There was so much she wanted to ask her friend, but her brain just spun in circles. Finally, she managed to settle on the most important question of all. "So that means...that after you graduate, you'll still be in Amanecer?!" Her eyes sparkled.

The way Yana smiled reminded her of a flower blooming. "I'm sure I will spend some time visiting various other countries, but yes. That is my intention. Does that make you happy?"

“Happy is hardly the word for it!”

“I’m glad to hear that. I was a bit anxious, to tell the truth.”

“What for?” Oriana shook her head. “I mean, ahem... I apologize for worrying you, my love, but you are the only woman I have feelings for! I swear I will never let you go again!”

“Hehe, I hate to break it to you, but I give my love to everyone, not just you.”

“Yanaaa!” Feigning the heartbroken boyfriend, Oriana pretended to sob.

In all truth, she was confused why Yana would be anxious at all. Oriana had originally expected she would go back to her homeland and return to being a princess, which would mean, being a mere merchant’s daughter, Oriana would see her connection to Yana severed. Part of her was resigned to it being out of her control, but hearing that Yana had different plans and was going to stay filled her with joy. It would be rough on Yana, going from being a princess to part of the working class—not that Oriana could fathom just how rough—but nonetheless, perhaps she could be close and offer her support.

“But that’s only if my future husband allows me to work,” Yana added.

Oriana nodded solemnly at the reminder that Yana still had that issue to resolve. She was still currently looking for a partner.

According to ancient Ete Kariman custom, she was to wed whatever man could best Azraq in a duel. That was her trial. Perhaps part of the reason she decided to study abroad in Amanecer was because in Ete Karima, there was no tradition of married women working.

“Well, Azraq won’t be losing to anyone, so I won’t have to worry about that. Isn’t that right?”

“Of course.”

“My dream is to tour the whole world with Azraq at my side, continuing the trial we have been undergoing.” She giggled and latched onto his arm, her movements as soft and flowing as that of a butterfly landing on a flower.

Azraq made sure Yana was in no danger of falling as she dangled on his arm, and as he turned to Oriana, he smirked. “Well, there you have it.”

“Makes sense. So basically, by virtue of her decision, your future is already set in stone, too.” Oriana had no way of knowing what he really thought beneath that cool mask, but at least on the surface, he looked like he had no complaints about the arrangement.

“Correct. Because I am Princess Yana’s bodyguard.”

Even though Oriana often forgot that simple fact, his indifferent statement reminded her of their reality. *That’s right, she thought. He’s not a real student. He’s here as part of his job. Unlike the rest of us, he’s actually working.*

A little worried, she snuck a glance at Yana, but the latter was still wrapped around Azraq’s arm, smiling calmly.



“**THIS** has got me way more panicked than I thought,” Oriana mumbled to herself as she ambled down the cobblestone path all alone.

She never dreamed one of her friends was already considering their future even though they were still only in their third year at the Academy. Perhaps even Kai and Heidemarie, who were the most mature of their group, already had a clear vision for what they wanted in life too.

But what is it that I want to do?

If she kept going with the flow and letting it take her wherever, would she still be able to find something she wanted to do? She was beginning to feel like scum for having no dreams or ambitions, and that in itself came as a shock. Her mind was blank as she meandered absently down the path, not noticing the step until it caught her foot and tripped her.

“Aaah!”

I’m going to fall! Fortunately, no sooner had she thought that than someone grabbed her by the arm. The impact must have loosened the band around her books because all of her texts went scattering across the ground.

“Sorry. Thank you for... Miguel!” To her surprise, he was the one who’d saved her from her fall. He had a lollipop stick protruding from his lips as his large hand held fast to her arm.

"Heya. If you keep swinging back and forth like a pendulum as you walk, you're liable to fall, y'know."

"Was I that unsteady on my feet?" Oriana asked with a laugh.

"Yep. About like this," Miguel said, mimicking her movements by staggering back and forth, almost like a drunkard.

"You're exaggerating way too much."

"Okay, so more like this then?" He continued his weird pendulum motion, though with less speed this time, and Oriana burst into laughter.

"What are you doing all the way out here, Miguel?" she asked.

"Helping Vincent out." Miguel pointed a finger in the direction of the forest. "The ink for his converter ran out, so I came to get a refill."

"If it's an inkwell you need, I have one."

"Mm. We can borrow that then. I bet you were heading out here to see Vincent anyway, right?"

For a moment she wondered how he knew, but thinking about it, students only took this particular path for one reason. The only thing that lay ahead was the Herbology facility. Oriana had looked for Vincent in the study hall and the library but hadn't found him there, so she intended to check the Herbology fields next. They hadn't seen each other in almost two weeks by now, and as friends, she'd hoped to see his face again.

"Wanna go together?" Miguel offered.

"I won't be in your way?"

"Don't see how you could be. Though, on the other hand, you'll probably get your clothes dirty."

"Again?"

Miguel wasn't in his work clothes today, but his robes were covered in splotches of dirt. They were probably doing more experiments in the field and trying to collect data, she figured.

Vincent was, as usual, tilling the fields with his magical implement. He spent

half of his free time studying and the rest of it he dedicated to his invention. Oriana could see why he hadn't managed to make any other friends besides Miguel these past three years.

Oriana had pitched in with the development of his invention several times now. Most of it involved her drawing magic circles for him, so lately, she'd kept magic paper and a pen stuffed in her sleeves.

"Want some candy?" Miguel asked.

"No thanks. If I'm going to help, I'll be getting my hands dirty."

"Sure are eager to pitch in. How kind of ya."

"Really? You think so? Hm, but you could stand to praise me more," Oriana teased.

"Yep, you're practically a saint. You know you're gonna get dirty, but that doesn't bother you, and you've memorized a bunch of circles you'll never use again just to help out. We're lucky to have you."

"Oh, come on, enough of that," Oriana said. "You're actually going to make me blush..."

"That's what I was aiming for."

"Urgh! You're way too good at this!"

"Hahaha!"

Though she had no idea when he'd started helping Vincent, Miguel was an impeccable assistant, and the two made a perfect team. That naturally meant Oriana's experience, knowledge, and even talent for the role of helper was nowhere near Miguel's level. Nonetheless, it was precisely because Miguel and Vincent were so accepting of her as she was that she didn't lose confidence in herself. That was why she wanted to be useful to them, why she studied various circles, why she made sure she could draw them off the top of her head as needed. It was a bit embarrassing, desperately pouring in so much effort for the sake of others, but seeing how delighted they were by the results made her happy.

I wonder if Miguel's also thought about his future.

Perhaps, since he was so involved with Vincent's experiments which fell out of the purview of their normal studies, he also already had his own vision. Oriana clenched her jaw, folded her arms, and twisted her body, groaning. Her face puckered as she peered over at Miguel. "Oh, pardon me if you would, Mister Miguel."

"Yes, whatever could it be, Miss Oriana?"

"Well you see, Mister Miguel, I was wondering...um...do you perhaps already have a dream for yourself?"

"Huh?" Miguel blurted back, dropping the act. "What's this all of a sudden. You quizzing me on what I plan to do in the future?"

"No, uh, hehe... It just seems like most people have already made up their minds. So I'm feeling kind of embarrassed for myself since I've just been going with the flow with no real thought for what I want to do..."

"Mm? You think so? I bet Lucian's got no clue what he wants to do."

"But what if he actually does? I might fall into a coma from shock. What are you going to do then? Will you look after me if that happens?"

"Sure. Wanna get hitched while we're at it?"

"Oh no!" Oriana slapped her hands over her cheeks, swaying back and forth. "You mean to tell me I'll be an earl's wife in the future?!"

Miguel laughed. His teeth crunched down on the candy in his mouth, a crack echoing. "Well, I *am* the oldest son in my family, so it's not like I've got a lot of choices. My mom's from the Azure Dragon house, so I'll probably get married to a girl from there, I figure. And that's about it."

As a noble, Miguel was expected to dip his hands into politics and shoulder the burden of overseeing his family's territory. His future was already predetermined, so maybe he wasn't really in a position to give it much thought.

"The present is more important to me than what's ahead," he said. "Without the now, there would be no future."

It was so obvious she had never given it any deep thought, but as his words gradually sank in, Oriana gave pause, surprised.

“Don’t you think you’re worrying a little too much about what’s ahead?” Miguel flashed his usual mocking smile at her. “If you’re so eager to figure out what you wanna do in the future, why not enjoy what you can right now? They’re basically the same thing, after all. To find something you wanna do means to find something you enjoy, right?”

Perhaps this was what it meant to have an epiphany.

Oriana recrossed her arms over her chest, her shoulders feeling much lighter now, and glanced up at Miguel. “Huh... Can I call you my life mentor?”

“Aw, knock it off. I’m happy just being friends with you.”

“Oh, no! Be still my heart! How dare you say something so adorable! You’re killing me with cuteness over here. It goes without saying we’re already best buds. You’re going to have me grinning like an idiot in a second, so pass over some of that candy.”

“Certainly.” Miguel slipped a grape-flavored lollipop from his sleeve.

Oriana grinned and thanked him for it. The sweet flavor rolled over her tongue when she popped it in her mouth, and she suddenly felt empowered now that she’d kicked her anxiety to the curb.



“Viiiiinceeent!” She waved her arms through the air with exaggerated flourish, standing on her tiptoes.

Vincent had been crouching on a rock at the corner of one of the fields, glaring down at a piece of paper spread across his lap. When he heard her voice, he lifted his chin. He gave no reply, but illuminated by the evening sunlight, his cheeks looked redder than normal as he gazed straight at her. He seemed to be spacing out. Oriana had never seen him like this before. Despite being a handsome young man, the look on his face was like that of an innocent, lost boy.



“What’s wrong?” A ripple of anxiety ran through her as she scurried over to him. She peered at him worriedly, and he raised his hand to pat her on the head, freezing midway through the action.

Vincent gazed at her with such yearning, but after a moment, he flinched, his shoulders bouncing. “Oh...it’s you.” He smiled, even though he looked like he was on the verge of tears. “Sorry. For a moment, I...no, it’s nothing. Seeing your face has reenergized me. Thank you.”

Much as she wished for it, they weren’t close enough for her to pry, but she also wasn’t so much of an idiot that she took his words—saying she’d reenergized him by merely showing up—at face value. Nonetheless, she did think his thanks was genuine, so she grinned at him.

“Well, if my face can do that much, you’re welcome to look at it any time to cheer yourself up. Also, congratulations on taking the top spot on our most recent exams.” She bowed her head.

“Thank you.” Vincent mimicked her actions, returning the gesture. When they lifted their faces, they both laughed.

Good. I’m glad he’s smiling like normal again. Oriana had no idea what was going through his head, but at least he didn’t look utterly dejected like he had a second ago. Relief washed over her.

Vincent turned his attention to Miguel, who was strolling up behind Oriana. “You made a good find, Miguel.”

“And get this, we have an inkwell too.”

“Ehehe, that one is thanks to me!” Oriana piped in.

“Excellent job, both of you.”

Oriana passed the inkwell over to him.

“Thanks, I’ll be borrowing this then,” he said, popping the lid off. His pen was soon gliding across the paper in front of him.

“Incredible,” Oriana murmured. “Exams are barely over and you’re already back at this, huh?”

"Time is limited, after all," Vincent answered even as he continued to draw.

At the edge of the field, Magical Implement Number 4 was lying idle, covered in dirt. Number 4 was a name she had slapped on it while she was helping Vincent out. She went with that because she was sure he'd probably made numerous versions of it before.

"I'll lend a hand," Oriana said as she rolled up her sleeves. Suddenly, she remembered the lollipop still in her mouth. She plucked it from her lips and inspected it. Since she'd only just started on it, it hadn't gone down in size much at all. "I hate to ask this since you were kind enough to give it to me, but do you mind if I bite it?"

"Go for it," Miguel said.

Oriana placed the flat side of the lollipop between her teeth and tightened her jaw, but she was struggling to break through it. As she was clamping her teeth around it, Miguel and Vincent stared straight at her. She popped it out of her mouth for a moment and cleared her throat. "Ahem, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't look. It's a bit embarrassing."

Miguel only laughed, while Vincent awkwardly averted his gaze. Once she was sure they weren't watching anymore, she went back to trying to bite it in half. A loud pop resounded as it crumbled between her teeth. Unfortunately, one of the shards was so large that as it slid across her tongue, she felt a sharp pain shoot through her mouth.

"Ouch!" she cried.

"What's wrong?"

"I cut the inside of my mouth."

Vincent lifted himself up from the boulder he'd been parked on and grabbed her face.

"Gweh?!"

His eyes were the same amethyst color as the lollipop she'd just broken between her teeth. Seeing them up close, her whole body tensed. *Wh-What's going on? Is he going to kiss me?*

He had seized both of her cheeks and was examining her with a very serious expression. Oriana's heart started pounding furiously. All the heat in her body concentrated in her cheeks, and her lips began trembling.

"Open your mouth."

Oriana held her breath. Her mind was still in a state of shock as she obeyed his command and parted her lips. Vincent immediately peered inside.

It's not a kiss... But what's he doing?!

There was still a shard of the lollipop resting on the top of her tongue. Vincent reached his fingers in and grabbed it.

"Ngaah...!"

In the same instant, the back of his fingers grazed her tongue, and she let out a voice so strange that even she was shocked by it.

What is he...huh?! He grabbed...the piece I was sucking on...

Oriana had never experienced a boy her age peering into her mouth like this before, let alone sticking his fingers in to grab something covered in her saliva. She was frozen solid as he tipped and tilted her chin, showing no compunction as he glanced at the inside of her mouth from different angles. He was treating this like a doctor's exam. Oriana's head was spinning so much she wanted to cry.

Eeeeek! Wh-What is he doing? I can't take this. What did I eat before this? Oh God, I should have brushed my teeth. Please, let this be over quickly!

She was too embarrassed to move her tongue since he was peering inside her mouth, which meant she couldn't say anything even if she wanted to. The saliva was beginning to build, and she had no choice but to swallow it down even as she held her mouth wide open. Her cheeks flushed bright red, and she snapped her eyes closed, waiting for it to end.

Miguel, what are you doing? Hurry up and save me, why don't you!

He should have been somewhere nearby, though she knew not whether that was in front of her, beside her, or behind her. Regardless, he could have thrown her a line, but strangely, she couldn't even sense him anywhere nearby.

"Is this it? Is this where it hurts?" Vincent asked solemnly, head still tilted to the side as he scrutinized where the cut was.

Oriana plucked up what strength she had left to shake her head. She'd only cried out because she was surprised, but the wound wasn't so serious he needed to fuss over her like this.

Relieved that it was superficial, Vincent finally released her cheeks. The tension had only begun to drain from Oriana's body when he rested his head against her shoulder. "Thank goodness."

It's not like it was life or death or anything...

Oriana was only further confused by his exaggerated reaction. Vincent had never tried to touch her more than was necessary. This was the first time he'd put his hands on her like this. It was so intimate, and she was so unaccustomed to having a boy touch her that she was flustered the entire time. On top of that, she was now pinned in place. It went without saying that she'd never lent her shoulder to a boy her age before.

"Sorry for making you worry, but um, I'm perfectly fine...so..."

Before Oriana could finish speaking, Vincent suddenly wrapped his arms around her.

"Huh...?"

Almost as soon as his arms snaked around her, they slipped away again. His entire body began to slip toward the ground. Apparently, he'd been trying to cling to her to keep from falling. Shocked, she completely forgot about the fact that she still had the lollipop stick in her hand and tried to catch him, but it was sudden, and his weight was too much for her to bear. Unable to withstand it, she collapsed onto her bottom with him landing face down in her lap.

"Ouch..."

"Everything okay?" Miguel asked as he hurried over. For whatever reason, he'd apparently given them some space. That explained why he hadn't come to save her even though she'd been on the verge of dying from embarrassment.

Teary-eyed, Oriana glared at him. "Does this look okay to you?! Vincent?

Vincent?!" Vincent was completely unconscious in her lap. When she finally got a good look at his face, it was bright red. His breathing was coming out in ragged gasps, too. She'd thought his blushing cheeks were merely a product of the sunlight, but now she realized he'd had a fever this whole time.

"What do we do?! Is he sick?!" Oriana shouted, panicking. For him to collapse out of nowhere like this, she could only guess it had to be something serious.

In contrast, Miguel didn't seem at all worried. "He's been pretty busy lately between his studies and research, so the exhaustion must've caught up with him. Sorry 'bout that. He must be heavy." He dragged his friend out of her lap. Even though Vincent had been heavy enough that Oriana had no hope of moving him, Miguel managed to lift Vincent onto his back like it was nothing. Judging by the way Vincent's entire body hung limply, he really was completely conked out.

"Guess I must've let him push himself too much," Miguel said.

"Everyone always talks about how he's a superhuman who's never caught a cold before..."

"Instead of listening to ridiculous rumors, why not actually pay attention to the person who's right in front of you?"

He's absolutely right.

Miguel's words were like a slap across the cheek. Miguel must have caught the gloomy look on her face because he raked a hand through his hair. "My bad. I was taking things out on you. The real person I'm pissed at is me, for taking his word for it that he was doing fine."

"No, I should apologize. I know that Vincent's only achieved what he has because he worked hard for it, and I still said something so insensitive..."

Vincent Tanzine was like anyone else; if he didn't study, he couldn't take first place, and if he worked himself to the bone, he'd catch a fever. Oriana had frequently caught fevers when she was little, giving her father endless grief. She had been lucky enough to get the opportunity to see that Vincent was a normal human being, but she had still said something so stupid. She was ashamed of herself.

Oriana dug into Vincent's pocket and took out the key to the storehouse, stowing away the magical implement he'd been in the midst of using for his experiment. She also rolled up the paper he'd been studying so earnestly, and she and Miguel walked together toward the infirmary.

"He's normally good about conserving his energy, but he got a little too fired up this time," Miguel explained.

"Did something happen to cause that?"

"...He met you and had to go through his first real test."

"Huh?" She quirked a brow at him.

Miguel kept his gaze focused straight ahead as he hauled Vincent along. "He wanted to look good for you, since you're his new *friend*."

"Look good? But he always looks good..."

"Well, when you come to check in on him later, be sure to tell him that."

Oriana giggled and patted her chest. "Of course, leave it to me!" But as she listened to Vincent's strained breathing, her brows furrowed. "If only I could visit the boys' dorms to see him."

"Why not? I'll let you in."

"What? You mean I can actually enter?"

Miguel grinned. "We're on the second floor, but there's a tree right by our window."

"...Oh. You meant to sneak in, not get permission from a professor or the dorm head. And on top of that, you're asking me to climb a tree?"

"Yup." He nodded like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Oriana burst into laughter. "You know, it's kinda funny how you treat me like I'm a guy. I've never had anyone tell me to climb a tree before."

"You wouldn't want to hang out with me if I treated you like a girl, right?" He paused for a moment before adding, "I like hanging out with the three of us—you, Vincent, and me."

Even assuming he was merely joking around, it didn't seem to be a total lie.

They hadn't really started talking to each other properly until about four months ago. The three of them hadn't hung out much at all, but knowing that even such a short period had been special to him warmed Oriana's heart.

"Thank you... It means a lot hearing you say that," Oriana said, meeting Miguel's gaze. She decided not to let her own embarrassment get the better of her this time and discourage her from saying what was on her mind. "I enjoy it being the three of us, too."

In all honesty, they hadn't spent enough time together for her to feel that way from the bottom of her heart, so she'd merely said it as a way of returning the gesture to him. But she was shocked by his reaction.

I can't believe he's smiling with such joy on his face.

Miguel was a hard person to read normally, but the way his eyes softened as he grinned, genuinely happy, made her stare in awe.



OBVIOUSLY, the plan of having Oriana climb a tree to visit Vincent in the boys' dormitory never came to fruition. That was mainly because Vincent was confined to the infirmary, his fever a result of overworking himself.

Vincent normally managed his health perfectly, so the fact that he'd gotten sick shook up the whole school. That just went to show how much everyone at Lagen Magic Academy idealized him as a superhuman.

It wasn't until a few days after he'd initially collapsed that word reached Oriana that he'd attended one of his classes again. Afternoon lessons had barely begun when she heard the news, so she spent the next couple of hours restless and unable to focus. She was so worried about him that the second the bell rang, she dashed down the halls and stealthily peered inside the Special Class's classroom.

Vincent was packing his things, getting ready to leave. Beside him were Miguel and a female student Oriana had never seen before.

Oh... So he does talk to other girls besides me. Oriana was flabbergasted at herself for being shocked by that. She almost wanted to slap herself silly. *Come on now! You already said you weren't going to look down on Vincent like that*

anymore! Oriana inwardly chided herself for treating him like he was some kind of loner.

But still, he's the one who told me he didn't have any friends besides Miguel, so I simply didn't think there was anyone else. Yeah, that's it. So there's no reason to slap myself silly after all, is there?

Oriana studied the girl beside Vincent. Her hair was a blindingly bright blonde color. She had elegant features and a dignified air about her. The way she conducted herself was graceful too, each action measured and delicate. She had to be nobility.

Wow. She fits in perfectly with them.

An earl's heir, a duke's heir, and a gorgeous noble lady. The three of them looked like they'd popped out of a storybook. There was something so natural about the way they interacted too, as if they'd known each other for years.

Unable to watch any longer, Oriana hid herself behind the door.

Wait a second... Was everything he said to me purely flattery?

Maybe he'd only told her he wanted to be friends so he could dispel her strange paranoia. And maybe she'd read too much into what Miguel said about liking it being the three of them.

Anxiety crashed over her for a moment, but she quickly waved her worries away. *That can't be it*, she thought. *I've spent plenty of time with them these past four months, and they really have tried to be a friend to me, I know it.*

Each time she recalled the great big grin on Miguel's face when she told him she liked it being the three of them too, she secretly felt guilty. Her "like" surely wasn't strong enough to warrant that kind of genuine smile. On top of that, Vincent had trusted her enough to confide in her that he had feelings for someone.

I don't want to dismiss the time we've spent together as a lie. Oriana had barely managed to pump herself back up when a student suddenly stepped out of the classroom.

"Oriana?"

Shocked, she jerked her head up. Her eyes landed on Vincent, who was still standing on the threshold.

“Oh, ‘sup?” Miguel casually greeted, peeking his head out from Vincent’s side. “It’s rare for you to come all the way here.”

It didn’t seem like that female student was going to be joining them. Oriana felt pathetic for being relieved at that. It was ridiculous for her to feel betrayed simply because they had another female friend. What was she, a drama queen?

“I’m glad to see you’re feeling better. I was just a little worried about you, so I came to check in,” she said.

“You came all the way here just for that? Thank you.”

All the way here...just for that... The words echoed in her head. Was she being a nuisance? Had she gone overboard? She was being too self-conscious. Neither one of them had admonished her for it, but for whatever reason, she was suddenly feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed for herself.

“Well, we’re friends,” said Oriana. “This is normal. Class 2 does it all the time.” She put extra emphasis on that, trying to cover for the truth. She felt ashamed of herself for being so restless and hung up over Vincent, wondering if he would be okay.

“Sorry, Oriana, but do you have a moment?” Vincent asked.

Oriana nodded, and Miguel gave her a slight wave before giving them some space. Vincent called her over to the edge of the hall. Once they were away from the main stream of people and it was just the two of them, Vincent dropped his voice and said, “I’m sorry for what happened before. I mean, I, uh... heard I put my arms around you...”

“Oh, that little thing?” Oriana shook her head. He was sick, so obviously there was no need for him to fret over it.

“That little thing?” Vincent echoed her words.

“It’s fine. Actually, I should be apologizing that I couldn’t keep you upright.”

Besides, the part where he examined her mouth stood out more in her mind. That was far more awkward, and she’d like nothing more than to forget it ever

happened.

“There is nothing for you to apologize for,” said Vincent. “I simply wanted you to know that I had no ulterior motives.”

“Oh. Right.”

“There was no other meaning to it. I’d like it if you could put it out of your mind.”

“Yeah.”

You don’t have to spell it out for me. The exhaustion was so bad he’d completely passed out. It was clear he was at his breaking point at the time. Oriana had a front-row seat to the whole thing, so she knew that better than anyone else.

Do you really need to drive the message home? You don’t have to go out of your way to warn me off. Just because you peeked into my mouth and put your arms around me doesn’t mean I’m going to suddenly fall for you.

Besides, as she suddenly remembered, he’d already told her that he had someone he liked.

“I met her, and that had to be the first time I ever did something of my own volition. Not one thing—I did a bunch of meaningless things that hadn’t been predetermined for me. I became a different person, but I didn’t hate the change it caused in me. It was like this big piece inside of me that had been missing for so long had suddenly been filled, and that’s how I realized: she’s the only person that can make me whole.”

She wasn’t such an idiot that she’d fall in love with a guy who was clearly head over heels for someone else. But...

“*But one thing I did realize is just how deeply you care about her.*”

“Yeah.”

When he said “yeah,” his voice was so soft and his expression was so much sweeter than she had ever seen it before. Oriana found herself envious of this girl for being able to evoke such a change in him.

I wonder what it feels like to be that cherished by someone. It sure would be

nice if someone felt that way for me...

Vincent didn't seem like the type to fall that hard for someone, so that was probably why it caught her attention so much. Yeah, that had to be it. She was convinced there could be no other reason.

Suddenly, Oriana's gaze wandered to the classroom door, where the girl who had been standing beside Vincent earlier suddenly appeared. She glanced toward Oriana and flashed a smile at her before walking off.

Oriana's chest squeezed painfully, and she forced herself to grin. "Well, we're friends! Things like that happen."

"Right. Because we're friends."

"Yes," she insisted. "Because we're friends!"

That's why I can support you like that when you have a fever and help you out when you're trying to invent a new magical implement...because we're friends.

Oriana repeated those words again and again inside her head, like a mantra.

Chapter 5: Winter, The Beginning of Love's Opera

THEIR long holiday break had never seemed to drag on as much as it was this time around. Vincent was deeply distressed as he sat on the couch at his family home, surrounded by his mother and older sisters. The tea one of them had prepared should have been exquisite, but he couldn't taste anything.

I want to see Oriana. It didn't matter whether he was touring the region, lounging around in their estate, or attending dance parties he'd been invited to —that was all he ever thought about.

Their third year had ended, and with it, they'd entered a long holiday. He spent every year around this period cooped up in their territory; inspecting the region and mingling with the neighboring nobility wasn't an optional duty. And yet this year, since his father was returning to the capital, Vincent decided to accompany him. There was absolutely no chance he'd glimpse Oriana back in their region, and while being in the capital guaranteed nothing, there was a non-zero chance he might see her at least.

Even I must admit I'm acting like a lovestruck maiden.

Two-thirds of their break was already over by now, and his cunning plan to run into her had yet to bear him any fruit. The only thing he'd managed to accomplish was reading more books.

"Vincent, in two more hours, we'll be leaving. Make sure you are prepared," his mother warned, having noticed that his mind had been wandering throughout their tea hour. She treasured having teatime with her family more than anything else, and he'd upset her with his disregard.

Flustered, Vincent reached his hand out. His mother accepted it, wearing an impassive mask on her face, and stood up. He was a bit late noticing it, but his sisters had already disappeared from the room. They had likely retreated to their dressing rooms to pick out their gowns for the opera later. It wouldn't be too long before their respective partners visited to fetch them.

"Allow me to escort you to your dressing room, Mother," Vincent said.

"It was *your* preparations I was discussing just now," his mother reminded him.

"I'm a man. It won't take me long at all."

She gave Vincent a fleeting look but said no more after that. As she desired, he played the part of the respectful son, wearing a polite smile as he pulled her along and delivered her to her dressing room.

When he left her there and turned to leave for his own room, the butler Marcel intercepted him. "I have delivered your bouquet," he said.

"All right. Thank you."

Every year, Vincent had an anonymous bouquet delivered to Oriana on her birthday. He suspected no one would find it suspicious if a random bouquet showed up alongside the mountain of other presents she was surely showered with. At first, he did it as a way to send a secret signal to her that he still retained his memories. Each time he would take a walk around their estate and pluck the flowers himself to arrange the bouquet. Afterward, he would entrust it to Marcel and have him deliver it to the Elsha estate, in such a way that it couldn't be traced back to him.

The flowers he picked were the sort that blossomed in forests and on roadsides, the natural, plain sort. They were neither an opulent nor vibrant assortment, but they did possess a quaint calmness. Admittedly, they weren't at all fitting for a birthday bouquet, but that was also why he was positive she would be able to identify who'd sent them.

I never dreamed she didn't have her memories.

If she'd had her memories from their previous timeline, she would have recognized them immediately. They were the same kind of flowers he'd gathered out of nowhere before when he invited her to go to the ball with him.

"Also," Marcel continued, "there is something I'd like to inform you about, regarding the event later today."

"What? You want me to tuck the organizer's favorite flower into the pocket of

my suit? Is that it?" Vincent responded sarcastically. He had been proactively attending events as of late in hopes he might be able to see Oriana, but after days and days of these outings, the exhaustion was beginning to catch up to him.

Marcel flashed a polite smile at him and said, "The Elshas have reserved seats in the gallery."

Vincent froze in place.

"According to rumor, Mr. Elsha has even had some sweet drinks prepared for a lady."

Oriana didn't have a mother. It was possible Mister Elsha was inviting along his next potential partner, but it wouldn't be strange at all for him to take his beloved, only daughter along to enjoy the opera.

Vincent tried to still his thundering pulse as he fixed his eyes on Marcel. "So you still remember her name, do you?"

"Of course. I haven't burned your agreement with your father either, since you have maintained the top seat throughout your exams."

"Dammit..." Vincent pulled a face, but Marcel didn't look the least bit bothered. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying himself. Vincent huffed at him, "Fetch my sky-blue tie pin for me."

"As you wish."



"GOODNESS, this year is quite the spectacle."

"Agreed. Every single year manages to be no less incredible than the last."

It was the morning of her birthday. Oriana was wearing pajamas with a cardigan pulled over them, standing there staring up alongside the elderly head maid. There, in the middle of the entrance, a stack of presents was piled high—a given for the only daughter of an up-and-coming merchant family.

If Oriana were to be honest, there wasn't a single gift among them that pleased her. Her father's acquaintances competed among themselves to see who could send the most valuable gift, but not a single one of them actually

considered whether their gift would make her happy or not.

“All right, well, I’m going to go eat,” she said.

“The kitchen staff are fired up this morning, given the occasion.”

“I’ll be sure to thank them.”

“Oh, my lady,” the maid called after her. “Be sure to at least take a glance over the inventory and the cards you’ve received.”

“Kaaay.”

The head maid had looked after her ever since she was born, so to Oriana, she was like a mother figure. Thus, however reluctant she was to do this, she still obediently heeded the older woman’s command. Oriana always checked the gift inventory every year, to make sure that whenever and wherever she encountered someone who had sent something, she wouldn’t be caught off guard and risk offending them.

As she glanced over the list, she saw rows of names belonging to her father’s acquaintances and all manner of gifts that she couldn’t make heads or tails of. She secretly checked to see if Rysted’s name was listed as well. Thankfully, the present he offered was nothing too over the top for an apprentice. That felt like a load off her chest. Ever since their long holiday break started, she’d been anxious every single day about whether or not he’d resume his annoyingly persistent advances. Her fears had been unfounded, thankfully. She hadn’t seen him even once.

Oriana was lazily glancing through the last few names when her eyes landed on the final item, and immediately, her face lit up. “Ah, a bouquet! They sent one this year, too!”

It had been about ten years now since this anonymous person began sending her a bouquet. The flowers were plain and simple, and it was the same gift every year. Nonetheless, she found herself beginning to anticipate it. Of all the presents people sent her, this was the only one that felt truly sincere—specially picked just for her.

“Yes. I thought you would be pleased, so I already put them in some water.”

"Take them to my room later!" Oriana said.

"Very well." The maid paused. "But I do wonder who your secret admirer could be."

Oriana plucked a card out from the bouquet. *Happy Birthday* it read—a typical, formulaic greeting. Nonetheless, she grinned from ear to ear. "It doesn't matter who it is. Although, if I do discover their identity, I'd like to thank them for these past ten years."



EVEN at night, the Amanecer capital was still brightly lit. Streetlamps lined the main thoroughfare at regular intervals. The country had two magic academies, meaning they didn't lack for mages, which was a luxury compared to other countries. Sightseers from abroad traveled en masse to see the city at night.

In one corner of the capital was a particularly lively opera house. Carriages lined up one after the other at its entrance, passengers quickly disembarking to head inside. The street out front was lined with waiting carriages.

Inside, the lobby was dazzling with light amidst the pervasive darkness. The halls were brimming with fancily clad gentlemen and ladies. No matter where you looked, people were packed in like sardines, making it nigh impossible to spot a recognizable face among the crowd.

Oriana had come here tonight as part of her birthday celebration, and upon seeing the turnout, she quickly gave up on looking for anyone she knew. She had hoped to find even one classmate among all of these people, but the odds weren't in her favor.

Her short, plump father led the way, holding out his arm, which she lightly draped her hand over as they made their way a step at a time up the carpeted stairway. An enormous chandelier hung overhead at the top, and its magic-reflecting crystals were what illuminated the lobby.

Since this was a special night, being her sixteenth birthday, Oriana was wearing extremely high heels. Fortunately, she was able to maintain her balance and make it to the top of the steps without tripping.

"Hey there, Elsha. Your lover there is quite beautiful. Mind introducing her to

me?"

They were on their way to the gallery when someone called over to them, and the second Oriana caught a glimpse, she thought her eyes might bulge right out of her head from the shock.

"Oh, the Amethyst Dragon Duke. Fancy seeing you here," her father greeted in turn.

Oriana swallowed hard upon hearing his title. The man had slicked back golden blond hair, and his smile was glowing. Those amethyst eyes reminded her of Vincent, both deeply pensive and imposing. As Vincent's father, the Amethyst Dragon Duke, approached, he made it only a step before Oriana retreated a half step to curtsy.

"Actually, she's not my lover. We're family," her father said.

"Oh? But I haven't heard any news about you getting remarried?"

"Allow me to introduce her. This is my daughter, my pride and joy, Oriana."

"Greetings," Oriana said, her voice hitching due to nervousness. She slowly lifted her chin to find him smiling kindly at her. As Vincent aged, she suspected he would become the spitting image of his father. And yet, Duke Tanzine's charm and presence were entirely different from his son's.

Oh, wow. For an older man, he sure is handsome.

Oriana berated herself for being so flustered in front of a friend's parent. She forced a smile to distract herself from her blushing cheeks.

"It's an honor to make your acquaintance. As my father said, my name is Oriana."

"I brought her to the opera today to celebrate her birthday," her father explained.

"Oh? Happy birthday then, Oriana. For us to meet on such a special night like this...it can only be fate, don't you agree?" He jerked his chin slightly. Oriana immediately realized what he was hinting at. The blush extended all the way to her neck as she held out her right hand. The duke planted a kiss atop her gloved fingers. It was an extremely dated, formal gesture, but had she ever seen

anyone do it so stylishly before? No. No, never.

Eeeep! I can't do this. He's way too stunning!

The duke, who was still probably only barely over forty, smiled upon seeing how flustered and bright red she was.

His voice is just like Vincent's, and his eyes, too.

Oriana's face was burning so bright at this point she almost felt dizzy. Pulling her wits about her, she managed to squeak out, "Thank you, Your Grace. Meeting you like this has been the best gift all day." She was at her limit. Her voice strained so much it was trembling. He still had her fingers clasped in his hand, and as much as she wanted to plead with him to release her, she couldn't say the word. It was all she could do to stand there and keep herself upright.

"Father, I think it's about time we—"

"Vin...cent..." Oriana mumbled. His timing was like a gift from the heavens. While she was overwhelmed with anxiety, he appeared from the crowd to retrieve his father. She let out a sigh of relief, genuinely believing he would rescue her from her current predicament.

"Oh? Are you two acquainted?" The duke quirked a brow and glanced at his son.

"We're in the same year at the Academy," said Vincent. "So, you're attending tonight as well?"

"Yes," Oriana managed to say, though her voice still didn't sound normal. Her cheeks had been practically on fire a moment ago, but his words made her feel like she'd been doused in ice water.

"In the same year"? So he won't even call us friends... I guess maybe he wants to keep it a secret from his father. Oh, I'm such an idiot. I accidentally called him "Vincent."

Things were different here than they were at the Academy. Oriana knew that in her head, but it still came as an unexpected shock. While she spaced out, Vincent greeted her father. His eyes drifted to Oriana's hand, which was still in his father's grasp.

"Mother was calling for you. Sharon is waiting as well," he said.

"All right. I was hoping to celebrate with you a bit longer, but my apologies. I don't want to anger my wife. See you another time, Oriana." At last, he released her.

A wave of relief washed over Oriana, and she smiled at him from the bottom of her heart. "That sentiment means enough on its own. I was pleased that we were able to talk at all."

"Such a dutiful daughter. Be sure to come visit soon. We can pick up where we left off today." The duke tried to reach for her hand again to bid her farewell, but Vincent intercepted him.

"Father, there's no time."

"Ah, yes, I nearly forgot my son is just as scary when he's angry. Well then, I'll be off."

"All right."

The duke hastily left, still looking every bit as dashing in his retreat as when she first saw him. It was hard to believe this was the same person who'd just been admonished by his own son.

Vincent kept his eyes on his father until he disappeared into the crowd, then Vincent turned his attention back. It wasn't Oriana who he focused his gaze on, however, but rather her father.

"It has been a while, Mister Elsha."

"You certainly have grown," her father responded.

"Yes. I'm not nearly the mischievous child I was when we first met."

"Hm, I'm not so sure about that." Her father flashed a friendly smile, glancing at Oriana. She was confused as to why the conversation had suddenly turned toward her. In fact, she'd been struggling to keep up since the duke's sudden appearance, never mind Vincent's.

Vincent smiled weakly. "You have a point. I suppose I'm no less mischievous after all. Well, at any rate, the curtains will be going up momentarily. 'Till next we meet."

"Indeed." Her father gave a small nod and turned back to Oriana, a meaningful look in his eyes. She couldn't decipher what it was, but she stared right back at him nonetheless.

Vincent gazed into her sky-blue eyes and smiled, expelling a breath. "Oriana, happy birthday. I hope you have a wonderful day."

Puzzled, she furrowed her brows. "Uh, th-thank you..."

He actually knew today was my birthday.

No, surely he had only realized because of what his father had said a moment ago. She was just caught off guard by their conversation and never dreamed he would wish her a happy birthday.

The edges of Vincent's lips twitched, and he held up his hand in her direction. Realizing he was waving goodbye, she returned the gesture.

The distance between us now is so much greater than while we were in school. But still...the way he looks at me makes it clear he still wants me as his friend.

Oriana more or less understood that he wasn't outright rejecting her; there had to be a reason why he avoided having any kind of conversation with her. Thus, as his friend, she wanted to show him support. When he saw her wave at him, he smiled, satisfied. His necktie pin glimmered under the light of the chandelier.

"Goodbye," he said. His coat fluttered through the air behind him as he took off after his father.

Noisy chatter filled the surrounding air in the lobby as she watched Vincent's receding figure, her eyes never leaving him until he disappeared completely.



"DADDY...so you're acquainted with Vincent—or rather the Amethyst Dragon Duke?"

"As are you. That's an awfully intimate way to refer to the Amethyst Dragon Duke's son."

The gallery was shaped like a horseshoe around the stage, slightly elevated, so the audience could look down at the performers. The show was so successful

that all the seats in the gallery were sold out, from the front to the very rear. Even the standing seats at the very back were full.

Oriana pretended to keep her attention on the birthday bouquet set on the table in front of them. In a small voice, she answered, "We're friends." She wore a poker face as she said it, her voice low enough that it could easily disappear among the murmurings of the hundreds of other guests.

It was impossible to know who was eavesdropping and from where at a place as out in the open as this. Before the curtain rose, the gallery was almost like a stadium with how people hustled and hustled around. People's gazes were wandering, scrutinizing other people's expressions, ears tuned to the content of all the different conversations.

"Are you close?" Oriana's father asked.

"Sort of."

"I see. That's quite impressive."

Did I really put in enough effort to justify being praised like this?

Oriana felt a bit guilty, just as she had with Miguel. She wanted to put more effort in somehow, so that they could proudly call her their friend. Of course, she never dreamed her father was in such a position that a duke would strike up a conversation with him like that. She had never actually watched her father or his company at work, but he was more of a go-getter than she'd ever imagined.

Since Rysted is always at Daddy's side, he must have known how many connections Daddy has made.

That must have been why he panicked and resorted to such extreme measures to court her. Even if she could empathize, she wasn't going to forgive him for it, but having her suspicions answered did bring her some relief.

Back when it happened, I wasn't able to confirm any details, but Vincent seemed to know what was going on. It makes sense, since he seems to be acquainted with Daddy.

"How did you and Vincent meet?" Oriana asked.

"Happy big sixteen, my dear. Barely a year older, and you have already discovered that there's a whole mountain of information out there you're not privy to, hm?" He smiled warmly at her, but seeing that coy expression on his face, she knew he wasn't going to give her a straight answer. He hadn't been a father for sixteen years for nothing.

Oriana gave up on trying to wheedle anything out of him. She secretly stole a glance at Vincent, careful not to be too noticeable, lest she seem rude for staring. According to the governess that taught her etiquette, a single glance could be enough to trigger rumors. That was how sensitive high society was.

It was easy enough to find Vincent. He and three others were seated in a first-class viewing box. She recognized the duke and who she assumed to be his wife, but there was also a girl with them about the same age as Vincent. Her hair was golden blonde, just like the duke and Vincent, and there was something else familiar about her.

It's her, Oriana thought.

Even in a dress, Oriana still recognized her. She was the girl who had spoken so intimately in the Special Class with Miguel and Vincent. Seeing how amicably she conversed with the rest of Vincent's family made it clear that the duke and his wife had already accepted her. They all looked perfectly comfortable with each other, conversation flowing smoothly between them.

Oriana dropped her gaze to the glass of sweet champagne in front of her.

Vincent was jaw-droppingly gorgeous in his suit. He looked completely different from how she was used to seeing him in either his academy uniform or work clothes. His formalwear perfectly matched his superior status, making him look all the more like a stunningly handsome nobleman.

We live in completely different worlds.

It was only now that she realized she'd gotten too accustomed to the Academy's unique atmosphere. Even if she ran into Vincent like this, she couldn't casually chat with him, not here, where she was unprotected by the school's rules.

"Daddy, thank you for bringing me today," she said.

“Has this made for some good memories?”

“It has.”

She owed her father her gratitude. *I’m sure now I’ll never forget the difference in our status.* Thanks to today, she wouldn’t let things go to her head. She would remain calm and collected when evaluating anything. *Because no matter how close we get, no matter how much he calls me a friend, we’re still a world apart.*

Oriana directed her attention to the stage and never once glanced at the first-class viewing box again.

Chapter 6: A Love Abandoned in the Desert

THEY entered their fourth year, and as always, Oriana remained in Class 2.

“Yana! Welcome home!” Oriana was in the midst of unpacking in her dorm room when Yana walked in. Oriana threw her arms around the princess, her tiny, petite body fitting snugly in Oriana’s embrace.

“Yes, good to be back.” Yana softly leaned her weight against Oriana, as a show of how happy she was at their reunion. It was like being showered with affection by a lover who was normally ice-cold.

Shook to the core, Oriana swayed back and forth before squeezing her friend tighter. “How was the break?” she asked.

During their long holiday, Yana had stayed in a hotel in the capital. Apparently, several staff from her homeland attended to her there, and she found herself dragged off to all sorts of high society events. She was thoroughly exhausted, having spent her entire break acting as a diplomatic liaison in her capacity as Ete Karima’s princess.

“Nearly every person I met had the same annoying, redundant questions about whether my trial was up yet or not. A glare from Azraq was enough to silence them most of the time, but when he wasn’t around... I wonder if next year I can drag him along and flee somewhere else.” Yana sounded genuinely perturbed. She was smiling, of course, but she let out an enormous sigh.

This was the first time Oriana had ever heard her friend complain so openly. Before she even knew what she was saying, she blurted out, “How about staying at my place next year?”

Friends though they might have been, Yana was still a princess, and Oriana’s invitation was far too casual. Just as she started reflecting on how discourteous it might have been to offer so offhandedly, Yana’s mysterious black eyes fixed on her.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

"What? You mean you'll actually come? Of course, I'm sure!" Oriana nodded eagerly.

Yana's face lit up. Her expression was always beautiful, to be sure, but her genuine smile was so powerful it knocked Oriana out completely. "I'm so happy you're willing to have me. Thank you. I hope you won't change your mind when next year comes around," said Yana.

"Don't worry. You'll forever be adorable to me, Yana."

"Oh?" Yana giggled. As she finally set about changing out of her travel attire, Oriana jumped in to help.



"**OH** my, so you received a bouquet this year as well?"

"Yep. Here, see? There were some really fragrant flowers among them, so I turned them into a sachet." Oriana had brought up the topic of the bouquet she received every year as they unpacked, but she paused briefly to outstretch her hand, a tiny little bag cradled against her palm.

After enjoying the bouquet for a while, she enlisted a company to dry the flowers with magic. She then wrapped them in some organdy fabric and tied it with a golden ribbon. The material was so sheer that the dried remnants of the various flowers were visible.

"Oh, how cute."

"Right?" Oriana grinned. "Even I think I did a pretty good job, if I do say so myself." She studied the sachet as she praised her own work. When she pressed the bag close to her face, the flowery scent caressed her nose. It reminded her of the joy she'd felt receiving that bouquet on her birthday.

"I wonder why this person keeps sending me one every year, though," she muttered to herself.

"Are you sure they're not in love with you?"

"From the time I was a little girl? Besides, if that were the case, wouldn't they have at least revealed their name by now?"

"Maybe they're waiting for you to find them."

That made some sense, but even so, there were too few hints for her to go off of. The only clues she had were the card with the standard greeting and the wildflower bouquet itself.

“If I get one next year too, I guess I’ll try to look into who the sender is.”

Yana nodded. “Splendid idea. I will be happy to help.”

“A princess acting as a great detective’s assistant? I’ve never seen a story like that even in books.”

Yana giggled as she stowed her clothes away in the closet.

“A bouquet of wildflowers, hm... Yana, if it were you, what would you send your beloved?” Oriana asked.

“Me? Well, let’s see... Azraq likes alcohol, so—” Yana froze in the midst of hanging another outfit in the closet. Thinking it strange that she hadn’t moved an inch, Oriana moved closer and peered into her face. Yana’s cheeks had lit up bright red, and sweat was trickling down her forehead.

“Yana?”

Yana flinched. Her fingers slipped and the hanger she’d been holding fell to the ground along with the outfit dangling from it. Yana whipped around to face Oriana directly, but her eyes were nearly spinning in circles as she stuttered, “Uh, um, uh... Well, you see... I, um...”

“Yana...”

“No! It’s not...that’s not what I... Hold on. It didn’t make any sense just now for me to bring up Azraq, did it? Please, forget what I said and let me answer properly this time.”

“Yana, I want to know the truth.” Oriana grasped her friend’s hands tightly.

Yana glanced down at their interlocked hands before peering up at Oriana’s face. Her lips trembled. “Nngh...”

“So cute...”

“Nngh....” Her face flushed an even deeper crimson. She groaned like a wild beast, but her eyes were those of a girl in love. It was so adorable that Oriana

could barely contain herself. Resigned, Yana mumbled, “I’m just so exhausted. I was finally released from my duties and returned to the dorm, and it’s been so long since I last saw you that I just...I let my mouth slip.”

“I know.”

“I wanted to keep it under wraps. My love for him, it’s...not right.”

Oriana nodded. “I get why you don’t want to talk about it, but I’d like to hear. Can’t you share with me?”

If Yana refused her, Oriana wasn’t going to press the issue, but apparently her feelings got through. Yana peered up at her with teary-eyes, as if she was at her wits’ end and begging for support.

“I...I love Azraq.” Yana’s body was still stiff as a board, but her voice was unbelievably soft. It was as if she’d summoned all the courage in the world to eke out those words, conveying how genuine her feelings were. “I’ve always, always loved him. Ever since we were children...” She squeezed Oriana’s hands tight.



FOR as long as Yana could remember, Azraq had been at her side.

Ete Karima’s royal palace was lauded as one of the most luxurious in all the world. The pillars within even had jewels embedded into them. In the courtyard, pillars of water would shoot up every hour. The garden boasted flowers from all over the world, and the place was always filled with the laughter of beautiful girls in opulent attire.

Children of the king spent their youth in the harem until they reached eight years of age. Thus, until she was six, Yana was raised alongside Shinra, her older brother, and Azraq, who was almost like a brother, too, despite not being blood-related.

Yana always loved Azraq. She had nine older brothers, but she was more attached to him than any of them. There was even a time when she refused to leave his side, when her right hand was always joined to his left.

Once she passed the age of six, her naughty side hit its peak. She would

frequently sneak out of the harem if the person watching her looked away for even a second. During these times, everyone would immediately look for Azraq. Instead of trying to pin down the location of an unprecedently rambunctious six-year-old, it was faster for them to hunt down the mature eight-year-old boy instead. Every time, without fail, she would be right there beside him.

Since Yana was so attached to him, they decided to saddle him with the role of being her bodyguard. Azraq was already devoting himself to martial arts at the time, and even though he was only eight, he was still strong enough that he could easily take down a full-grown adult. That was what prompted the grown-ups to entrust the job to him.

Once Azraq was around her full-time, Yana's mischievous streak came to an abrupt end. It made sense; she'd only avoided her caretakers because she wanted to seek out Azraq and be with him, but now that he was with her all the time, it wasn't necessary to shake anyone off.

With Azraq by her side, Yana learned the necessary grace and tenderness befitting a princess. Their days were peaceful and calm, and she thought they would continue that way forever.

Things changed on her twelfth birthday.

"Yana, I'm going to marry you off to Azraq," said her father.

"Oh? That's one thing I absolutely cannot accept."

It was around that same time that she realized her love for Azraq wasn't platonic.



"THERE were talks of you being engaged to Azraq?" Oriana asked, tilting her head. She'd been listening silently up until that point.

Yana smiled. It had been four years now since she and Oriana became friends. When they met for the first time, she never dreamed she would show this much of herself to someone else.

Back in Ete Karima's palace, Yana had kept dozens of servants, but there wasn't a single person among them she could call a friend. No matter how long

they knew each other, at the end of the day, a servant was still a servant and Yana was a princess. Yana realized how much power her words had, which was why she gradually began to keep an emotional distance from those around her. It wasn't until then that she realized, for the first time, that other people never thought themselves close to her to begin with.

Oriana's different. She gauges where the line is, but she never distances herself. And right now, she's actually trying to step past my walls.

Yana never dreamed she would be able to make a friend like this. Part of her was chagrined that Oriana asked for details, but at the same time, she was happy to have someone to listen. She stammered as she spoke. It was the first time she had ever spilled her guts like this before.

"That's right," she said. "Azraq was from a respectable enough family that it didn't matter if I was married out of royalty. Rather than send his unruly daughter off somewhere that she might cause issues, my father must have figured it better to keep me under tabs within the country by sticking me with Azraq."

Oriana knitted her brows, puzzled. "But then why would you even bother with this trial...?"

Yana found her friend's expression blindingly innocent. *That's right, Oriana doesn't yet know what love is.* She probably thought that if you liked someone, a sudden engagement to them could only be cause for celebration. Oriana didn't know what it was like to feel as if your heart was on fire, to want to cry so badly you were willing to do things that went completely against your true feelings, to be desperate to run away, to have a jumble of absolutely miserable emotions that were so overwhelming they were beyond handling.

"The answer to that should be obvious enough: because I don't *want* to marry him," Yana said with a smile. "I really have been glued to Azraq ever since we were little. And that's why I know exactly who it is he has feelings for."

Oriana swallowed hard.

I, too, wish I could return to the time when I didn't know what love was. I'm sick and tired of my own emotions leading me by the nose, of being powerless to resist them, Yana thought to herself, remembering how innocent she'd been as

she clung desperately to Azraq's hand as a child.

"You see, Azraq is in love with Mother. My mother, that is."

Azraq's gaze was always fixed on her. Yana's mother had been accepted into the harem at fourteen, and she was only sixteen when she gave birth to Yana. She'd been too young to be a mother, which was why Yana was so much tinier as a baby than any of her siblings.

Among her father's harem, Yana's mother was probably the most beautiful or close to it. She was the target of jealousy and envy at the palace. Naturally, as a young boy, Azraq admired her. When they were around her, even though he was supposed to be protecting Yana, his attention was always fixed on her mother.

Yana's mother was a bit of a klutz, which meant she needed more looking after than Yana did. Her mother was already charming enough, but being scatterbrained on top of being a world-class beauty only added to her appeal. Each time her mother would bump into something or drop something, Azraq would leave Yana behind and race straight to her.

Any time Yana's mother left the harem, Azraq was always right with her. He stayed glued to her left side. He'd undergone a growth spurt since passing age ten, and so even as he stood beside her, he didn't look the least bit out of place.

It was forbidden for any man to touch one of the king's wives, so Azraq always had his right hand hovering close to her without ever actually making contact. That hand was always off-limits to Yana; he had to have it free to protect her, he insisted. But in reality, he always kept that hand free to protect her mother, even though she wasn't his charge. That alone said how much he wanted to touch her even though he couldn't, and as she watched from behind, Yana's chest squeezed painfully.

That right hand stole my heart. I fell in love with him because of how much he yearned for my mother.

That was the beginning of her futile love. No matter what she did, she could never win. It was made that much worse by the fact that she was a princess in Ete Karima. She was in a position where she could ignore Azraq's feelings and still have him for herself anyway.

"Azraq is eighteen. My mother is thirty-two. Apparently, she's even more beautiful now than she was before."

During the long holiday, a servant from Ete Karima had informed her about her mother, and it only served to make her miserable. She hadn't returned once since enrolling at Lagen Magic Academy. Before coming here, Azraq had already looked like an adult when standing beside her mother, and he'd probably look even more fitting at her side now.

There was only a two-year difference between her and Azraq, while there was a fourteen-year difference between him and her mother. Yet the two of them looked far more suited to one another. Even after having a child, her mother had only grown more beautiful. She could do nothing but sit there, and she would still be irresistibly alluring.

"I don't want Azraq to see even a glimpse of her, which is why I don't want to go back." Yana laughed at her own cowardice.

Each year, her face grew to resemble her mother's more and more. No matter how much people praised her for her beauty, it didn't make her the least bit happy. It actually made her sick when Azraq, in particular, praised her looks.

"It's a serious crime to fall for one of the king's wives. But in the end, that's all just an excuse. I simply...don't want him to love me as my mother's replacement when she's the one who's really captured his heart."

When her father approached her about the arrangement, she strongly refused, even though Azraq was present. She did it because she wanted to emphasize to him that she had no intention of marrying him and that her feelings for him weren't romantic at all. She even selected him as her bodyguard for her trial because she was desperate to keep her cruel, cowardly feelings a secret.

Even if it meant dying otherwise, I still wouldn't want to be his wife, not when he loves my mother.

Yana didn't want to live in a whirlpool of regret by becoming his wife. Each time he touched her, he would surely remember whose skin he really wanted to caress. When he called her name, he'd remember whose name he really wanted to cross his lips. And each time they gazed into each other's eyes, her

likeness to her mother would act as yet another reminder for him.

“I know it’s foolish, but this was...the only way I could think of to protect my heart.”

One needed a fitting reason to refuse the king’s chosen groom for them. Fortunately, Yana was in a position to turn him down since, as his daughter, she could instead opt for her right to undergo a trial.

“This trial really was perfect for me because my future husband has to be able to best Azraq in a duel. As an excuse, I keep telling myself that if someone is able to best him, then that must be fate. That Azraq never wanted to marry me, either.” The tears Yana had been holding back began to trickle down her cheeks, dripping onto the floor. “But if Azraq is the strongest, I’ll end up wanting him instead. I’ll find myself ordering him to steal me away. I can’t help myself, you know?”

That’s why I’ll marry whoever bests him.

Yana managed to force a smile on her face, but her expression soon caved. This was the first time she’d ever confessed her feelings for Azraq—that she’d ever admitted her own resolve out loud. She never knew it would be so painful or that it would bring her such relief in the process.

Suddenly, Yana felt an oppressive weight around her. Oriana had thrown her arms around Yana and was squeezing. She was slightly taller, so the way she wrapped around her petite friend made it seem as if she was trying to protect Yana from the world. Her arms were pulled so tight that it was almost painful, but this was exactly what Yana wanted, more than anything else.

Yana rested her cheek on Oriana’s chest, her tears soaking into the other girl’s shirt, turning it damp and cold.



FROM a young age, she’d always watched Azraq as he stuck beside her mother. He always bowed his head respectfully to her and kept close at her side. Too close for a bodyguard, in fact. He was much shorter than he was now, and he didn’t have anywhere near the muscles. And yet, he still held his head high like a warrior, walking confidently beside her mother.

Ah, that must be nice.

Yana had wanted the same thing. Back then, she hadn't yet known what love was, but even though she was still only a child, she wanted him. His hands, his eyes, his warmth. Everything she ever wanted was hers, but she knew that Azraq's heart was the one thing she couldn't receive by throwing a tantrum.

Thus, Yana gave up on desiring him. She knew that once she did that, she would want nothing else. But that was fine; she was happy enough just being by his side.

If she flashed a ladylike smile, people would pamper her. People were so eager to please her that all she had to do was let them. She was so rambunctious as a child that no one could handle her, and yet they were all willing to wait hand and foot on her now. It was so ridiculous she wanted to laugh.

Azraq was the one person who remained the same. No matter how much Yana changed, Azraq stuck by her side, just so he could be close to her mother. And that was why she'd wanted him for so, so long.



“THANK you for listening. I’d appreciate it if you’d continue acting the same as you did before,” Yana said, smiling bravely.

Since they were friends, Oriana naturally wanted to respect Yana’s wishes.



I'D never thought about who Azraq might have feelings for before, Oriana thought to herself as she eyed the man in question. He was waiting for Yana at the entrance to the girls' dormitory. Somehow, it makes sense, given his personality. Her expression sobered. How many eighteen-year-olds out there can make having a crush on a thirty-two-year-old seem natural? Just Azraq, I'd bet.

The way he devotedly looked after Yana reminded her of a mother hen, but he always struck her as a mysterious and sensuous boy. He had thick, wiry fingers, a slender neck covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and the edges of his lips were curled up in a smile. He was on a different level than the other boys in

their year.

The whole “tortured man in the throes of a hopeless love with a married woman” thing already suits him well enough, but for it to even be the woman who raised him too... Ugh, I can’t take this! It’s so sensual!

Oriana quickly shooed her wanton delusions to the back of her mind.

Azraq was a man of few words normally, but he also had a wildness to him, overflowing with masculine charisma. It was only Yana that he treated with such reverence, as if she were a priceless treasure.

I always figured that if Azraq loved anyone, it had to be Yana, Oriana thought to herself. She now realized how childish she was for taking everything at face value.

“What is it, Elsha? Your gaze is likely to bore a hole through me.” Oriana’s eyes had grown moist as she stared him down, but Azraq simply flashed her a grin. Yana, who had been speaking to Azraq about something, turned to face Oriana.

The one thing she had asked, only a little earlier, was that Oriana act normal, and Oriana had failed to do even that. She had fallen into silent contemplation the moment she saw him. Flustered, she tried to gloss it over. “Sorry, I was just thinking it’s rare to see you with a bedhead.”

It was a spur-of-the-moment lie, but it seemed enough to deceive him. He pressed his large palm flat over his head, trying to smooth out his hair. “Is it that noticeable?” he asked.

“Nope. Not really.” Oriana quickly shook her head. He’d never had bedhead to begin with, after all.

“Azraq,” Yana said softly.

He instantly sensed what she wanted and went down on a knee, crouching before the girl who was far shorter than him—Yana was only about 150 centimeters tall. Once he tipped his head forward, Yana could scarcely hide her joy, grinning as she caressed the top of his head.

“Your hair is awfully stubborn.”

“I can wash it in the nearest stream,” he offered.

“That won’t be necessary. Simply stay like this for a bit longer.” Yana giggled, her spindly fingers brushing through the waves of his black hair, as if dancing in and out of the darkness.

“Yep, your hair sure doesn’t want to cooperate,” Oriana agreed, stepping closer to peek at his head and provide her friend backup.

“Quite right. I think I’ll have to do this for a few more minutes,” Yana said.

Even though he had two schoolgirls giggling above him, fiddling with his hair, Azraq didn’t mutter a word of complaint. He remained perfectly still, waiting for Yana to finish.

Chapter 7: Unknowingly Reciprocal Love

AFTER three long months away from the Academy, the students soon broke into noisy chatter upon their return. There was a plaza inside the grounds, just a short distance from the main entrance, and it was here that people were reuniting with one another. Rather than return to their dorms, they loitered there, babbling amongst themselves.

Oriana and her companions managed to slip out of the crowd, intending to head toward the cafeteria, when someone flagged them down.

“Heeey! Oriana, Yana, Azraq! How’ve you guys been?” Lucian waved excitedly at them from where he stood in the plaza, surrounded by other male students he’d been talking to, his luggage left sitting at his feet. Kai also stood beside him. Neither one seemed to have changed much in the time since she’d last seen them.

Oriana gave them a wave, wandering over with Yana and Azraq in tow. “Lucian, you must be exhausted from your long journey back.”

“Yeah, I’m totally wiped. Wouldn’t be so bad if our territory wasn’t so remote. Oh yeah, I got you a gift. Yana, too.”

Caught off-guard, Oriana stuttered, “Th-Thank you.”

“You have my gratitude,” said Yana.

Unlike Oriana and Kai, who both lived on estates in the capital, Lucian was the son of a regional lord and thus had to return to their territory during long holidays.

“I’ve got something for Azraq, too.”

“You needn’t bother. I am fine sharing with Princess Yana,” said Azraq.

“Nonsense. Here ya go.”

Azraq grunted, accepting the proffered fruit with a wry smile. “Thank you.” It

was because of Lucian's generous nature that even though he could be insensitive on a fairly regular basis, people still forgave and fussed over him.

"Ah, look! There they all are!" shouted a voice.

"Edda, don't yank me around... Ugh, I can't do this. I'm so nauseous..."

"Come on, just a little bit further, Heidemarie. You can do it!"

Edda, Heidemarie, and Constance made their way over, marking the arrival of the rambunctious trio. With the arrival of the Enchanted Voyager, the number of students pouring in through the gate multiplied. It was nearly time for the next wave of people to hit as well.

"Heidemarie, are you all right?" Oriana asked, hurrying over to support her tottering friend.

"I made myself motion sick, reading a book on the Voyager."

Like Lucian, she had also traveled a long distance from her home territory.

"Oh boy. Do you need to go to the infirmary? I can carry your things for you," Oriana offered. "You need to get some rest."

Heidemarie didn't stay in the same dorm building as Oriana. Although it was two doors down, Oriana had gone there to visit enough that she knew the layout and where Heidemarie's room was located.

"No, it's fine," Heidemarie insisted. "I'll just take a seat here for a few." She cradled her luggage in her arms as she slowly slid down to the ground, only for Kai to grab her by the arm and yank her up. "H-Hey, what are you..." She stumbled, completely unprepared for him to pull her right back to her feet, but even though she was unsteady, she obediently followed him.

"Hey, make way! We've got a sick person here."

"Oh, right! Sorry."

Some students had deposited their luggage on a nearby bench while they stood and chatted with each other, but when Kai spoke to them, they hurriedly cleared the space. They were probably underclassmen. It was almost pitiful the way they hastily fled the area.

Kai planted his own luggage on one part of the bench before forcing Heidemarie to sit. "Here, you can use my bag here as a pillow," he said.

"I owe you." Heidemarie planted herself on the bench and buried her face in his bag, waving her hand lazily at him.

Edda and Constance exchanged looks before turning to Lucian and saying, "Did you see that? *That* is how you get popular with the ladies."

"And because you can't do that much, you're forever a virgin."

"Hey, guys! You know Kai's a virgin too, right? At least, I'm pretty dang sure he is. Right, Kai?! Right?!"

"It's our first day back and that's what you choose to shout at the top of your lungs? Ugh, I'm ashamed to be associated with you." Disgusted, Kai put some distance between himself and Lucian.

Ahh, it didn't sink in that I was back at the Academy 'til I saw them interacting like this again. Oriana watched her friends warmly. But soon, her attention turned to a group creating a very different kind of fuss from her companions.

Not too far from where she and her friends stood, two male students were surrounded by a crowd of girls. Judging by the amount of luggage they had with them, they hadn't yet been able to return to their dorm rooms and stow it away.

It was easy to see who was at the center of all the attention; even surrounded by dozens of female students with gifts in their hands, Vincent and Miguel were tall enough for Oriana to glimpse their faces. Being flocked by admirers didn't seem to bother them at all. They kept cool smiles on their faces as they interacted with the girls.

This was the first time Oriana had seen such a spectacle. She tugged on Yana's arm. "Hey, hey. Look at that."

"Oh my, certainly popular, aren't they? Like a couple of circus bears."

Oriana snickered at the perfect analogy.

However, leaving Miguel aside, she did find it peculiar to see so many girls crowding around Vincent without any compunction. At the very least, she

hadn't seen anything like this prior to their long holiday.

Vincent Tanzine had always been solitary. Forget casually touching him like that, people couldn't even approach him. He was treated as sacred as the moon.

"I wonder what's gotten into them. They always used to watch him from afar before."

"Since he got so close with you, they probably figure they have a chance to do so as well," Yana reasoned.

"What? Me?" Oriana paused and nodded as it sank in. "Yeah, I guess?"

It did make sense. Oriana wasn't a noble. She wasn't part of the Special Class or a boy, either. Normally, she would have no contact with Vincent at all, and yet she had still managed to befriend him. If she could, it only stood to reason that other female students could as well.

Everyone was still in good spirits after their long break and since they had gifts to serve as an icebreaker, they took their opportunity to go after him.

"I guess that tracks. I wonder if Vincent is enjoying the attention," Oriana muttered.

"He certainly doesn't look like he is to me," said Yana.

Oriana hummed to herself. Yana didn't know it, but Vincent had specifically approached her because he didn't have any friends, and he wanted to make one. That was how lonely he was. True, all the people surrounding him now were girls, but so was Oriana. There was nothing wrong with having friends of the opposite sex. Even assuming their motives were impure, he surely had to be happy for the opportunity to become acquainted with all these schoolmates.

"I don't want to disrupt them. I'll just wait 'til later to—"

"Oriana!"

Say hello to him, she had meant to say, but he cut her off midway by shouting to her.

What in the world? Oriana thought, spinning around. She wasn't the only one; all the students who hadn't yet noticed Vincent's presence suddenly turned

their gazes to him.

"Did you come all the way here to welcome me back? My apologies for being a little later than I'd promised."

"Wha?" Oriana blinked at him, completely in the dark.

While she remained dumbfounded, Vincent took the opportunity to try and slip away from the throng of girls. "Let's be on our way, shall we?" He paused and turned to Miguel. "Are you coming?"

"Nah, I'm good. Have fun." Miguel smiled blithely at him, waving even as the girls coalesced around him.

Vincent sprinted over to Oriana. "Sorry, but if I could just borrow you..." He whispered into her ear as she gaped at him. After speaking, he grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her along, breaking out into a run again.

Still shocked by what was happening, Oriana glanced over her shoulder at Yana and the others. They all waved at her, even Heidemarie, who had lifted her head to see what was happening. It was so utterly embarrassing that Oriana found herself whimpering.

When they finally reached somewhere deserted, Vincent paused to catch his breath, the shadow of the nearest building casting darkness over him. "Thank goodness you were there," he said.

"N-Not a...problem. B-But...wh-what...were..." In contrast to Vincent, Oriana was completely winded even though she wasn't carrying any luggage with her. Her shoulders jumped with every eager gulp of air she took.

Vincent is...way too fast!

Oriana had never run alongside a boy before. It had taken everything she had to keep up with his pace. She'd sprinted so hard she felt like she was floating on air. Still gasping for breath, she used the sleeve of her robe to mop away the sweat on her face. Her knees trembled, threatening to buckle and send her crumbling to the ground at any moment.

"You can sit here," he offered.

"No, I...I couldn't possibly...plant my bottom...on luggage belonging...to the

future Amethyst Dragon Duke...!" Oriana managed to wheeze out in response, hunching over.

Seeing how exhausted she was, Vincent refrained from forcing her. Instead, he took out a handkerchief and spread it on the ground. Unable to firmly refuse him, Oriana gratefully plopped down.

Vincent settled down beside her. He kept one knee bent, resting his arm on it. His gaze was focused straight ahead, never straying over toward Oriana. That came as a relief, since she didn't want him to see how pathetic she looked, desperately trying to drink in air like a madwoman.

"...Calmed down a little now?" he asked.

"A little. I'm embarrassed at how little endurance I have."

"I'm the one who suddenly sprang this on you. Please don't act so ashamed," Vincent said with a smile, relaxing his shoulders. His expression was completely different now than it had been earlier when he spoke to those other girls. For whatever reason, that made her chest tighten.

"Anyway, are you sure that was a good idea?" Oriana asked. They had made no such promise to one another. For him to claim otherwise and pull her away like that could only mean he wanted to escape.

"I gave them the slip for a reason," he said.

"Yes, but that was a good opportunity for you to get close to them."

"...It would only cause issues if they developed a liking for me," Vincent answered after a short pause, voice thick with determination.

Oh. Yeah, I guess. Sure. Right... Yeah.

Her noisy heart suddenly went completely silent. It was shocking how effective his words had been. If they sold heartburn medicine that potent, it would surely fly right off the shelves.

That makes sense. It would only cause him issues if someone were to fall for him.

Thinking about it, it was obvious. Vincent already had feelings for someone. It would only be a burden for him if someone were to show a romantic interest in

him.

It's fine. I'm Vincent's friend, after all. I'm not the one causing issues for him.

Oriana wrapped her arms around her knees, hugging her legs tightly to her chest, as if trying to protect her aching heart. She didn't want to trouble Vincent, and she didn't want her world to be any more shaken up than it already was either.

"Oriana?" Vincent must have been worried since she'd fallen silent. He dropped a hand to the ground and twisted his body, peering into her face. "What's the matter?"

Unable to resist his gentle voice, she lifted her gaze. The wind softly buffeted his golden hair, and those violet eyes were staring straight at her. Thanks to their little sprint a moment ago, Vincent's forehead was covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

Why is it that...I want to throw myself at him and wrap my arms around him? Oriana kept her eyes glued to his as she resisted the strange, mysterious urge that overcame her. As if confused, his eyes seemed to waver. His hand reached toward the outer corner of one of her eyes.

"Oriana—"

"Vincent?" interrupted a voice.

A loud gulp rang in Oriana's ears, but it wasn't hers—it was Vincent who jolted.

"Sharon?" he said. "Do you need something?"

Standing there was the same female student Oriana remembered from before. The one who had laughed together with Vincent and Miguel in the Special Class, who had attended the opera together with the Amethyst Dragon Duke and his family. She was only now learning for the first time that this girl's name was apparently Sharon. Fearing it rude to continue sitting, Oriana planted her hands on the ground to support her weight as she tried to climb to her feet.

Vincent quickly turned back toward her upon noticing. "You don't have to force yourself to get up."

"No, I'm fine now," she said with a smile.

His lips curled as well, albeit faintly.

Sharon glanced between the two before saying, "I was worried since I heard you still hadn't returned to your dorm yet, Vincent."

"I'm not a kid. There was no reason for you to search for me." Vincent turned back toward Sharon, grumbling like a petulant child.

There was something so indescribably intimate about the way he spoke to her that Oriana froze up.

"No need to pout," Sharon teased.

"I'm not the one pouting."

"True. I'm pretty exhausted after hunting around for a certain someone," she said, giving him a pointed look. "You're always like this. You haven't changed since we were children. Remember? How you would suddenly disappear, and everyone would be looking for you only for you to—"

"You have told this story countless times before, and it's not as though I've forgotten. There's no need to bring it up again."

"You don't have to act all embarrassed about it."

Judging by the way Sharon spoke, Vincent often acted this way. It didn't take long for their conversation to devolve into stories of a past that Oriana wasn't privy to. She stood there awkwardly, feeling completely alienated.

He's never talked to me like that before. I thought the only person he bantered like this with was Miguel... Which was why him barking at Sharon the way he did was proof of how special she was to him.

Could it be... Oriana suddenly remembered the conversation she had with Vincent before, when he told her about the girl he loves.

"She's extremely cute."

"Yeah, I bet. What else, huh? What else?"

"We're the same age."

"Right, okay."

“...and she’s cute.”

As far as Oriana knew, the only girls at Lagen Magic Academy that Vincent had gone out of his way to be close to were her and Sharon.

I never planned to dig into who it was he liked, she thought to herself, absently peering at Sharon.

Sharon noticed her probing gaze and said, “Hello there. Oriana, right? I’ve heard the rumors. You’re Vincent’s lover, yes?”

“No,” Vincent corrected immediately. “Oriana is a friend. We’re not in that kind of relationship.”

We’re not in that kind of relationship... Oriana rolled the words over in her mind. She knew he was right, and it was an obvious reaction to have. But for some reason, her heart throbbed. She had to force herself to smile to distract from the tears that threatened to spill otherwise.

“Hello. My name is Oriana Elsha,” she greeted.

“Sharon Beezel. I’m glad to hear you’re not his lover. We’re engaged, after all.”

Engaged? Oriana had barely outstretched her hand when she heard that, and her body seized. Her arm instinctively jerked back as if to pull away, and she had to force herself to remain still. Sharon smiled and shook Oriana’s hand.

“We used to be engaged,” Vincent corrected bitterly. “Oriana, this is my cousin.”

Ex-fiancée? Oriana thought as she gawked at Sharon. Again, her previous conversation with Vincent replayed in her mind.

“You’re not going to tell her how you feel?”

“...It’s complicated. The two of us were separated, so now I’m not sure how to maintain the appropriate distance between us.”

There before her was a girl the same age, who was unbelievably cute, whom both his parents had accepted. They also had a special dynamic between them, and she’d been separated from him once before, as indicated by their previous engagement status.

"I'd thank you not to spread false information," Vincent warned Sharon.

"I'm not spreading anything. She's the first person I've ever told."

"And that's all the more reason why it was unnecessary to tell her."

The way he put up a wall there was like a bucket of cold water to the face. Oriana suddenly found the ground beneath her unsteady—or was it her knees threatening to buckle again?

Vincent had positioned himself between Oriana and Sharon, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Sharon stood right next to him.

So what he's saying is that since we're just friends, there's no need for me to know that kind of information. As she digested what was happening, Oriana finally understood what the excruciating pain in her chest really was. It suddenly made sense why it bothered her so much that he was introducing her as a friend to a girl he spoke so intimately with—a girl he was probably in love with.

It hasn't been that long since I was confronted with the reality that we live in different worlds, and he literally just told me he doesn't want anyone developing romantic feelings for him.

Oriana stood still as a statue, rocked with despair as the new love she'd barely borne withered away before her.



I can't believe this.

After the opening ceremony wrapped up, Oriana retreated alone to the library. She spread her books out over a desk and pretended to read, but the words never actually made it into her head.

This is simply awful. I can't believe, of all people, I fell for Vincent Tanzine.

Oriana had always thought she had good self-control. That was why she naively assumed that she would never fall for someone when she knew she wasn't permitted to get that close to them in the first place. She knew he would never reciprocate her feelings. Firstly, she wasn't a noble, and secondly, Vincent wasn't the deplorable type that would mess around with women for fun.

I knew this already, so why did I let myself think I was the only one special to him? No. It was more like she hoped for it to be true. I wish...I really was the only one.

After listening to Sharon and Vincent's friendly banter for a while longer after that, Oriana became convinced Sharon was the recipient of Vincent's affections. Their engagement had been broken off once in the past. She was cute, and he was trying to figure out the appropriate distance between them.

I never dreamed I was such a fool that I would fall for someone who already had their heart set on someone else, she thought.

Vincent had left her after that, dragged off by Sharon to the boys' dormitory. Once they were gone, Oriana had tottered along toward the cafeteria where Yana and the others had been waiting.

I feel so utterly miserable.

Today, Oriana had retreated to the library for some much-needed alone time, but unconsciously, perhaps she was hoping that Vincent might come find her. If that really was her motive—if she hoped he might come and offer her excuses for what transpired or some form of comfort—then she was more pitiful than she thought.

I think I'll grab a little shut-eye.

Oriana hadn't slept at all the night before. As the exhaustion swept over her, she willingly relinquished her consciousness to the darkness.



“LET’S sneak a look at her face while she’s sleeping.”

Much to Vincent's displeasure, a hushed voice drifted into his ears. He stood amongst the bookshelves of the library, a freshly picked tome in hand, as he glanced at the two male students grinning at one another. The two boys were pressed close, giddily whispering to one another. By the look of them, they were probably upperclassmen. Vincent gave up on perusing books and idly fixed his gaze on the noisemakers.

In a secluded, inconspicuous corner of the library, hidden away by the

shelves, was the table where Oriana had drifted fast asleep. Her books were spread out around her as she rested her head on top of the desk. Her face was mostly hidden, buried in her arms which she was using as a pillow. That did nothing to hamper his ability to identify her, however. After all, just how many times had he dreamed of running his fingers through that sweet, milk tea-colored hair?

"That's Elsha from year four, right? You've had your eye on her for a while now, haven't ya?"

"Aw, stuff it. Make yourself useful and block people from seeing with your body."

"And what're you gonna do if she wakes up and causes a fuss?"

"No biggie. I'm just going to brush her hair out of her face. That's all."

"So, you actually mean to touch her."

"Just a little, okay? Lay off." The boy who snapped at his friend then reached his hand out toward Oriana.

Vincent hastily sped over to them. "Excuse me. Would you mind moving out of the way?"

Before the boy's hand could so much as brush her bangs, Vincent interrupted him. The boy's shoulders jumped, and he spun around to face Vincent. "Oh, it's you, Mister Tanzine."

"That's my seat," Vincent said with a smile, motioning to the chair beside Oriana.

Flustered, the boy moved his hand away from Oriana and to the chair beside her instead. "Oh, I didn't realize. I was about to sit down."

"Nothing to worry about. Those sorts of mistakes happen from time to time." Vincent spoke politely, but the underlying meaning was clear: *So? Move it already.*

Sensing those unspoken words, the two boys mumbled their respects—if it could even be called that—before beating their retreat. They barely made it out of earshot before they started grumbling to one another.

“Crap. I didn’t think he’d be hanging around her today.”

“Knock it off, would ya? It’ll be all your fault if I get on his bad side, too.”

Vincent didn’t even bother glancing in their direction, instead opting to settle beside Oriana. He rested his elbow on the table and turned to face her. She was completely oblivious to the fact that another boy had tried to touch her just now, remaining blissfully trapped in sleep.

Feeling utterly miserable, Vincent sighed to himself.

Oriana was extremely popular. Objectively speaking, she was adorable, considerate, and had dozens of friends and acquaintances. She was a delight to talk to, never giving heed to gender differences, and she had such an infectious smile that she offered to everyone regardless of whether they were older or younger than her, which made them all that more fond of her.

Oriana also had one of the most desirable traits for a potential bride: an impressive dowry. Since over half the student population were commoners, the money she would provide in marriage was highly appealing.

This wasn’t the first time Vincent had encountered male students showing an interest in her. Each time, he angrily bit his lip. Back before they were friends, he’d had to interfere from afar to keep potential suitors away, but now that they were close, he could shoo boys off directly, the same way he had a moment ago.

“The person I was in my past life never knew you to be this popular,” he muttered to himself.

No, it wasn’t that I didn’t know. It’s that I never tried to know.

He had taken for granted that Oriana was the one always pursuing him. Even had he known she was popular, it might have only given him a sense of superiority. But the real person Oriana had loved then was Vince, not Vincent.

Vincent wanted to lift her hair and tuck it behind her ears. He wanted to sneak a peek at her face. But in this timeline, he had no more right to her as she slept than the boys who had just been here plotting to do the same.

Vincent draped his arm across the table and rested his head on it, bringing

him to the same eye level as Oriana.

When they met during her birthday at the opera house, he'd thanked all the gods in the world for that miracle. She looked cute enough in her robes, but she also looked adorable adorned in a dress.

Vincent had offered her the best birthday wishes he could, in consideration of the fact that he was doing his utmost to hide the true nature of their relationship, lest his father sniff out his intentions before they took their final exams in their last year at the Academy.

Hard to believe that in a sulky fit, I told Marcel to burn my promise with my father. It's almost laughable now.

Vincent was extremely grateful to the butler for keeping the note safely tucked away. Even though he had yet to truly reach Oriana's heart, he was still desperately clinging to the promise he'd made with his father.

Right now, this is the only means I have of sticking beside her.

Just the other day, when Sharon had gone off at the mouth about being his former betrothed, Vincent had panicked like never before. It gave off a completely different impression if someone else divulged the truth to Oriana rather than him doing it himself. That was likely why Vince had confessed the truth to her in their first timeline together, and why he had opted to do so as well in his previous timeline.

I told her those marriage talks were all in the past, but...if possible, I would have preferred for the conversation to come up more naturally, after we'd gotten closer.

Perhaps it wouldn't matter to Oriana at all that he'd been engaged in the past. But he didn't want her to see him as someone who'd already been promised to another—who, as the duke's heir, might have more such candidates in the future. He didn't want her to be overly conscious of the difference in their status. He'd hoped she might entertain a future together with him before completely dismissing the possibility of him being a romantic interest.

I never thought Sharon would have that kind of attitude, he thought. When

Sharon introduced herself as his fiancée, Vincent took a stern approach with her, in order to remind her that their engagement was annulled and why that had happened. Since he had never spoken so coldly to her before, she'd obviously been shaken by it. He suspected she'd lay low for a while.

Alas, Vincent couldn't be any more strict with her than he already had been, largely because he felt guilty.

I knew she had stolen my mother's necklace and I didn't stop her because it suited my plans better to leave things be. I had the means at my disposal to stop her beforehand, but...I wanted to establish ties with the Elshas, so I made use of Sharon's naive, childish mistake.

That wasn't to say her crime was his fault. Vincent knew that logically, but he still couldn't erase the guilt. He at least wanted to offer her some respect, as a member of his extended family, and had done his best to maintain an amicable relationship.

I have no idea whether she actually knows why our engagement was annulled or not, but I never thought she was still expecting something more from our relationship. At least until that conversation.

From Vincent's perspective, her actions were an attempt to keep him in check. She'd likely realized his feelings for Oriana.

She should know that, merely being my cousin, she had no right to do such a thing. The moment that thought popped into his head, he was chagrined; he'd been thinking the same thing to himself regarding Oriana—that he had no right to interfere.

“Oriana...” Vincent grabbed a fistful of his own hair. He was pouting and he knew it—could feel the way his expression contorted as he sulked childishly.

When will you finally fall for me? he wondered, burying his face in his arm. He couldn't give the words a voice.



“...WHAT’S that fragrance?” croaked a dry, groggy voice.

Vincent had repositioned himself, taking the seat directly in front of her as he

read silently to himself. When he heard her, he glanced up.

Bleary-eyed, Oriana righted herself and peered around. "Vincent?"

"Finally woke up, have you?"

"I...guess I fell asleep..."

"You must have been exhausted."

Oriana groaned, pressing her fingers over her eyes.

"Do they hurt?" Vincent asked, worried.

"Hm? No. But my makeup will smear if I rub my eyes, so I do this instead."

"Does that really work?"

"It does." As he studied her, he felt a familiar sadness well up inside. He often experienced this loneliness any time he saw parts of her he didn't know or felt her pushing him away, keeping him at arm's length.

Couldn't she at least act a little more at ease in our conversations and not be so stiff? Vincent wondered. He hoped she would eventually do so of her own accord.

It's not because of my status that she acts more polite with me than the others. After all, she was close friends with a baron's daughter. It frustrated him beyond words, and to make it worse, she spoke casually with Miguel. If she really was that worried about status, then she would act as formal and distant with the neighboring country's princess as she did with him. *I hope eventually you'll get used to me and feel as comfortable in my presence as if you belong there.*

The previous year had ended with that vain hope going unfulfilled, and even now, Oriana showed no signs of being any more open around Vincent. It invoked a twinge of sadness in him, one that he was growing increasingly unable to ignore. Each time she acted formal and polite around him, his loneliness swelled and jealousy reared its ugly head.

"Ouch..." Oriana mumbled.

"What's the matter?" Vincent jumped to his feet and circled around the table,

rushing to her side.

Oriana blinked several times. "Seems I managed to get a lash in my eye."
"Let me see."

"No, no, no! I can't show you. Absolutely not."

The moment Vincent tried to sneak a peek, Oriana hurriedly refused him. Left with no other recourse, he gave up.

"Can't you cry and get it out?" he asked.

"Not on cue, I can't."

"Yes, well, I suppose not."

Come to think of it, she doesn't cry much. Vincent hadn't seen her tears in a long time. She used to cry all the time. Though, I suppose the biggest reason was Vince.

The Oriana in his previous timeline was always sobbing. She would do it when she was happy and when she was sad, to the point he almost wondered if her tear ducts were broken.

But the Oriana before me now doesn't cry at all. He paused. No, that's not it. It's not that she won't cry. It's that she won't let me see her cry anymore. I'm not close enough to her now for her to be that vulnerable with me.

"...I want to make you cry." The words spilled out of Vincent's lips before he even knew he was speaking them.

"Wh-What?! I-I don't know what to..." Oriana was so flustered she stuttered, even as she kept her hand over her eyes.

I miss her tears.

Unable to resist his own emotions, Vincent stretched his hand out toward her, intending to pry hers away from her face. "For the moment, it might be best not to touch—"

Smack!

A dry sound echoed as she slapped his hand away. She gasped when she realized what she'd done, and he was no less shocked than her.

"S-Sorry, but um...I'm all right," she insisted, flatly rebuffing him.

This is the first time she's ever been this blunt about turning me away. Vincent had thought, more or less, that she'd come to accept him. Somewhere deep down, I figured she would let anything fly with me. That, even if she wouldn't show me her tears, she wouldn't complain even if I touched her a little without getting her consent first. Now he realized how conceited he had been.

Vincent stared vacantly, at a complete loss for words.

Oriana turned away from him and continued blinking. After a bit, she finally said, "Ah...I managed to get it." She turned back toward him, the offending eyelash balanced on the tip of her index finger. "I'm sorry again about how I acted a moment ago. I probably ruined my makeup in the whole process, so I didn't want you to look at me." Still hiding her eyes behind her hand, she quietly added, "Oh, this is embarrassing..."

Even though he'd crossed the line as her friend, Oriana tacked on an excuse to her apology, as a way for him to save face.

After hesitating, he asked, "Do you require a mirror?"

"No, that won't be necessary. I'll just be on my way back to the dormitory..." As Oriana stood, something fell from her shoulders. "Huh?" she squeaked in surprise, glancing down at her feet. Vincent's robe was strewn in front of her, part of it still caught on her chair. Oriana picked it up. "Is...this yours?"

"That's right. I figured you must be cold." Vincent had draped it over her shoulders on the assumption that a friend would be permitted that much, but he was feeling much less confident now.

If she shoves that back at me too, I'm honestly not sure whether I'll be able to recover. Vincent admonished himself for doing something so unnecessary. Having lost his nerve, he was now waiting on tenterhooks to see how things would play out.

Oriana's lips curled as she stared down at his robe. "So that's where that lovely fragrance came from."

Her voice was so soft and gentle, as if she were talking about finding a blooming rose in the middle of winter. It made his heart hammer. He'd been

stranded in a forest of anxiety on the brink of his dying breath moments ago, but thanks to those few words, he was now floating on high, glad he'd decided to lend her his robe after all.

"Thank you," said Oriana. "But you shouldn't do these kinds of things with girls."

No sooner had the relief washed over him than a bucket of cold water soon followed, dowsing his spirits once more.

Oriana held the robe out to him. He avoided her gaze for the most part as he took it.

But why? he wondered. *She said it had a lovely fragrance.* Vincent slipped his robe back on. The scent of Oriana's shampoo soon teased at his nose. He kept his gaze glued to the ground. *It makes sense now. I really can't be doing these kinds of things.*

Not for whatever reasons Oriana had in her mind, but more so because her smell made him feel like her face was right beside his.

"All right," Vincent said meekly, though this time he'd lost his nerve for a very different reason.



"**HEY**, hey! What happened after you-know-what before?"

That evening after dinner, Oriana found herself idling away in the lounge with Lucian seated beside her.

"And what, pray tell, does 'you-know-what' refer to?" Oriana asked him.

"You know, the part where Mister Tanzine dragged you out by the hand. Things were looking pretty romantic from my perspective."

He was referring to when Vincent pulled her away from the main plaza after returning from his long holiday.

Completely oblivious to the perturbed look on her face, Lucian grinned to himself as he leaned in close and whispered into her ear, "You know, I've been thinking this for a while now, but there really does seem to be something special between you guys. Especially this last time."

Yeah, I thought the same thing. Alas, she'd experienced a rude awakening and realized how shameless and conceited she had been to ever have such a delusion. It was proving a chore to pretend like everything was okay after that.

Siiiigh. I can't even really blame myself. Anyone else would get the wrong idea, too. I mean, he's so kind and he smiles at me all the time. I can come up with a million excuses for myself.

Vincent was equally kind to everyone, though, and the only person he didn't mince words with was Sharon. For as special as Lucian seemed to think Oriana was to Vincent, she had never seen a more intimate atmosphere between two people than the one she experienced with Vincent and Sharon.

"There's nothing between us," she said. "We're just friends." Her voice sounded much stiffer than she thought it would. Oriana hurriedly slapped on a smile, but Lucian had already realized something was amiss.

"C'mon, go on the attack a little more. How are you going to make it, marrying into a ducal family, if you act so meek all the time?"

"I already told you, it's not happening," Oriana huffed at him. "Now, away with you." She shooed him off with her hand.

"Lucian has a bad habit of thinking going on the attack will pan out well," Constance said with a smile.

Edda grinned and added, "Well, that's a virgin for you. No direction to move except forward."

Apparently the two had been listening in on her conversation with Lucian.

"What the hell?! That's got nothing to do with this!" Lucian grumbled at them.

"Oh yeah? I seem to recall an incident fairly recently with a younger female student you approached. You called her cute, but you kept staring at her chest the entire time."

"Heidemarie, you sure do like to keep a close eye on me... Ah, now I see!" Lucian froze with exaggerated surprise. "I'm sorry, I never realized you felt the way for me..."

“Good luck figuring out how to deal with your failing exam scores next time.”

“O Great Mistress Heidemarie! I bid you, have mercy!”

As the conversation changed topics, Oriana watched her friends' antics with a grin, but she couldn't make it seem genuine forever. Though her face clouded over, she tried to keep it from catching their attention.

I need to hurry up and get over these romantic feelings I have.

As she remembered how excessive her reaction was to Vincent almost touching her in the library, she was overcome with an urge to find a hole and bury herself in it forever. This was the first time she had ever fallen for someone, and she never knew that harboring affections for someone would completely dismantle all of her self-control.

But what Vincent really wants is a friend, she reminded herself with added emphasis. And a friend mustn't have romantic feelings. Besides, I don't want someone to know that a commoner like me has fallen for a man in line to become one of the next Eight Dragons.

Oriana wanted Vincent to think of her as someone wise enough to know her place socially. She didn't want to prove him wrong for selecting her, out of everyone else, to be his friend. *I don't want him to be disappointed in me.*

The moment she fell in love with Vincent, her desire for him swelled.

Friendship? Hah, that's laughable at this point.

And so, she locked her feelings away. If she let even a little spill out, she was sure she wouldn't be able to face Vincent without exposing how disgraceful she was. She could just imagine herself, drunk on a shameless sense of superiority, eyes filled with affection as she stood beside him. It made her entire body tremble.

It's okay. I'll make sure we can be proper friends.

Oriana steeled her resolve as she absently watched her rambunctious classmates.



“ORIANA, do you have a moment?”

Oriana was sitting beside Lucian, spacing out, when someone called to her. Standing behind the back of the couch was none other than Vincent.

"Heya! What'd you eat today?" Miguel, who'd apparently accompanied Vincent, asked Kai.

Kai and Constance scooted closer together to make room for him to sit, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Miguel plopped himself down beside them. He was like a big cat, with a knack for slipping in past people's defenses and for slipping into small spaces.

"What's wrong?" Oriana asked.

"If at all possible, I'd prefer to speak privately," Vincent answered with a thin smile.

Oriana slipped out of the lounge with him. In the past, she wouldn't have thought anything of it, but now his private invitation had prompted a strange anticipation in her.

No, no, no. It's nothing like that. This is nothing special, she told herself. Darn it, why is love so illogical...

She knew that, as far as Vincent was concerned, this was nothing out of the ordinary. But it wasn't nothing to her, being called away from her friends like that to speak to him alone. As she walked behind him, she continued to contemplate how contradictory and yet perfectly reasonable love was.

That scent—his scent—that I caught on his robes earlier, I recognize it. Oriana stared at his sleeves, which fluttered as he walked. Memories of that afternoon came rushing back to her. *It wasn't all that long ago that I used a towel soaked with his sweat to wipe away my own, never giving it a second thought.*

All it took was for his hand to almost touch her—that was enough for her to act like a fool. If only the shame could kill, then she might be spared the continued embarrassment.

This is bad. My mind's all messed up. I hope I can get over these feelings quickly.

What could she even do to end them? Would time resolve the issue? She was

so inexperienced with this that she had no idea. Was it normal to be this self-conscious?

Oriana tried to keep herself hidden in Vincent's periphery as she took a deep breath. Her feelings were threatening to burst out of her, and thanks to that, she could feel her cheeks warming up.

They made it to a window just outside the lounge. Vincent stopped there and pressed his back against the glass, his hand resting on the windowsill. Oriana had a perfect view of the outside from where she stood, but it was dark as pitch with only a few shriveled, lonely trees dotting the discernible landscape. The air near the window was cold too, which helped her emotions settle.

"Is your eye better now?" Vincent asked.

"My apologies for worrying you, but it is much improved now."

After what transpired in the library, Oriana had hurried back to the dorm and fixed her makeup, which she was glad for now. She never dreamed they would run into each other again today, and she certainly didn't want to speak with him at this close proximity with her makeup all smeared.

"Glad to hear it. Actually, I bought you a gift."

"Oh? Thank you," she said. "How very like a friend to do that."

"It is, isn't it? This is the first time I've ever bought one for anyone." Vincent grinned proudly. It was so dazzling that she feared she might melt into a puddle on the floor if she gazed at him for even a second longer. Oriana jerked her head away unnaturally, hoping to spare herself such a fate. "I was...waiting for the perfect timing to give it to you."

"Thank you," she said.

"Why is your face turned like that?"

"I saw a bug."

"A bug?" Vincent repeated, perplexed.

"It already flew off," Oriana assured him.

"All right, then."

By the time she turned her gaze back toward him, she'd managed to put on a poker face—or at least as much of one as she could muster. She tried as much as possible to keep the emotion from showing on her face as she accepted his gift.

“They’re sweets. I bought them at the Enchanted Voyager’s station.”

A fitting present for a friend. Oriana politely accepted the gift bag with treats stowed inside. “Thank you. I apologize for not having anything to offer in return.”

“No, please don’t worry about it. I bought this for you because I wanted you to have it.”

Naturally, since we’re brand-new friends, after all. There is no more meaning to it than that. Don’t expect anything else, Oriana, she admonished herself.

“So, uh...you’ve never bought a gift like this for Miguel before?”

“Our territories neighbor one another. We don’t live far enough away to exchange gifts like that. Besides, I would never go out of my way to buy a man a gift.”

In other words, this was just a special perk for being his first *female* friend.

Oriana hugged the bag to her chest and smiled faintly. “Thank you again. I’ll enjoy eating these, I’m sure.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you’d have preferred noodles, but unsurprisingly, they didn’t sell them.”

Oriana froze. “You...know that I like noodles?”

“It’s all you ever eat.”

He actually...noticed that. Oriana closed her eyes and took a deep breath. I can’t believe every little thing manages to get my heart racing to the point I can’t even breathe properly. Love is no joke.

If they continued speaking on this topic anymore, she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from grinning like an idiot. So instead, she thought about changing the course of the conversation.

“What did you do during summer break?”

“You already know, don’t you? I spent the whole break attending every opera house hoping to catch a glimpse of you.”

“Well, then your scheming bore fruit, considering we did actually meet.”

“Yes, but it was only for three seconds.”

When she laughed, Vincent laughed too.

“I never dreamed I would see you there,” Oriana said.

“Indeed, but my toil paid off.”

“You’re really going to continue that joke, huh?”

Vincent nodded. “It’s the truth, after all.”

“Well, then my apologies for putting you through so much. I was happy to receive your birthday wishes.”

Memories of their unexpected meeting at the opera house flashed through her mind. If she had seen him looking that handsome now that she was aware of her romantic feelings, she might have screeched like a banshee without even meaning to.

“If only other eyes hadn’t been on us. I wish we could have talked longer,” he said.

“Come to think of it, you and my father were already acquainted.” She suddenly remembered how friendly the two had been, even as they kept their close relationship on the down low.

“Yeah. He did me a favor when I was younger. A bit of a shameful story from long ago, so I haven’t really told anyone about it.”

“Well, so as not to bring back memories of such embarrassing times, I shall be sure to keep it a secret that you two know each other.”

“I would appreciate that.” He flashed a smile at her that was all too gentle and brilliant. She had to count to five as she turned her gaze away, trying to calm herself. Looking at him directly was like gazing straight into the sun. In other words, unthinkable.

"The duke was rather friendly as well," Oriana said, trying to distract herself.

"If my father accosts you again like that in the future, you can simply call my mother over. He's powerless before her."

"Summon the duchess directly? Me? You're asking for the impossible."

"Give it a shot. We are friends, aren't we?"

If we're friends, you should hop in to save me, Oriana thought. She opened her mouth to say as much jokingly but froze up. Memories of the girl who'd been standing beside Vincent rushed back to her. *Assuming we were to find ourselves in such a situation, he'd surely be busy escorting Sharon Beezel. He wouldn't have time to bother with me.*

Sharon was beautiful, and her status matched Vincent's. Oriana had never considered her own ancestry or her father's status before, but now for the first time, she was envious of Sharon for being born into the aristocracy.

Oriana couldn't bring herself to ask Vincent about Sharon, either. Not about their time together at the opera or how intimate the two had seemed the other day. It took every bit of willpower to keep herself from inquiring, and she only resisted because she worried he might sense her jealousy rather than interpret it as friendly conversation. Besides, she didn't really want to hear anything about Sharon from his lips anyway.

I'm not doing so well at this friendship thing, she thought. Much as she wanted to be there for him the way he wished, the more she clung to their status as friends, the more likely it seemed she'd let her true feelings slip.

Oriana stepped closer to the window, pressing her forehead against the glass. Her reflection gazed back at her. Although she had adjusted her makeup to perfection, her gloomy expression detracted from it. This was not at all the expression of a girl who was with someone she loved.

But I can't help it, she reasoned. *I'm not supposed to fall for him.*

Oriana tried to tell herself things were better like this. And with that thought in mind, she sighed, fogging up the glass. She lifted a finger and pressed it against the pane. Vincent drew close to her, his face practically right beside hers. Apparently he was curious what she was about to write.

Um...? Isn't he standing awfully close? Uh, yeah. Super close.

Had she ever allowed him to be up in her personal space like this before? Perhaps she had. Noblemen like him were accustomed to escorting women, so they naturally had less of a sense of personal space, so she'd probably dismissed it before and thought little of it.

I can't do this. I can't even remember how I used to act with him before.

Oriana drew her brows together, utterly perplexed, and bit down on her lip.

Vincent studied her, mystified as to why her finger remained perfectly still. "Oriana?"

"Oriana," Yana called at the same time, her voice overlapping with Vincent's.

Oriana whipped around to face her friend, feeling as though Yana's interruption was a blessing—the Dragon God's divine intervention.

Yana and Azraq were just exiting the lounge together. Yana said, "I was thinking about returning to my room for the day."

"All right. I'll go too." Oriana stepped away from the window, careful not to accidentally brush against Vincent in the process. She hugged his gift bag in her arms and bowed her head. "Goodbye for now. Thank you again for the gift."

"Yeah..."

Oriana hurried over to Yana's side, not even bothering to glance at Vincent's face before she left. As soon as she reached her friend, the princess immediately started walking. Azraq followed behind them, his broad black blocking Vincent's gaze from following after them. That brought Oriana such relief that all the tension seemed to leave her body.



SILENCE hung over the dormitory as people slept the night away. On the bottom bunk of the bed, curtains drawn around her, Oriana restlessly turned over. No matter which direction she tried to face, her thoughts kept wandering to Vincent. She drew her nose toward her shoulder, hoping to catch that cedarwood scent, but her bath earlier had washed it away. All she could catch now was a whiff of her own shampoo. Defeated, she dropped her head back

against her pillow.

“Hey, Oriana.” A dark silhouette suddenly appeared on the other side of her curtains, drooping down from above. Oriana squeaked in surprise. Apparently Yana was leaning down from the top bunk, her long hair catching the moonlight and casting eerie shadows on the curtains.

“Wh-What is it?” Oriana responded, pressing a hand over her heart, which was still hammering.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Of course not.”

Yana always made it a priority to sleep right away in order to maintain her beauty, but today she was up awfully late.

Oriana waved her wand at the magic lantern resting near her pillow. Light spilled over her. She drew the curtains open, and Yana climbed down from the top bunk. The princess was clad in a silk maxi dress-type nightgown.

As she slipped inside, Yana said, “Pardon the intrusion.” Once she climbed under the blanket, Oriana found there was less space between them than she’d expected. She scooted over to share her pillow, but the two were so close they practically had their foreheads pressed together.

“What’s the matter, Yana?” Oriana asked.

“There was something off about the way you acted today in the lounge.”

Oriana was taken aback and embarrassed because she’d been so confident that she’d managed to act normally in front of everyone. “Did...everyone else think I was being weird too?”

“I suspect I only noticed because I was worried about you and kept my eyes on you.”

I hope that’s the case, Oriana thought. I’ll have to be more careful starting tomorrow.

As her expression turned solemn, uneasiness getting the best of her, Oriana realized Yana was staring straight at her.

“Oriana.” Yana’s pitch-black eyes glimmered under the dim light of the lantern. “You’re in love, aren’t you?”

Oriana sucked in a breath. Yana wasn’t mincing words.

Yana stared straight at Oriana, and for her part, Oriana found she couldn’t even peel her gaze away. Seeing the shift in Oriana’s expression, Yana smiled. Not the usual, relaxed kind, but one full of tenderness that came straight from the heart.

“It’s going to make you that much more beautiful, Oriana.”

“Beautiful?” Oriana choked back. She was so sure Yana would ask who the man was that she wasn’t at all prepared to hear that kind of statement.

“Love is painful, isn’t it? Heartrending. But starting now, you’re going to grow in ways you couldn’t have by yourself.”

A tear fell from Oriana’s eyes. All the tension that had built up in her body suddenly faded. *Th-That means I can keep loving Vincent...for my own benefit?* Her throat tightened. *I tried to suffocate these feelings, coming up with every excuse in the book to do it—that Vincent already has someone else, that we live in separate worlds. But now, Yana has saved the very love I tried so desperately to throw away.*

By those words, Yana had given her justification for not abandoning the affections she held—because her feelings weren’t for anyone else’s sake; they were for Oriana alone.

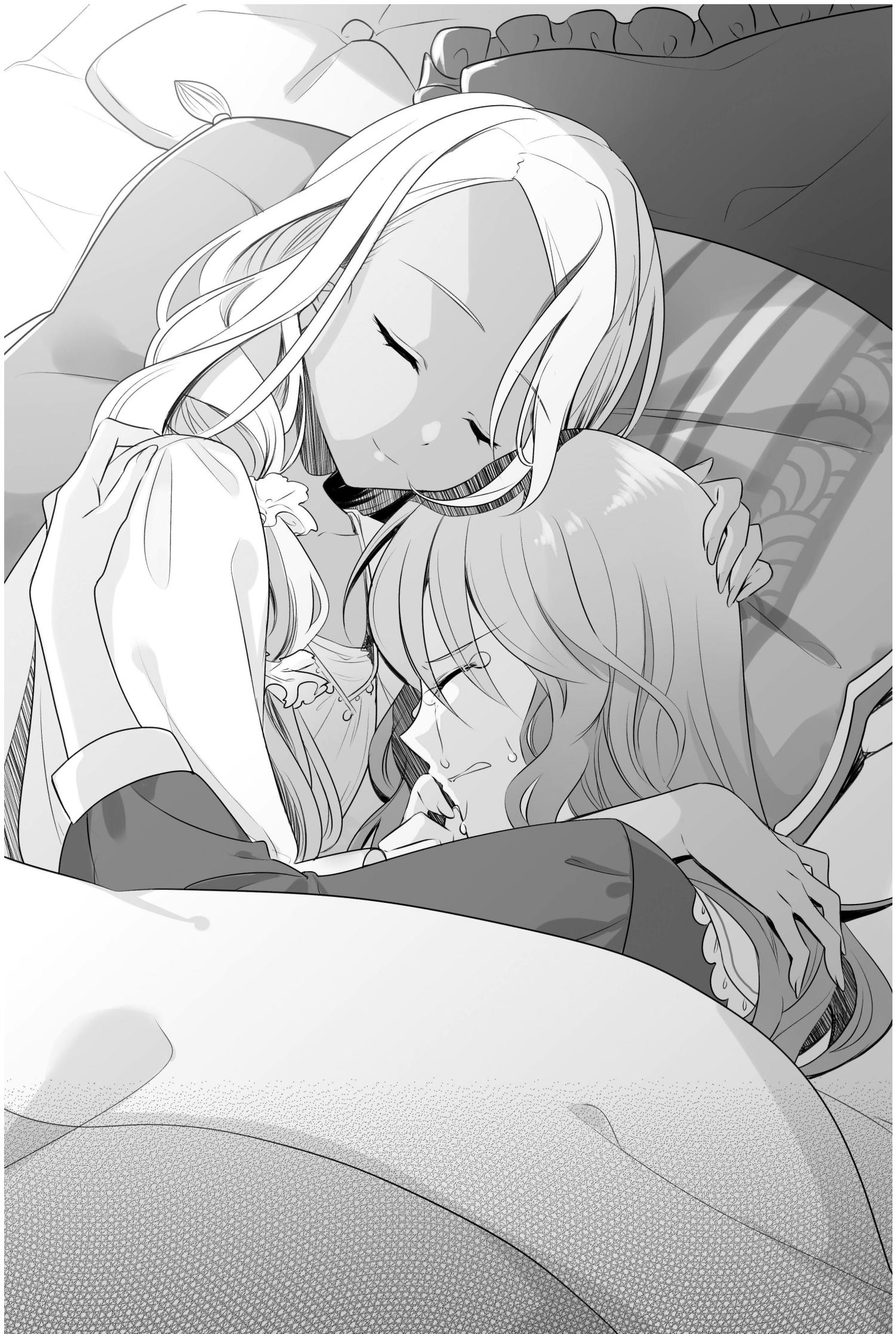
Before she knew it, her tears were falling one after the other, and she hurriedly wiped them away. Oriana pulled up the blanket to hide her face, too embarrassed to be seen like this.

“I-I thought I’d be bothering Vincent by feeling this way for him...”

“What’s wrong with being in love? You didn’t develop these feelings for his sake. They’re for you.” Yana gently wrapped Oriana, blanket and all, in her embrace. Being cradled in her petite arms made it that much warmer. “There’s no need for you to tell him how you feel. Nor is there any need for you to abandon your love for him. You are free to treasure it. I’m happy for you, Oriana.”

Although Oriana had found no pleasure in falling in love with Vincent, Yana celebrated it, never once acting as if her feelings were a hindrance or unnecessary.

Oriana clung to her friend and sobbed.



After crying for a while, she lifted her head to find tears in Yana's eyes as well.

"Right now, I really hate Mister Tanzine," said Yana.

"I can't bring myself to hate Azraq at all."

"Of course you can't."

Their gazes met and the two girls giggled. Oriana would likely be able to sleep soundly now, thanks to their talk.

Chapter 8: Date - A Promise to Meet

“VINCENT, do you have a moment? I have something to report regarding the dance lessons.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be right there,” he answered warmly.

Her lips pulled into a smile. *Ah, I love the way he says “Yeah.”*

The end of winter hailed the coming of spring and with it, the start of their fourth year. The color green soon filled the grounds of Lagen Magic Academy, the Herbology fields busy with the planting of seeds. Their first term exams were over as well, which meant everyone was leisurely passing the time. Well, everyone except Vincent Tanzine.

“About our practice venue... Since we’ll be using it for a prolonged period, our natural first choice would be the assembly hall, but it was already reserved. Instead, we’ve secured two inner rooms on the third floor of the west building, which are completely empty. Along with our written petition, I included a list of 204 names of students who are unconfident in their dancing skills. Apparently, Professor Wilton will be overseeing us twice a week.”

“Thank you. Your assistance has been invaluable,” Vincent said, smiling as if he trusted her from the very bottom of his heart. Each time she saw such a dazzling expression on his face, her heart pounded.

Ugh, stupid feelings. My pulse keeps going crazy at every little thing he does.

Even so, Oriana wasn’t about to be embarrassed of herself or depressed simply because Vincent managed to evoke such emotion in her.

It’s stupid for sure, she thought, but I actually kinda like it.

Thanks to Yana’s encouragement, she was no longer trying to run from her feelings and could instead face them head-on. Once she acknowledged that her feelings were valid and acceptable, she felt much calmer, which allowed her to speak to Vincent again naturally. While she did feel bewildered by her own

emotions at times, she no longer got so worked up that she couldn't interact with him.

"I also managed to recruit some people willing to help as instructors," said Oriana.

"In that case, we should be able to start before summer."

Since Vincent was as busy as ever, Oriana was pitching in to help him out; he'd come up with the idea of providing dance lessons for students in anticipation of their graduation ball. Though she was assisting, Oriana was more or less just following the plan he had already come up with. She did also make her own contributions, however; she was the one who managed to convince the teachers to let them hold dance lessons twice a week as part of their extracurricular activities.

"Still, it's incredible you recognized that many students were feeling nervous about dancing," Oriana remarked.

"It's all thanks to you. Though I also referenced the opinions of Miss Bälz and others."

"Glad to hear it, but...considering how in-depth this plan is, you had to have been putting it together for a while, right?"

"Yeah. I had other things going on concurrently though, so I wasn't able to move forward with it until now."

Oriana nodded thoughtfully. "Well, with this, we have over half a year to practice. Constance and the others are over the moon, naturally."

Most of the people around her were commoners. Those from similar upbringings who'd been instructed in etiquette had no issues dancing, but there were many others who didn't enjoy that luxury. She could think of two such examples off the top of her head: Edda, whose parents were scientists and knew little about the ways of the world outside their field of study, and Constance, whose father was a knight and single parent, who'd yet to remarry. Constance had polished her sword arm to perfection, but she knew nothing about wearing a dress and curtsying.

"You truly do care about your friends," said Vincent.

"Yes, I love them all."

Oriana had spent this past month running around like a chicken with its head cut off, anxious to be of help to her female companions. And not so long ago, she finally managed to take down the last barrier to their plan: Professor Wilton.

While she was busy chatting with Vincent, a few girls called over to him in cutesy voices. "Mister Tanzine?"

Vincent glanced at them and smiled.

Ah, that's his business smile, Oriana noticed. After being friends for a year, she could spot the subtle difference.

When girls first started clustering around him, Vincent was utterly bewildered by the sudden change, but after dealing with this for four months, he'd naturally become accustomed to it. He no longer grabbed her by the hand and tried to escape but instead greeted the girls with a smile.

Since she had already finished updating him on the progress of their dance lessons, Oriana moved to excuse herself and leave the floor to the group of girls. The moment she moved, however, Vincent's eyes followed her.

Huh? What's with him? She wondered, retreating a step. The power of his gaze only grew stronger. *Is he trying to tell me to stay where I am?* Her heart suddenly drummed louder. *Is he maybe...asking me for help?*

Oriana put on a graceful expression and stood in place, inwardly praying that her lips hadn't betrayed her and curled into an idiotic grin. As the group of girls pressed in closer, they glared at Oriana for not moving, even as they circled around Vincent.

"Um, you see, I was fretting over what type of wand I should settle on. Would you mind lending your ear and giving me your thoughts?"

"I would like the same. You use your wand for the rest of your life, right? It's an awfully heavy decision to make all on your own."

"I can hardly believe this! You girls, too? I actually came hoping to consult him about the very same thing."

“Perfect timing, since tomorrow happens to be Flower Day (Saturday). Would you mind meeting us at a cafe in the city to discuss our wands?”

What part of that was perfect timing or why they decided to invite him out to the city, Oriana couldn’t be sure, but the girls nodded to one another as if they thought it was a splendid idea.

“Um...” Oriana began to say, intending to fulfill the request Vincent had made of her, but apparently she had misunderstood because he shot her a look again, as if telling her to wait. Wise enough to heed his instructions, she snapped her mouth shut.

“Hm,” said Vincent. “If it’s about your wands, I can speak to Professor Proston for you. Tell me, what year are you girls in?”

Hearing the name of the professor overseeing Magical Implement Construction took the wind right out of the girls’ sails.

“Uh...we’re third years. B-But it’s not so major that we need to get the professor involved.”

“Yes, agreed. Mister Tanzine, if you would just give us your—”

“Terribly sorry, but my schedule is full,” Vincent replied.

“We won’t take much of your time, we promise.”

“That’s right. We don’t have to go all the way to the city to discuss it with you. Right, girls?”

“Yeah.”

Vincent shook his head. “Apologies, but I truly am busy. Speaking to the professor for you is the most I can do. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He left no room for them to argue the point as he spun around, turning his back to them.

Urged along by his gaze, Oriana bowed to the girls and hurried after him. He made sure she was following before he started walking, his pace slow and leisurely.



ONCE they distanced themselves from the group of girls, who were stamping

their feet in frustration, Vincent finally paused. There happened to be an unoccupied bench nearby, so he lowered himself onto it.

Huh? So...why did he look at me like he wanted me to stay? Oriana was sure he'd been imploring her to drive the girls off, so she was a bit dejected about not being able to fulfill that duty for him. And here I was, excited because I thought he was relying on me as a friend.

Vincent pinched the hem of her robe between his fingers and tugged. With his other hand, he patted the empty spot beside him.

"Uh, I should probably excuse myself," Oriana said. "From the sound of things, you must be really busy."

"I'm not the least bit busy." Even assuming he'd been making excuses by claiming otherwise a second ago, there was no way he wasn't busy *at all*.

Oriana burst into laughter.

"What is it?" Vincent asked.

"Nothing. I was just thinking, you probably are too busy to go to the city with them, anyway."

"...If it were with you, I would go."

"With me? Is there something you need to buy?"

"...Yeah, there is." Vincent nodded slowly.

Oriana hesitated. *I guess if we're friends, going to town to shop together isn't that strange, is it?* It didn't seem like it would be. Surely not. No, it had to be perfectly normal.

Oriana slowly nodded to herself. "All right, then. Let's go together."

"Yeah, agreed. Let's do that."

For whatever reason, they both wore meek expressions, using the most clichéd responses imaginable.

"Oh, um, are you going to invite Miguel along too?" Oriana asked nervously.

It would be strange not to invite Miguel if they were going together. She resented some part of herself for even bothering to remember him, as much as

she felt guilty about it since he'd said before that he enjoyed it being the three of them.

"I figure he's probably busy," Vincent said.

"O-Oh, all right then. I guess that's just how it goes."

"Yes, that is how it goes sometimes."

"Right."

"Yeah."

Uh-huh. Okay. Yup.

The two continued their awkward, perfunctory replies, their plans to go out tomorrow now solidified.



"IT'S *really* not a date?"

"It's *really* not a date!"

Their words were the exact same, but the tone changed the meaning completely; Yana sounded skeptical of Oriana's claim, while Oriana was insistent.

"I mean it," Oriana said. "We're just going out shopping. This is most definitely not a—"

"It *is* a date," Yana interjected.

Oriana covered her face with her hands. "You *really* think so?"

"I don't care what anyone else tries to tell you, that is a *date*."

As the rays of sunlight spilling into the room dimmed, Oriana held her breath. She flopped around on the floor, as if forgetting how to properly inhale. She kept her hands over her face and curled into a ball.

"Seriously? Oh God. Is this actually happening?"

A date... She never dreamed a day would come when she'd actually go on one with Vincent. No, realistically, Vincent merely thought of tomorrow's trip as a normal outing. But regardless of his intentions, it could still be classified as a

date.

“What am I going to do? Now I’m so nervous,” Oriana mumbled.

“You needn’t do anything special. After a bit of yoga, we’ll do a lymphatic massage.”

“Ugh, but that’s super painful!”

“If you were mindful enough about doing it daily, it wouldn’t be that painful. For as much interest as you have in beauty, you certainly do slack off on the work necessary to achieve it.” Yana shot her an exasperated look. She was a pro among pros when it came to pursuing and maintaining beauty. Massages and yoga were practically an Ete Kariman specialty.

“Urk... Well, I’ll start putting more effort in. I *do* want to be cute.”

I’d at least like Vincent to think I’m cute. Though she was too embarrassed to say as much, that was undeniably how she felt. It was only because she’d convinced herself not to abandon her love for him that she’d come to think this way to begin with. As Yana had advised her, Oriana let her love grow. She wanted to look good in front of Vincent, which was why she dedicated herself more to her studies, helped him out when she could, and was even trying to earnestly devote herself to yoga and massages despite hating them.

“What should I do about my clothes?” Oriana wondered aloud. “Maybe I should ask Kai or Lucian what kind of outfits guys prefer.”

“Are you seriously considering asking an infamous virgin like Lucian?” Yana stared at her in disbelief.

Oriana shrugged. “Well, virgin or no, he’s still a man! I have faith in him!”

“Hold it right there. If that’s how desperate you are, let’s enlist Azraq.”

“Wha...?”

Azraq? The man who had feelings for a mature woman in her thirties? Oriana had no confidence she could pull off an outfit suiting someone like that. Seeing the grim look on her friend’s face, Yana must have sensed Oriana’s apprehension.

“Basically, you need to find what suits *you* best,” she said.

Oriana hopped to her feet and threw her closet doors open. Outfits she used on holidays and the weekends were lined up neatly inside. She glanced over the selection, eyes unblinking as she said, “I need to find the best possible outfit combination. I don’t want to be too chic, though. And it needs to fit the mood. I can’t seem too feminine, but at least enough to rouse his interest. I have to be careful that it’s not too casual, though. It has to be perfect!”



PLEASE, oh please, don’t let me run into anyone I know, Oriana prayed to the Dragon God.

It was the morning of Flower Day, and people in casual wear were bustling about the surrounding courtyard. She was slowly making her way down one of Lagen Magic Academy’s brick pathways. Since she’d already received permission for her outing yesterday, she was on her way to the front gate, where she was supposed to meet up with Vincent.

After racking her brain over what outfit to go with all night, she finally settled on something fitting for the spring weather: a simple top and skirt. Oriana’s late mother had been built for easy child labor, and having inherited that, Oriana’s figure was not the least bit suited for pants. A dress would have been a bit *too* feminine, however, so she abandoned that option. Frankly speaking, despite dedicating an hour to fussing over her attire, she’d only come up with this outfit by process of elimination.

Among all the clothes she owned, this particular skirt had the longest hem. Her blouse, meanwhile, hid her neckline, and the jacket she wore over it was baggy enough to obscure the lines of her body, complete with ribbed sleeves. In the event of an emergency, she could still easily roll them back, and they provided her plenty of mobility. It was up to her to protect the life of the duke’s heir, after all, should the need arise.

Oriana was also carrying an enormous rucksack on her back, since whatever they bought, she certainly didn’t intend to make Vincent carry it. She’d also tucked a handkerchief inside, plus two spares, just in case.

Much as she wanted to complete her outfit with high-heeled velour pumps, considering their date was an outing into the city, she opted instead for lace-up

boots.

It's fine, she reassured herself. When Azraq came over first thing this morning, he told me I'd picked well. I'm sure this will be just fine.

Oriana had felt as embarrassed as a child being sent off on their first date by their parents, but she wouldn't have felt comfortable not getting a man's opinion before she headed off. She would need to send Azraq a bottle of alcohol later as a way to express her gratitude for his help.

Thanks to Yana's lymphatic massage, the swelling in her face had gone down considerably, making it nearly half the size it normally was. Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration, but it definitely felt that way. The skin along her chin was completely clear and smooth, and her eyes looked bigger and brighter than usual. Thanks to the oil she had used the day before, she'd had an easy time putting on her makeup as well. And yet, in spite of her perfect preparations, she still kept fussing.

Yana and Azraq kept watch over her like parents as she left the dorm. She made it only a few steps before pausing to pull out the mirror from her rucksack. Her makeup was nearly perfect. Naturally, of course, since she'd spent several hours on it, which was way more time than she dedicated on any normal school day. Most of her effort was dedicated to making sure the foundation was perfected, so at a glance, it didn't seem as though she'd gone any more gung-ho than usual.

I don't want him to know how excited I was about today, but I do want him to think I'm cuter than usual. With any luck, I'd like to make his heart race.

Oriana had never been more nervous in her life before. She combed her hand through her bangs numerous times, plodding along.

“Orianaaaa!”

Oriana flinched at the sound of her name. She hadn't even sensed anyone coming close until a hand clapped her on the shoulder from behind. “G-Good morning, Miguel,” she said, craning her head around to peer back at him.

Crap, she thought. The last thing she wanted was to meet someone she knew, especially Miguel, who she feared would see right through how ridiculously

excited and anxious she was.

“Mornin’.”

Miguel was wearing casual clothes as well, likely because he was taking the day off. Most of the time, he and Vincent spent even their weekends inside the school or in the fields, so they usually wore their robes. It wasn’t often she got to see him dressed like this.

“Hm?” Miguel’s eyebrows shot up.

“What is it?” Oriana asked.

“Your lipstick. It’s different than usual.”

“Huh? Really? I wonder why that’d be?” Oriana averted her gaze, feeling like an idiot for pretending to be oblivious, even as she tried to keep up the facade.
“Yeah, sure is a mystery...”

Inwardly, she wondered, *Is it really that obvious? Then again, I’d prefer not to discount the possibility that he’s simply got a discerning eye.*

“It’s nice. Lighter than usual and cute.”

“You think so?! I normally always use a makeup puff to apply it, but today I tried using a brush instead!”

“Uh-huh.”

“I spread it over a wider area than usual, but I tried to make it lighter as well...”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I kept wondering if it still looked natural.”

“Uh-huh. It’s super cute.”

“Aww.... Thank you.”

In the end, Oriana wound up digging her own grave. She’d basically spilled the beans herself by emphasizing how much effort she’d put into her makeup, proving how special today was.

“Don’t worry, you really do look cute,” Miguel said. He reached a hand up to

stroke her head, only to stop himself at the last second. “Ah, you’ve even done your hair too.”

Yeah, I have, but I’d prefer it if you wouldn’t bring it up.

Oriana’s cheeks colored bright red as she knitted her brows. Her lips pulled together in a frustrated pout, and Miguel chuckled.

“Hey, say ‘aah’ for me.”

“Aah?” Oriana did as she was told and opened her mouth, only for something to be promptly shoved inside. She soon realized it was one of the lollipops he always carried with him. “Fwah...” she tried to speak around the candy in her mouth.

“Well, have fun.”

“I whill twy!” Her words came out funny thanks to the sucker obstructing her tongue. Grateful, she waved at Miguel, enjoying the sweet candy in her mouth as she parted ways with him.



MEANWHILE, a few hours earlier in the boys’ dormitory...

It was early morning when Vincent began running a brush through his hair. He did so more meticulously than usual, eyes fixed on his reflection in the mirror in front of him.

It’s a date...

It *wasn’t* actually a date, strictly speaking, and yet at the same time, it kind of was. The nature of their outing *wasn’t* explicitly romantic, but he did invite Oriana out to the city, and she did agree to go. Plus, it would be just the two of them. That definitely made it a date.

“You’re going out?” Miguel’s groggy voice called from bed, eyelids still heavy with sleep. Considering he normally struggled with getting up so much that he couldn’t even speak coherently, he must have been awake for a little while. Miguel pushed a hand through his bangs and rolled his head back and forth like a cat, trying to shake off the drowsiness.

“Yeah, I am.” Vincent could provide no other answer than that. If he revealed

who he was going with and where, he was sure Miguel would insist on tagging along. That wouldn't normally be a problem, but today at least, he'd prefer Miguel to remain in bed, lounging about like a feline.

Miguel purposefully kept his silence. Vincent made no attempt to interrupt it, but that didn't make it any less comfortable; Vincent felt it as keenly as a knife stabbing into his back.

"I might be a bit late returning, so feel free to eat whenever you want," said Vincent.

"What's wrong with the two of us? We sound like an old married couple."

Vincent glanced over his shoulder, displeased by the comparison. To his surprise, Miguel stood right there beside him, having climbed out of his bed at some point during their exchange. Miguel promptly thrust his hand into Vincent's hair, tousling it.

"Huh?" Vincent blurted, stunned.

"Hmm-hmm."

Despite how painstakingly he'd groomed his hair, Miguel had left it looking far more disheveled than it normally did.

"Miguel, what do you think you're doing?"

"What's with those clothes?" Miguel asked, ignoring him. "You visiting a theater or something? Even assuming you are going to an afternoon program, these clothes are way too formal."

As his friend stared pointedly at him, Vincent glanced down at himself. There was little else he could do, much as Miguel scolded him; it wasn't the season for balls right now, and since he was staying at the Academy, he hadn't brought any evening attire with him either. As far as Vincent was concerned, this *was* casual wear.

"Lose the tie at least," Miguel advised. "And get rid of the handkerchief in your pocket. Those pants are made of some good material, but don't you have anything a little brighter? You do realize it's the fourth month of spring, right?"

Vincent sighed. "Miguel, as much as I appreciate your advice—"

Before he could finish, Miguel sensed what he was about to say and interrupted, "Come with me, then."

"...All right." Vincent reluctantly acquiesced, the bitterness showing on his face.

As they busied themselves with that, time flew by before Vincent knew it, until he only had thirty minutes left before he was slated to meet Oriana.

"Miguel, are you quite done?"

"Mm, not quite."

"And how many times do you intend to have me try on the same outfits over and over again?"

"Tch."

After scolding his friend for being too occupied playing around, Vincent removed his slippers and pulled his outside shoes on. His hair hung loose around his face, looking far more unkempt than usual. He had little choice but to leave without grooming it.

This is awful. With nothing else at his disposal, he resorted to combing his fingers through his hair in an attempt to smooth it out.

"Vincent," a voice called behind him before he slipped out the door.

"What is it?"

The words barely left his mouth before Miguel shoved a lollipop past his lips. Vincent glared disapprovingly, having half a mind to bite the confounded candy in two.

"Welp, I'll be off to grab me some grub, then." Miguel hurried past him and disappeared out the door before he could. He tottered on ahead as Vincent followed behind him. If he was headed to the cafeteria, it was located near the gates, so at least he wouldn't run into Oriana unless he purposefully sought her out.

This was supposed to be Vincent's first date, but he felt completely out of sorts; his hair was a mess, his tie was missing, his cuffs were unbuttoned, his handkerchief was gone from his pocket, and his pants were something he'd

borrowed from Miguel. Although he felt far less confident not being in his normal attire, he nevertheless set out to meet up with Oriana.



ORIANA still hadn't arrived by the time he got to their meeting spot. There were dozens of other students loitering there, however, preparing to set off into the city.

Not that I need to hide myself from anyone, but...

Vincent found a tree to lean against, thinking it might be a pain otherwise if people spotted him. At least over here, he could see the flow of foot traffic while not sticking out too obviously.

As he waited for her in the shade, he realized how incredibly precious this moment was—and how lucky he was to be able to enjoy it. After all, in this moment, he was here waiting for her—the only one waiting for her—and with her tacit approval at that. It filled his heart with joy.

So sweet, he thought as the saccharine taste of the candy in his mouth rolled over his tongue. He hadn't found an opportunity yet to discard it.

Vincent still lost his composure when it came to Oriana, despite having lived a bit longer than everyone else his age in this timeline. Chagrined by that, he distracted himself by watching the crowd of people milling about, only to be caught off guard when a head suddenly popped into his view from the side.

"Aha. I figured it was probably you, Vincent."

Oriana—her hair a warm, sweet milky-tea color—peeked in at him as he hid in the shade of the tree. He hadn't at all been prepared for it, so his heart felt like it might jump right out of his throat. If the surprise wasn't bad enough, Oriana looked ridiculously cute as well. She was dressed in casual clothes, her hair even curlier than usual. He wasn't even sure where to begin complimenting her. All he knew was that she was...well, *cute*.

"Everyone was fussing about how there was a handsome man over here, but you looked so different than normal that I didn't realize it was you at first—" Oriana was speaking at a rapid-fire pace as he absently admired how adorable she was, but the moment was shattered when she suddenly stopped. Her gaze

had wandered down to his mouth, and as soon as he realized, Vincent started with surprise—because Oriana, too, had the same candy in her mouth.

The air went quiet between them.

Miguel must have realized we were planning on going out together.

Miguel had claimed he was going to the cafeteria, but he'd clearly surmised that Oriana was Vincent's date and took a detour to the girls' dormitory.

Confound him. This is insanely embarrassing, Vincent thought.

Both he and Oriana silently sucked on their lollipops, gazes glued to the ground.



HE'S so handsome. Oriana genuinely believed that very word had been conceived to describe Vincent. *I mean, ridiculously handsome.*

Vincent had gone for a wild look with his outfit, and it was so dazzling she could scarcely look at him directly. The best part about it was getting to see him wearing something totally different than she was used to.

Amazing. He's even got his hair down, despite always combing it back. He looked amazing at the opera house in that formal attire, but today, he...looks like a normal boy his age. Young. This is incredible. Like, I can't even put into words how special this feels. Vincent is so, so handsome.

The two stood facing each other, unable to move an inch. Oriana, gaze leveled at the ground, closed her eyes and twisted her mouth shut, biting her bottom lip.

Oh boy, what should I do? I bet even my ears are red as a tomato!

Oriana knew that he was peering down, his eyes glued to her. She couldn't even bring herself to peer up at him, and worse, he could probably see how badly she was blushing. The embarrassment was so overwhelming she was ready to dig her grave right here.

"...Are you hot? You could go back and get a hat to—"

"N-No, I'm...quite all right," Oriana stuttered back. What else was she

supposed to say? No, it took all of her willpower to manage that much.

Silence fell over them again. As they awkwardly stood there, the voices of female students heading toward the main gate drifted their way.

“Hey, over there. Isn’t that...”

“What? Seriously?”

“I mean, look who’s beside him—Miss Elsha, right? So it has to be...”

Oh crap. They’ve realized Vincent’s here! Not that it was a problem that he was. Not really, anyway. I mean, we’re just going out shopping, so it’s not like this is a date. Sure, the other students have noticed us, but there’s no reason for us to be secretive about it. Who cares if more people join us? It’s not like... It’s not...

Oriana suddenly jerked her chin up. Despite her sudden movement, Vincent remained stock still, staring at her. She snatched his wrist.

“Huh?” he blurted, confused.

Oriana took off running, pulling him along. She could still hear the faint voices of the girls behind her, but she didn’t bother giving them a second glance as she dashed out the front gate.



“WHAT’S the matter?”

“Hold...just a...sec...”

“All right, all right. Here, have a seat.” Vincent produced a handkerchief and spread it out on the edge of one of the roadside block planters.

Winded and out of breath, Oriana squeezed out a few words of gratitude before plopping down. *Getting déjà vu from this. I went through the same thing not all that long ago.* Back then, Vincent had been the one leading her away, but the experience had done nothing to encourage her to exercise; she had no stamina.

Putting on those lace-up boots was a smart idea, after all. If she’d gone with the pumps, her feet would have already died before she got this far.

In exchange for running full speed, she was covered in sweat, and sadly, ignoring it wasn't an option. She pulled out her own handkerchief from her rucksack and pressed it over her face to soak up the sweat.

Past-me, bless you for thinking ahead and packing extra handkerchiefs! Oriana was skilled at distracting herself from reality and preoccupying herself with her own inner thoughts. Incidentally, the very thing she was trying to keep her mind off of was the sheen of sweat covering her face, her surely noticeable makeup, the fact that she'd grabbed Vincent's hand, and that he was now sitting next to her.

Thanks perhaps to how narrow the planter was, Vincent was unable to maintain his usual distance, instead close enough that the two might brush arms if they weren't careful. He was also holding her lollipop for her in one hand, still sucking on his own as he crossed his ankles and waited.

Whaaa... Is this for real? Oriana managed to catch a glimpse of him past the edge of the handkerchief, and as soon as she did, she promptly covered her face with it again. Not only is he in casual clothes, but the whole aura around him is different. Oh man, and after it took me so long just getting used to Vincent normally, and now this!

Vincent faced straight forward as he sat beside her, making no move to rush her along. Oriana decided to lean into that kindness and use the opportunity to calm her frazzled nerves and get rid of some of the sweat covering her.

Enormous crowds milled about the city. The buildings were all squished in together with no space between them, creating walls and pathways in the process. At the top, all of the buildings were proportionately dissimilar, and it was through those gaps that one could peek at the sunny sky. There, birds could be seen flying in the vast spaces between the clouds hovering in the great blue expanse. Meanwhile below, children ran along the streets, weaving their way through the people unhurriedly ambling along. As a woman watered the flowers in front of her shop, a man from the shop next door called over to her, striking up conversation.

Sitting there, watching absently as all of this played out, Vincent muttered to himself, "Now it makes sense. So that's why he made me come dressed like

this."

"Sorry?"

"Before I came, Miguel made me change," Vincent explained. "I've never walked around the city before, so I'm glad I changed before coming. I would have been embarrassed in my original outfit."

Oriana thought he would look handsome no matter what he wore. And regardless of whatever his outfit had been, she certainly wouldn't have found it embarrassing.

That said, I can't believe he invited me out even though he's never walked about the city like this before.

Oriana dabbed her handkerchief along her hairline, facing forward as she said, "I'm feeling a bit nervous today, since you're...a little different than usual."

"The clothes, I assume? Because part of this wardrobe I borrowed from Miguel."

When she inquired as to which parts specifically, he informed her that his pants were Miguel's. They suited him so well that she would never have guessed had he not told her.

"Well, you're as handsome and stunning as ever, but...next time we go out, wear the outfit you were planning to come out in today. Just make sure we don't go anywhere where I might embarrass myself," Oriana joked, knowing full well that it was a tall order to hope for another invitation like this. She only jested because he looked so forlorn.

Vincent smiled at her. "In that case, I'll be the one to pull you by the hand next."

"Running? I'd really rather we not..."

"Hah, after you were the one who made *me* run today?"

Vincent had a point. Little did he know she'd only ran because she didn't want the other female students to see him like this.

"I was just feeling a little restless," Oriana said, crinkling her brows as if to look grumpy, only to break out into a grin immediately after.

Vincent stared directly at her. His lips moved slowly as he said, “I’m...nervous too.”

“Because it’s your first time in the city?”

“You know, I’ve often thought this, but...you really are daft.”

“Huh?” Oriana gawked at him. She never dreamed he thought of her as an idiot this whole time.

“It should be obvious I’d never be nervous over something that inconsequential.”

“Oh, right. Of course...not?”

Vincent hesitated before saying, “You’re...different than usual today, too.” He dropped his gaze as he spoke.

Oriana held her handkerchief over her mouth as her mind raced. *Wait, wait, wait. Hold up. Did he just turn my own words back at me? He did, right?*

Both of them went silent. Even as chatter and clamor filled the air around them, they spoke not a word, sticking out like a sore thumb amid the humdrum of the city.

Vincent plucked up his courage, voice quiet as a whisper as he blurted, “You look...very cute.”

Oriana flattened her handkerchief over her face. She wasn’t simply hiding herself from view, she was strongly kneading the fabric into her skin. “I am most honored to hear that, milord!”

“What sort of response is that?”

If she didn’t joke around like she did, she couldn’t maintain their so-called friendship. *But I can’t keep this up. I can’t keep myself from grinning like an idiot.* Oriana kept the handkerchief over her face as she tilted her head toward her chest, sucking in deep breaths before slowly exhaling, again and again. There was no doubt in her mind that, if she wasn’t careful, her expression right now would reveal the truth—that she had utterly fallen for Vincent.

And now she was sure her makeup was probably a mess too. All that time she dedicated to perfecting her foundation, and now it was surely smeared all over.

Not even an hour had passed since they'd left. She could hardly excuse herself to reapply her cosmetics right now. Though she couldn't do it very well in front of him, either.

Making an excuse to visit the ladies' room would be too embarrassing. Ugh, who knew the day would come when I'd act like a lovestruck maiden! And that was indeed what she was. As Oriana fidgeted about, chin still dipped toward her chest, Vincent spoke up beside her.

"Hey..."

"Yes?"

"Can we stop for today?"

What? He wants to go home already? Shocked, Oriana jerked her chin up and away from the handkerchief she'd been using to hide her face. Vincent was far closer to her than she'd anticipated, so her sudden movement made them bump shoulders. Both of them felt a bit awkward at such close proximity, but neither one tried to move away, since that seemed just as embarrassing.

"What I mean is..."

"Yes?" Flustered, Oriana waited for his response, wondering what he'd say. Had she flubbed things by making him run with her? Or had she left him waiting too long? Could it be that he now disliked the idea of walking around the city? Ill premonitions fluttered through her mind one after the other.

"Stop being so formal."

"Pardon?" Oriana squeaked back. That was the last thing she pictured him saying.

"It's not often we go to the city like this together. At least for today, couldn't you speak more casually with me?" His eyes seemed to pierce right through her.

Oriana jerked her head up and down, nodding. "Very well, I under—I mean, s-sure. I get it."

"Push yourself if you have to."

"Yeah, okay." Oriana nodded again.

I wonder why it is that I'm way happier hearing him ask me to push myself than if he told me not to. It felt like he wanted something from her desperately. She didn't mind, even if he only desired as much in his capacity as her friend.

Oriana's heart was so full, she felt like she was floating on cloud nine. She didn't even care that her makeup might be smeared. *Wait, scratch that. I definitely do care.* But more than anything right now, she didn't want to keep him waiting.

"Sorry, one moment," she said, pulling out her hand mirror. To her relief, her makeup didn't look as bad as she'd feared. She gave herself a pass and promptly stood up. "Apologies for the wait! Let's go, Vincent." Oriana beamed at him, and Vincent stared back at her in awe.



HE'S so cute.

"...Do you truly walk about as you eat this? Where are you supposed to sit?"

So cute.

"The grip of this skewer is piping hot too."

So cute.

"What? You simply sink your teeth into it like this? Surely you must be joking."

So cute.

Oriana watched Vincent with a great big grin on her face. She was smiling so much that her cheek muscles were starting to ache.

The two were wandering the city aimlessly when they happened upon a street stall selling grilled fish. Skewers were lined up in rows across a wire rack, fire licking at their undersides. Since Vincent asked what it was, she bought him one.

They found their way to a block planter along the roadside and plopped themselves down. Oriana spread out a second handkerchief across her lap. The fragrant fish they'd bought was garnished with a modest sprinkling of salt.

As Vincent gawked at his food, utterly bewildered, Oriana held out the portion she'd purchased for herself, wanting him to hold it. When he obliged her, she said, "Now, pass yours over."

"Yeah, sure."

Oriana took his skewer and peeled off the skin for him. She discarded it on her lap, where her handkerchief was, and then sprinkled some extra salt over the fish itself. Once she was done, she passed it back over to him, then repeated the process with her own food.

"It's easiest to bite into if you start from here," Oriana instructed. "There are bones in the middle, so be careful." Holding one end of the skewer in either hand, she chomped down on its back. The meat was tender and peeled off with little resistance. A small, thread-like bone was left peeking out of the fish as she pulled her mouth away to chew. "Mm, so yummy."

Vincent watched her wide-eyed before hesitantly nibbling at the back of his own fish. After a small pause, he said, "It's delicious."

"Right? Pretty good, huh?" Oriana continued chomping away at her fish. Even its intestines, while a tad bitter, were exceedingly scrumptious. She polished it off in the blink of an eye. Perhaps it was a good thing that they bought three.

My heart was so full before eating the fish that I honestly thought I wouldn't even be able to eat. Stupid stomach sure has a mind of its own, she thought.

Oriana folded up the handkerchief on her lap. If she found a place to discard the fish skin later, she would have to be sure to do so. There was still a bit of fish oil left over on her lips, so she licked them, only to belatedly remember that Vincent was sitting beside her. Flustered, she promptly wiped her mouth with the edge of her handkerchief instead.

I wonder if he saw me? Oriana chanced a glance at him, and their eyes met. He was staring straight at her, which brought embarrassment crashing over her like a wave.

"You have some salt left on your cheek," he said.

"Huh? No way."

The bit of salt on its tail must have rubbed off on her cheek when she bit into it. With the back of her fingers, she tried to brush it away, but Vincent shook his head. “Other side.” She followed his instructions, but her fingers didn’t seem to be finding anything.

“Did I get it?” Oriana turned her face and leaned toward him so he could get a good look. They planned to continue wandering about the city some more, so she definitely didn’t want to do so with salt stuck to the side of her face the entire time.

Oh, that’s right. I have a mirror with me. Oriana was about to reach into her rucksack to retrieve it when Vincent’s hand came toward her, fingers still wrapped around his skewer.



Huh?! What? Eep!

Vincent's skin brushed hers. Since his fingertips were likely covered in fish oil and salt, he surely must have used the back of his fingers to do it. His touch, clumsy as it was, gave her the chills. A pleasant numbness spread through her body.

"Did you get it?"

"...The residue on my fingers rubbed off on your cheek."

"Seriously? Th-Then, would you mind getting that off, too?" Oriana was loath to lose his touch, so even though she was completely flustered, she still made her request. She wondered if she was asking for too much. Would he think it strange?

As she waited for an answer, his voice came out as a low, guttural grunt. "Mm."

Oriana snapped her eyes shut, lips tightly pursed. "*Mm*"? *What does that even mean*?! All he did was whisper and that was enough for her heart to feel like it might explode. She really wished he wouldn't do such cute things without warning.

If his touch had tickled before, she felt it that much more keenly as soon as she closed her eyes. Blood rushed to her head, and she was sure she was probably blushing. The way his fingers caressed her skin almost made it seem like he was enjoying it. He touched ever so softly, tracing over her cheek, but then, as if remembering the whole purpose of this, he put more force behind his touch to scrub away the residue.

I can't take this, Oriana thought, her lips trembling. "V-Vincent..." She heard what she thought sounded like a sharp inhale, so she peeked her eyelids open ever so slightly. "Have you got it yet?" Eyes now misty, she glanced at Vincent. He stared back, dumbstruck.

"...I finally got it off."

"Thank goodness."

He pulled his hand away.

Phew, that was a close one, Oriana thought. Any more of that and I might have melted into a puddle of goo. She took a few deep breaths. For some reason, as he sat beside her, Vincent did the same.



THEY continued purchasing and trying out different foods even after that. Vincent seemed to be enjoying his first little excursion into the city, much to her delight.

“By the way, that man isn’t bothering you anymore, is he?”

For a moment, Oriana was so clueless about what Vincent was referring to that her mind went blank. It was only upon seeing how solemn Vincent’s expression was that it dawned on her, he was referring to her father’s apprentice, Rysted.

“Oh, no. He hasn’t been stalking the city waiting for me to come out anymore, and even when I went home, he didn’t bother me. In fact, he seemed to avoid me.”

“Glad to hear it.”

His words warmed her heart. She could tell, without a shadow of a doubt, that he was being earnest. However, a question niggled at the back of her mind —one she’d been wondering for a while now. So she asked, “So, um...why did you help me out, anyway?”

“Why?” Vincent echoed back at her.

“At the time, the two of us hadn’t ever spoken before.”

At first, she might have thought he was the type willing to save anyone in need, but considering how he’d turned down those underclassmen yesterday, he was capable of saying no if he wanted. That exchange had taught her that he had his own way of drawing the line with people, his own way of prioritizing who and what was most important.

“Because you were in need.”

Oriana pulled a face, not for a minute buying that simple excuse.

“I’m telling the truth,” Vincent insisted.

“Uh-huh.”

It wasn’t that she actually thought he was lying, simply that she was convinced there had to be more to it. As she hesitated over how best to go about pressing him for details, Vincent made an awkward face and glanced up at the sky.

“...I waited so long, hoping to get you to say the word ‘help.’”

“You what?” She blinked at him.

“I’m not lying about that either,” he said with a thin smile. His tone of voice made it clear that was all he was willing to divulge. She probably wouldn’t get anything more out of him even if she asked.

Though Oriana couldn’t tell what his true intentions were in all of this, she could sense that they were genuinely good, which was why she decided to be upfront with him as well.

“Vincent.”

“Yes?”

“You really saved me back then. I mean it.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “I’m glad.”

Oriana smiled at him.



HAVING remembered their original purpose in coming, the two stopped by a number of stores to do some shopping, and in the process she spotted a familiar face, as often happens to anyone when wandering about the city.

“Ah, Lucian!” Oriana gasped. She panicked the moment she realized her classmate was headed their way. She glanced up at Vincent, who seemed to have located him as well.

“Should we say hello?” Vincent wondered.

“Uh, no, um... I mean, if we did, he’d probably just make a fuss, which would be annoying.”

Those weren’t the most convincing reasons. So what if he made a fuss? So

what if he was annoying? It didn't even sound like a proper excuse. And yet, as she fidgeted there restlessly, Vincent nodded.

"In that case, let's hide," he said.

"R-Right."

Really? He's actually going to hide with me? But we're not even doing anything that would warrant hiding. Most people didn't usually hide unless they had something to feel guilty about. All they had to do was confidently say hello. Then again, this was Lucian they were talking about; he lacked all delicacy and would probably grill her for all the details of their outing. Worse, he'd likely try to tag along afterward.

I wonder if Vincent finds our time together too precious to waste, the same way I do.

Oriana hurried after him into an alleyway. The space was cramped, but the bigger problem was there was nothing there to hide behind.

"And get this, after that, the guy..."

"Come on, stop screwing with me."

The conversation between Lucian and his friend trickled into their ears. If they stayed here, standing next to one another, they were practically begging to be found. Seeing the panic on her face, Vincent's expression hardened. He stooped down closer to her.

"Oriana, my apologies." He yanked her toward him, wrapping his arms around her.

Oriana was so shocked she was speechless. The difference between them in height made it so that he was practically enveloping her, his nose bumping against the top of her head.

"Vin—"

"Shh." Air whistled past his teeth in a simple but effective order.

As Vincent breathed, the hot air from his mouth poured through the strands of her hair, sinking into her scalp. He had one hand wrapped around her head and was pressing her face into his chest. She knew it was to help keep her

hidden, which was why she closed her mouth and refrained from speaking.

While Vincent stood there holding her, he kept his back turned toward the main thoroughfare where Lucian and his friend were chatting. Vincent looked different than usual in these clothes, so there was no way Lucian would be able to recognize him with only a brief glance. As the seconds passed, Lucian and his friend's voices began to fade into the distance.

Lucian was surely gone by now, which meant there was no risk of them being found. And yet for some reason, Vincent didn't release Oriana, though he didn't strengthen his embrace either. He simply stood there, frozen, his arms circled around her.

He smells of cedarwood and sweat. This was the first time she had ever been this close to him. They were both so aware of the other's presence that, even amid the din of the city, they could still make out the sound of each other's breathing.

Vincent's chest slowly rose and fell. Though he had his arms around her, there were at least two hands worth of space between the two. Even so, his chest filled her vision. She was struck by the sudden urge to touch him. His neck was so close, and she longed to loop her arms around it. She wanted to throw herself at his chest, to feel every part of him. She wanted him to cradle her like a precious porcelain doll while she basked in the moment and thought of nothing else.

The moment Oriana started to move her arms, Vincent must have sensed it because he jerked away. "Ahem, I'm sure we should be in the clear now."

"Oh, right." Having been thrust unceremoniously back into reality, Oriana bobbed her head over and over.

The two peeked out from the alleyway, but Lucian didn't seem to be in the vicinity anymore.

"Looks like he's gone," Oriana said.

"That's good."

"Yup."

“Really, it is.”

“Yep, sure is.”

“Yeah.”

Their replies had turned perfunctory at some point, but neither one seemed eager to point as much out.



ALTHOUGH they had been out and about since early morning and should be physically exhausted by now, Oriana didn’t feel the least bit fatigued.

“Vincent, this way.”

The two climbed a long set of stairs before arriving at an observation deck. Since the sun was setting in the distance, the place was bustling with couples. Seeing how close the other men and women stood together, Oriana’s thoughts went back to a little bit ago when she and Vincent had been pressed close. Her cheeks heated up.

“We should be able to see the Academy pretty well from here.” She pointed in the direction of the campus. It was surrounded by so many trees that it was impossible to see what was happening there, but one could at least see how vast the school grounds were.

“You’re right... You can see the Dragon Tree well from here too.”

“Huh? Uh, yeah. I guess so.” Oriana turned her gaze to the forest further in, beyond the Academy, and she nodded. The Dragon Tree was so enormous that you could see it from just about anywhere. It was several times the height of any normal tree.

Vincent gazed solemnly at it, as if deep in concentration. *Ah, this is the same face he makes when he’s doing his experiments.* Which meant he was probably lost in thought about something.

So as not to disturb him, Oriana leaned over the railing and pretended to watch the scenery instead. She stayed like that for a while, and the sweat she’d worked up climbing the stairs was soon replaced by a chill as the cool evening air caressed her skin. She shivered, which finally caught Vincent’s attention.

“Apologies. My mind was wandering.”

“Yup, I know,” she said with a nod.

Vincent slowly smiled. “You must be cold. Let’s go back down and find you a shawl to wear.”

“No need. All that’s left now is to go back home, anyway.” Oriana pulled away from the railing and they started toward the stairs.

Vincent cast one last glance back, glimpsing the school grounds, illuminated by the dimming evening sunlight. “Indeed... We should be getting back.” He almost sounded sad about it.

But that’s probably just wishful thinking on my part, isn’t it?



“**THAT** was fun.”

Coming down the last few stairs, it felt like they’d just wrapped up a grand adventure. The two lined up together and started down the main road toward the Academy.

“I’ll never forget today, not even if I die,” Oriana said. She realized how exaggerated that was only after the words left her mouth. People didn’t normally act that emotional over going out shopping with a friend.

Worried he might suspect something, Oriana sneaked a glance at Vincent, only to find him gazing sadly back at her. Her feet froze. The pain written on his face was so severe, as if he’d just had his heart gouged out. Seeing him like that, she couldn’t help but call his name.

“Vincent?”

His whole body tensed. “Liar,” he blurted out.

“Huh?” Oriana scrunched her face in confusion.

Vincent forced a smile. “It’s nothing. My apologies... Let’s be on our way.”

It certainly didn’t seem like nothing. Worried, she hurried back to his side and peered into his face. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Not at all. I’m sorry. It’s my problem. Please forget I said anything. We’re

friends, so you can do that for me, can't you?"

"I-I can, yeah." Oriana fisted her hands, wanting to meet his expectations.

Vincent smiled. It was faint, but at least it seemed more genuine than the one he'd given her a second ago. "Hey, Oriana, today's about to end."

"Uh? I guess so, yeah."

Given the time, it was still a bit early to say that, but at the very least, their date would be over once they got back to the Academy.

"How was it? Speaking casually to me."

"Much to my surprise, it wasn't entirely disagreeable."

"Why would you go back to that stiff, formal way of speaking now, of all times?" Vincent broke out into a chuckle, even though he tried to suppress it.

Seeing the mirth on his face surprised her so much that she hopped in front of him, blocking his path.

"What is it?"

"J-Just now...you laughed."

I've never heard him laugh like that before.

Sure, Vincent would smile at her and chuckle now and then, but this was different; she was pretty sure this was the first time she had ever stood by him as an equal and heard him laugh from the heart.

"How rude. I laugh plenty," Vincent said sulkily. He was probably embarrassed she was pointing it out and trying to deflect. At some point during their relationship, she'd even become able to pick up on the little things like that.

"Wait. One more time. Laugh for me one more time."

"What are you going on about..."

"Come on, please? Please, Vincent?" Her persistent begging finally paid off when, resigned, he let out a dry chuckle. But no, it wasn't right. This wasn't what she wanted.

"What kind of laugh am I supposed to give you?"

"No, that's not what I mean..." Even Oriana was struggling to put it into words, but she wanted desperately to make him laugh the way he had a moment ago. She grabbed a lock of her hair and pulled it across her upper lip. "See? A mustache."

Vincent stared at her, dumbfounded. It had been the best gag she could come up with, but now she was starting to feel embarrassed for having done it. She dropped the mustache act quickly.

"Pfft..." A quiet, husky peal of laughter leaked out of his lips. "Bwahaha! You shouldn't do something like that in the first place if you're going to feel so embarrassed by it."

He laughed again!

The laughter was so genuine his shoulders even vibrated. Oriana's whole face lit up as she watched him. *Amazing. Seeing someone who normally never laughs start snickering like this is just...incredible.*

"So cute," she breathed out.

"What?" Vincent stared down at her coldly. The air around them turned subzero in an instant. It was so intimidating... Oriana was sure not even the rats on the street, sneaking bites of cheese from shopfronts, found themselves on the receiving end of a glare this powerful.

"It's late. We should get back before they close the school gate."

Thus, the curtains closed on the cheap admission Vincent Smile Festival, courtesy of Oriana's gaffe. It had been all too short.



BY the time they arrived at the gates of Lagen Magic Academy, the sun was already beginning to disappear beyond the tops of the mountains, which meant their surroundings had grown quite dark. Oriana was at least relieved that they managed to make it back before the gate closed for the day. They stopped briefly to report to security that they had returned, but by the time they made it into the Academy's main plaza, they found someone unexpected waiting for them.

"Vincent!" Sharon was leaning on the wall by the front gate.

She seriously waited for him until this late hour? Not knowing when he'd come back?

Sharon rushed over to them, in such a hurry that she tripped over her own feet. Vincent caught her in his arms, and she used the opportunity to latch onto his hands and lean into him.

Oriana's heart seized painfully, and her feet came to a complete stop.

"Sharon?" Vincent's voice was thick with suspicion.

Sharon glanced up at him before peering over at Oriana. Her beautiful face paled. "I searched everywhere for you. Imagine my surprise when I heard you'd left early this morning. You went out just the two of you? Don't tell me it was a date?" The sadness bled through her voice, much as she tried to contain her pain.

Oriana jerked her head back and forth. "N-No, that's not what happened! It was definitely not a date or anything! In fact, we just happened to run into each other by accident a little earlier, so we walked back together. That's all. Right, Vincent?" Panicked, Oriana blurted out the first thing that popped into her head, glancing at Vincent for backup. Sharon was the last person she wanted to misunderstand and think this really had been a date, if only for Vincent's sake. She expected him to look relieved and promptly agree with her, but his eyes were ice-cold as he stared down at her.

"...Right." His tone was completely flat as he spoke.

Oriana suddenly realized that, by virtue of her own words, the enjoyable time they had just spent together was completely ruined. "*We just happened to run into each by accident.*" She regretted ever saying that. *It's like I completely denied the fun we had today, and after I swore to him that I'd never forget today even if I died...*

Vincent was right. She was a liar. And worse yet, she'd made him complicit in her lie to Sharon.

"Miss Beezel," she said, her mouth feeling extremely dry. "I'm sorry. I denied it on instinct the second you said the word date, but the truth is, we did go out

shopping together today.” Oriana hung her head as she spoke, feeling awful that she’d irrevocably crushed the very friendship she’d so painstakingly built brick by brick with Vincent. “But we’re just friends, I swear! There definitely aren’t any romantic feelings between—”

“Oriana.” Vincent’s voice was cold as winter. Her shoulders jumped in surprise. “That’s enough.” Although Vincent was smiling, it didn’t take someone close to him to recognize how insincere it was. Seeing it directed at her, she felt miserable and pathetic. Her heart ached.

“W-Well, I’ll be on my way then,” she said.

Oriana never dreamed that such a fun day would end like this. She hung her head and scurried away.



“**SHARON.**” Vincent stared after Oriana, watching as her back receded. Anger boiled inside of him, and although he did his best to hold it back, he glared at his cousin. She flinched back, still using his arms for support to keep her upright. “You did this before too. Tell me, what exactly are you after?”

Vincent sounded even colder than he’d meant to, but that was largely because he was irritated at what Oriana had said a few moments ago.

“It was definitely not a date or anything!” Her voice echoed in his head. *“But we’re just friends, I swear!”* The words were like a bucket of cold water, and it chilled him to the core.

I already knew she didn’t think anything more of me. The only person who got stupidly excited and restlessly anticipated the outing so much they couldn’t sleep...was me. I knew that. Much as he told himself that, he couldn’t tamp down the anger he felt. Had Sharon not shown up like this, the two would have parted ways without issue, and it would have remained a fond, enjoyable memory.

In fact, the more he thought about it, he realized he might have been able to invite her out for another date if not for his cousin’s meddling. That made him so resentful he couldn’t contain it.

“What right do you have to do this?” Vincent demanded, the anger bleeding

through his voice.

All the color drained from Sharon's face. She retreated a step.

"You started this," he said. "You don't get to run away now."

"M-My mother was the one who—"

"My aunt put you up to this?"

"She heard you'd recently made a friend you were really close to, and..."

Vincent was so annoyed he wanted to click his tongue at her. The reason she'd approached him in his previous timeline was likely the same as well. The two hadn't been particularly close at all during their time at the Academy, but then his big fight with Oriana had marked a turning point; Sharon had suddenly started trying to sidle up to him. No doubt his aunt had been behind that.

"What, she told you to tie me down so I wouldn't look at anyone else?" Vincent guessed.

"You know what she's like, don't you? She won't listen to me no matter what I say!"

"I have no intention of bearing that particular burden with you," Vincent said curtly.

Sharon trembled. This was probably the first time he'd ever been so standoffish with her.

There were a handful of students lingering in front of the school's main gate, and sensing the tension in the air around Sharon and Vincent, they began staring. Vincent grabbed Sharon and dragged her behind the nearest building.

"Vincent, I—"

"Must I spell it out for you, Sharon? I sympathize with your situation with your mother. She has been manipulating you since you were young, so I felt sorry for you, but that was only out of kindness. While we haven't publicized the falling out between our families, not a soul in my house has forgotten what happened in the past."

"I-I swear, I...I didn't know better!"

"That doesn't absolve you of blame."

That was exactly why Vincent felt guilty toward Sharon. At the same time, if she threatened his relationship with Oriana any more than she already had, that guilt wouldn't be enough to make him restrain himself.

"If...if only that hadn't happened back then," Sharon lamented.

"It wouldn't have changed anything regardless. I was never going to pick you."

Sharon gaped at him.

"The most I'm willing to be for you is a cousin. If you try to pursue me any further, I'll take matters into my own hands."

That was the end of the conversation as far as Vincent was concerned. Having said his piece, he spun around to hurry after Oriana.

"Wait, Vincent! If that's true, then why have you kept all the girls in school at arm's length this whole time?" Apparently, she thought he'd done so because he intended to find a way to reinstate their annulled engagement. Alas, knowing her feelings did nothing to sway Vincent's.

"Considering it's not simply a matter of your mother and her antics, I will answer your question in a show of good faith." Vincent glanced over his shoulder. Tears were streaming down Sharon's face, but that didn't stop him. "I've had someone in my heart since long ago." Though unspoken, the implication was: *And that person isn't you.*

Sharon staggered, but Vincent didn't stop to watch her reaction. He peeled his gaze away and dashed off to search for Oriana.



ORIANA had run recklessly for too long. As she aimlessly darted across the school grounds, the sun set completely, bathing the place in darkness. Her visibility was severely limited, and every pathway and garden looked the same. She had no idea where she'd managed to wander off to. What could be more pathetic than spending four whole years here and still managing to get lost? Nothing, that's what.

Since she wasn't wearing her robe, she didn't have a magic lantern with her

either. She tottered along, using the streetlights dotted along the pathways as her guide. As she walked beside a building, anxiously peering from side to side, she slammed right into something.

“Oof!” Oriana grunted.

“Mm? Sorry ‘bout that... Oriana?”

Her nose smarted, but she was at least relieved to find Miguel. He was carrying a lantern, which illuminated his face. She’d wandered around a corner at the same time Miguel was walking forward, hence blindsiding the both of them.

“Whatcha doin’ here? Not good, y’know. You shouldn’t be wandering around these parts alone. Don’t tell me Vincent dragged you here?”

“Huh?! Oh, no! Nothing like that, but...phew, you saved me. Say, Miguel, where exactly is this?”

Seeing her desperate, pleading look, he burst into laughter. “Are you seriously telling me you’re lost? Inside school grounds? Even I gotta chuckle at that.”

“Aw, don’t laugh. Help me out.”

“This is the boys’ dormitory.” He motioned at the very building she’d been wandering along this whole time.

At least that answers why I didn’t recognize it. I never even go near the boys’ dormitory. It wasn’t as though there was a rule against it, but it wasn’t the most approachable spot for female students.

“Welcome back from your trip. Looking at you, I get the sense it wasn’t a very good date, eh?” Miguel lightly patted her on the head before ruffling her hair. He’d refrained earlier since she was going out, but there was no longer any reason to hold back.

“It was a good trip, but...I ruined things in the end.” Her voice was so heavy with regret that it was hard to push the words out of her mouth, and by the time she finished speaking them, she bit down on her lip.

“Hm.” Miguel groped around inside his pocket. “Tah-dah!” he exclaimed as he produced one of his usual lollipops. “Look, see? I’ve got candy. Why don’t you

come with me, little girl?"

Oriana burst out laughing at his joke. "Sadly, I was taught not to follow strangers, even if they promise to give me candy. But I guess I can make an exception for you since you're not a stranger." She smiled and took the candy. The tears she'd been holding back began trickling down her cheeks. Much to her relief, Miguel didn't point it out, instead pretending not to notice.

"Let's go then. Hm, what should we do... How about grabbing a light snack and setting up a spot on the lawn so we can have a picnic?"

"Nice idea! That sounds like fun."

As Oriana held the lollipop, Miguel pressed his hand against her back, ushering her along. She always knew he was tall, but it wasn't until walking beside him like this that she realized how much he towered over her, almost like Azraq. If she wanted to look him in the face, she had to crane her neck.

"Oriana!" cried a breathless voice.

Surprised, Oriana jerked her head around to find Vincent, winded and hunched over. He held an arm over his mouth as he tried to catch his breath, a magic lantern dangling from his hand.

"Vincent...?"

Even after all the running I've seen him do before, he's never been the least bit winded, she thought.

Through the dim light of his lantern, she could see the way he gasped for air, his whole body trembling each time he gulped more in.

"Thank goodness," he wheezed. "When I asked Miss Mahathin...she said you still...hadn't gone back to your room..."

Seeing how much he struggled to get the words out made her heart squeeze. He must have been searching for her the whole time after she ran away, scouring the school grounds once he confirmed she hadn't gone back to her room.

He searched so desperately he ran himself ragged? Oriana stepped forward, intending to go to him, but Miguel stopped her. He yanked her wrist back and

pushed her behind him.

“What is it, Vincent?” Miguel asked.

“Miguel... I’d like to...talk to Oriana for a bit.”

“Sadly, much as I’d like to help you out, I happen to be Oriana’s friend, too.” Miguel stood firm in front of her, as if blocking Vincent. For his part, Vincent likely never dreamed his friend would reject him. He stared at Miguel, eyes wide as saucers, while Miguel gazed nonchalantly back.

Still standing in her taller friend’s shadow, Oriana was flabbergasted. She gawked at the two, not entirely understanding what was happening. *Could it be... Is Miguel trying to protect me from Vincent?* The moment that possibility popped into her mind, she was aghast.

Flustered, Oriana tugged at the hem of Miguel’s shirt. “M-Miguel! I’m not scared of Vincent or anything!”

“Really? He didn’t try to do anything to you?”

Oriana quickly shook her head. “No! Oh God, no! I’m totally fine.”

Miguel glanced down at her. Apparently, Miguel was on guard after finding her wandering alone here because he assumed Vincent had put his hands on her, or at least something similarly offensive.

There’s no way he would ever do such a thing. Sure, they had gone on a date together, but Vincent wouldn’t put his hands on her like that. Especially since Oriana was nothing to him, least of all a lover. She suddenly felt extremely guilty toward the both of them—Miguel, for making him regard his best friend with such suspicion, and Vincent, for putting him on the receiving end of that.

“I won’t do anything to scare her. I swear that. After running all over the school, I have already cooled down quite a bit,” Vincent said stiffly, still trying to regulate his breathing.

Miguel quirked a brow at Oriana. “Well? I can run him off if you’d prefer.”

“That’s not necessary,” Oriana said, shaking her head again. “I’ve calmed down some too, so I can finally apologize.”

Miguel stroked the top of her head. He tousled her hair with even more force

than he had a moment ago. Thanks to that, her once perfectly braided hair was probably beyond salvation by this point.

“Okie-dokie. But if he tries anything funny, be sure to yell for me.”

“Vincent isn’t the type to try anything like that.”

“Okay, well in that case... Vincent, if Oriana tries anything funny, be sure to yell—”

“Yeah, yeah. Would you mind leaving already?” Vincent grumbled.

“Tch.” Miguel’s lower lip protruded in a pout as he waved goodbye to Oriana and took off. Judging by what he’d said, he probably planned to linger somewhere close by.

Oriana felt nervous once it was just the two of them standing there facing one another. It made her realize how naturally Miguel had managed to keep the air light and easy. Even so, she was the one who’d decided to apologize.

Plucking up her courage, she blurted, “Vin—”

“Oriana.”

Their words overlapped. Surprised, they finally looked into each other’s eyes. Vincent seemed to have something to say; he kept opening his mouth only to close it again.

“Do you...mind if I go first?” he asked at last.

“S-Sure.”

After hesitating, Vincent said, “I shouldn’t have been so gruff with you earlier.”

“No, I should be apologizing for acting like a fool in front of Miss Beezel and not explaining myself properly.”

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for.”

Oriana shook her head emphatically. “Th-That wasn’t the only thing. Today was a lot of fun, and yet I pretended like none of it ever happened...I’m so sorry for that.” The tears welled in her eyes as she spoke.

You’re going to cry after apologizing? How hopeless, Oriana inwardly berated

herself. She turned her face away. Considering how her voice trembled at the end, Vincent might have already realized she was crying. She didn't want him to think she was so underhanded she'd use her tears to coax forgiveness out of him. "Sorry, just a moment..."

"Oriana, I *want* to see."

A gentle thud resounded. It took her a few moments to realize it was Vincent putting his lantern down, and by then, he had already wrapped his arms around her, trying to pull her face back toward him. Her breath caught in her throat, and the tears only fell faster. She could feel his warmth on her back.

"Show me."

Vincent finally managed to turn her head. Oriana scrunched up her face, trying to hold back the tears, which probably only made her more unattractive.

"D-Don't look..."

"Hahaha. You sound like a child."



H-He laughed again! This is the second time.

Vincent was laughing and smiling, and he looked genuinely amused and happy. There was something so gentle and so sweet about the way he laughed, too. It made the tears fall faster.

“No, I don’t wanna cry,” she protested. “Do something to stop them.”

“How?” Vincent finally released his hold on her neck. With him out of the way, she covered her face with her hands. Snot was threatening to dribble down her upper lip.

“We’re friends. Think of something,” Oriana said.

“Then...can I hold you?”

“No, you can’t hold me.”

Wh-Why would you even think to hold me as a way of stopping me from crying? You’re a total lady-killer! Don’t make me expect more from this relationship. I’m already at my wits’ end today!

“Hmm...” Vincent audibly puzzled over how to help her.

For her part, Oriana was scrunching her face up as hard as she could, hoping it would stop the tears.

“In that case, I’ll tell you something I’ve never told anyone else.”

Oriana’s ears twitched with interest. “Okay,” she rasped.

“I’ve lived through all of this once before. This is my second time going through this life.”

“Huh?” Oriana blurted, dumbfounded. She lifted her head.

“Last time, the two of us were pretty close. You told me back then, much like you did today, that you would never forget our time together, even if you died. But when death did take you, it took your memory with it. You *did* forget.” He was staring straight at her, and his expression was entirely serious.

Oriana slowly blinked, taking a long pause before opening her eyes again. A teardrop that had been hooked on her eyelash suddenly trickled down the side of her cheek, making it all the way to her chin before it fell.

“Just kidding.” Vincent’s face softened, his lips pulling upward. “Did that stop your tears?”

“...It did.” Shockingly enough, it had been effective; Vincent’s poor attempt at a joke had done well to console her. Even Oriana thought it odd her tears had stopped that easily, but before she knew it, she was giggling. “Ehehe.”

Vincent smiled at her. Seeing that expression on his face made all the tension leave her body.

“So, um...can we be close again like we were before?” Oriana asked.

“I should be the one asking that. Please, Oriana, I want you to be my friend.”

At this point, I think it’s safe to say the word friend isn’t just an empty title anymore. Although it should have wounded her to hear him say that, she was actually proud considering the lengths Vincent had gone to for her. He’d chased after her, covered in sweat, and even made horrible jokes to stop her tears.

“Thank you, Vincent.”

Things are fine the way they are then, she decided, smiling from the bottom of her heart. Our friendship is precious enough as it is, and I want to protect it.

Chapter 9: Strong Winds and Forgotten Things

“HEY. Hey, Vincent! Isn’t there any way I can get a little closer to Rina? Whaddaya think?”

The only person fearless enough to throw their arm around Vincent’s shoulder and ask such a question was, as obvious as it might be to say, Lucian Cortes. Lucian, for better or worse, acted overly familiar with many people, and it took no time at all for him to start speaking casually to Vincent, even calling him by his first name.

No fair. Must be nice being a boy. It took me forever to finally be able to stop being super formal with Vincent, Oriana thought. On the other hand, Kai was still very polite when talking to him. It probably had less to do with gender than Lucian’s unique quirks.

“Miss Leroy? We’re acquainted, I suppose, but little more than that. I don’t think I’ll be of any help to you.” Vincent gave him a troubled smile. For as practiced as he was now at dispersing the crowds of girls that clamored around him, he couldn’t bring himself to be as dismissive to male students who admired him.

After lessons were over for the day, the gang had gathered in the courtyard, their little group consisting of Oriana’s classmates from Class 2, as well as Vincent and Miguel.

The spring weather was gradually heating up as summer approached. Bright rays of sunlight poured through the cracks between the trees, creating deep shadows on the lawn.

“Aw, don’t say that. All you gotta do is ask her what her type is.”

Rina was his nickname for Marina Leroy, a girl from the Special Class. He’d caught a glimpse of her during their extracurricular dance lessons, which had only started recently. Like Lucian, Marina was one of the participants.

Oriana had taken dance lessons at home, so she had no intention of partaking

in the lessons at this point. Vincent was much the same; although he'd come up with the idea, he hadn't actually taken part.

"Knock it off already, Lucian. If someone as swoon-worthy as Mister Tanzine asks a girl what her type is, there isn't a soul out there who wouldn't instantly fall for him." Heidemarie grabbed Lucian by the collar of his shirt and tried to haul him away from Vincent.

"Mister Tanzine," Constance interrupted. "I would be more than happy to undertake that challenge. Please, go on. Ask me my type."

"Oh, be quiet, Constance."

"Ah, love's embrace is as cold as winter!"

"If it's Marina you're after, how about I speak to her for you?" Miguel suggested. He was sitting in the shade of the trees with Yana and Azraq, while Lucian and Vincent bathed in the sunlight.

Lucian launched himself at Miguel. "I knew I could count on you, Miguel, my friend!"

"Well, not surprising you'd take a liking to her. She does seem to be your type."

Curious, Oriana couldn't stop herself from asking. "What do you mean? What's his type?"

"Fluffy black hair, always smiling, nice to everyone with no regard for gender...and she's got a big chest."

The mood in the air abruptly soured, but either not caring or oblivious altogether, Lucian clenched a fist and said, "Yes! I want to bury my face in those boobs!"

"This is exactly why virgin guys are so skeevy."

"Could the word virgin perhaps be a euphemism for 'scum of the earth'?"

"Even death couldn't cleanse his virgin mindset."

Edda, Heidemarie, and Constance shot cold looks at Lucian, their eyes like daggers as they disparaged him.

“I’ll introduce you,” said Miguel. “When do you want me to do it?”

“Miguel?!” Edda shrieked. “Are you an enemy of all womankind?”

Miguel grinned at her.

“You keep throwing the word virgin around willy-nilly, but you’re the one who doesn’t get it,” said Kai. He’d been silent up until this point, and even as he spoke, he continued thumbing through his book.

“Get what?”

“Yeah, so he’s a virgin, but he’s plucked up his courage to actually do something for once. Give him a break.”

Given the way Miguel continued to smile, apparently he was of the same mind.

Heidemarie stared blankly forward for a moment before dropping her gaze to Lucian, whose collar she still had a firm hold on. “Lucian, you...”

“Gaaah! Don’t say anything!” Lucian’s face lit up bright red. With the speed and nimbleness of a rabbit, he wiggled out of her grasp and took off.

Kai flipped his book shut with a noisy thud. “See you guys later,” he said before taking off after his friend.

Heidemarie gazed after them, dumbfounded. Once she recovered, she said, “Actually, me too! See you all!” and took off after Lucian.

“Chest, huh?” Yana mumbled to herself once the five noisiest members of their group were gone.

Oriana glanced over at her friend, only to see Yana’s eyes glued to her chest. Following her example, Oriana peered down at her own.

Silence hung in the air.

Neither girl was particularly well-endowed. Oriana’s were sized perfectly enough for her to wear all the clothes she wanted without trouble, while Yana’s exceedingly thin figure made the lines of her modest bosom stand out.

Vincent, Miguel, and Azraq were the only others still present, and they were smart enough to keep their traps shut as they waited for the girls to say

something. In place of their silence, the elegant chirping of a bird echoed.

“Azraq,” Yana said at last.

“Yes?” Although the air was thick with tension, Azraq maintained perfect composure as he answered his princess the same way he always did.

“Breasts are like wealth in that bigger doesn’t necessarily mean better, yes?”

“Indeed, Princess Yana. You are correct,” Azraq answered cleverly, smiling at her. He often grinned when telling little jokes here and there, but it was a bit rare to see him make that kind of expression when answering one of the princess’s queries.

Yana, of course, must have realized it as well. She offered him a beautiful smile befitting her nickname of the Star of the Desert.

“In that case, which do you prefer?” she asked.

Summer was drawing near, and yet the chill that stretched through the air might have one wondering whether someone had placed a magic circle nearby with the rune for “Cold” written in it.

Miguel, Vincent, and Azraq exchanged unreadable looks. The former two were both relieved they weren’t facing scrutiny, but they almost seemed to look at Azraq with silent pity, as if praying for the safe return of a buddy going off to war.

Azraq fell into silent contemplation for a while. Oriana had never seen him take this long to answer one of Yana’s questions before. As if resigning himself, he finally said, “I retain my right to silence.” Never once did his smile falter.

Meanwhile, the icy air rolling off Yana greatly intensified. Oriana took that opportunity to grab Vincent and Miguel by the hands, dragging them away from the courtyard.



WHEN meal time came around, Oriana tried to hunt down Yana and Azraq, to no avail. Thus, she instead ate with Vincent and Miguel. There were more and more lightly seasoned dishes on the menu, and despite the increasing heat, she was having no problems polishing off her plate.

Oriana returned to her dorm room ahead of Yana, and when the princess returned later that night, Oriana was there to greet her.

Yana stood on the threshold, the door still half-ajar. When she spotted Oriana, her cheeks swelled in a pout. "I gave Azraq a thorough scolding."

This was the first time Oriana had ever seen her make such a face. It was so adorable that she raced over to the door and shut it just to make sure no one else got to enjoy this side of her friend.

"What kind of scolding?"

Did she mean she physically beat Azraq, like with hitting and kicking? Azraq seemed the type to let her get away with it and not fight back, but it was hard for Oriana to picture Yana resorting to such violence in the first place.

"We went to the library and searched for a book on human anatomy."

"Huh? A *book*?" Oriana gawked at her. That was the last thing she expected to hear when Yana mentioned scolding.

"We found a line mentioning that a woman's breast size has no impact on her ability to breastfeed a child. So I had him copy that down a hundred times. Azraq hates little more than sitting and writing, so it was the perfect punishment."

Azraq was extremely tall and muscular, making him quite bulky. Sitting at a tiny desk to write was miserable since it was always too cramped for his long legs, which was why he loathed doing it for any long period. He seemed to enjoy standing more than sitting, perhaps in part because of his job as a bodyguard. Having to sit and write the same line a hundred times probably would count as a scolding for him.

I kinda wish I had been there to see it. Yana, petite as she is, glaring at him while he hunches over a tiny desk and scrawls out the words one by one... It would have made for a bizarre scene, only possible because of the difference in authority between the two of them.

"My mother is relatively tall and voluptuous. But honestly, big breasts are little more than lumps of fat, aren't they?" Yana grumbled tearfully. Considering how hard she worked every day in the pursuit of beauty, height and breast size

were probably a complex for her, since no amount of effort on her part could help her attain them.

Oriana threw her arms around Yana and squeezed. “You’re so adorable.”

Yana was always cute, of course, but since she started speaking about her own romantic feelings, her cuteness had exploded exponentially.

“Oh, please! Just because you’re a little bigger than me!” Yana pouted at her.

“Ehehe!” Oriana proudly puffed out her chest, even though it had nothing to do with why she found her friend so cute. Though she had more to offer than Yana, hers weren’t *ba-boing* like Constance’s. More like...*ba-bing* or a small, simple *boing*.

Yana eyed Oriana coldly, bringing her hands to rest on the sides of Oriana’s chest. Apparently, she was using her fingers as a measure. Once finished, she brought her hands back to her own chest for comparison, but soon her whole body slumped dejectedly.

Oriana gently rubbed her back. “Hey, you’re participating in the dance lessons, right? So you should be able to get acquainted with that Rina girl Lucian mentioned,” she said.

Yana wasn’t well acquainted with Amanecer’s style of dance, so both she and Azraq were attending.

“And,” Oriana continued, “once you get close enough to her, you can ask her what her secret is to getting her breasts that big. Okay? Sound good?”

Yana’s whole face lit up, glimmering like a star—befitting, given her nickname.

She would later manage to safely befriend Rina and inquire about her secrets, to which Rina would respond, “Well, I drink soy milk every day.” Thus, from that day forward, Yana began drinking soy milk every lunch period.



“**HM?** Where are Yana and Azraq?” Edda asked, peering about the room. They were probably only seconds away from the bell ringing, announcing the end of their brief recess.

“They have yet to return since leaving to commence a duel,” said Constance.

Oriana supplied, "They might have stopped by the infirmary on the way back."

There were few instances of Azraq sustaining any injuries during a duel, but that wasn't to say it never happened. Yana was always sure to drag him off to the infirmary if he received so much as a scratch.

"Lucian, you should give dueling him a shot. Might be a good chance for you to lose your virginity finally," Edda teased.

"Hey, don't even joke about that! He'd take my head, and you know it! Besides, I don't want Azraq to hate my guts, okay?!"

"Jeez, sorry." Edda frowned.

To Oriana and the other girls, Azraq was little more than an older pupil who was kind yet taciturn, but perhaps the boys had a completely different impression of him.

It wasn't until a half hour after class had started that Yana and Azraq finally strolled in. Apparently they had stopped by the infirmary, after all. When Oriana asked to see his injury, all she saw was a scratch about the length of her pinky nail. Azraq kept his emotions locked up tight, but even he had to be pretty embarrassed to go to the infirmary for something so minor.

Once their first class was over and everyone left to head to their next one, Oriana parted ways with them so she could run to the bathroom. She was lucky that Lagen Magic Academy enjoyed the luxury of flushing toilets, thanks to being equipped with special magic implements.

"...about Elsha, don't you think she's pretty cute?"

She was on her way back from the restroom when she heard a voice and froze in her tracks. A number of boys were chatting in the corridor. Oriana didn't know how many other Elshas attended the Academy, but she certainly didn't have the courage to peek her head around the corner where those male students were gathered.

She hugged her books to her chest, still snuggly fastened together by her book band, and pressed her back against the wall, sliding down onto her butt. At least where she was, she was hidden from them. Much as she wanted to

head to her classroom, the fastest way was through the hall where they were standing.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Although, Miss Mahathin is ridiculously hot too, ya know."

"Bälz is pretty cute, but her height and personality are kind of a turn-off."

Considering the boys had mentioned Yana and Constance as well, it was safe to assume she was the Elsha to whom they referred.

"Remember how we had fieldwork yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"Elsha had her hair tied back, and I could see the nape of her neck."

The nape of my neck? What about it? Oriana instinctively reached behind her, feeling the back of her neck. She never would have thought the boys would look there, of all places.

"She had a mole there. I couldn't stop looking."

"Seriously? That's sexy."

"Yeah. You know, I'd like to do it with her and make her cry."

"Nah, she seems the ugly crying type."

"Aw, don't say that."

"Well, she seems like she'd be pretty easy. You might be able to enjoy a night with her if you shoot your shot."

All the color drained from Oriana's face. Like her, many of the girls who attended Lagen Magic Academy were sheltered. Many were brought up quite strictly and kept away from any information pertaining to sex. Professor Wilton had conducted a special class on flower reproduction, with stamens and pistils, but never did they delve into human intercourse.

Oriana, likewise, would probably go without hearing even a single word about it until she got married. Mothers were supposed to be the ones responsible for teaching their daughters about it the day before their first night with their husband. In truth, Oriana had long wondered what she would do about that

since she'd lost her own mother at a young age.

Yet for as much of an amateur as she was when it came to sexual discourse, the voices echoing through the corridor made it clear exactly how those boys looked at her. She could just feel the lewd way they'd been scrutinizing her. A visceral disgust crept over her, giving her goosebumps. She'd experienced the same thing before when Rysted was making persistent advances.

Not wanting to listen to this drivel any further, Oriana took to her feet. She could at least get them to stop talking by popping her head around the corner, even if she didn't make any complaints to them directly. It was easy to reason that in her head, but it required no small amount of courage to be able to appear in front of boys now knowing how they'd been looking at her.

Oriana tried to walk forward, but her feet wouldn't budge. Her legs were actually trembling. She clenched her hands into tight fists.

Out of nowhere, a voice echoed from around the corner.

"If you gentlemen are in the middle of heading somewhere, might I be allowed to join you? I am quite close with Oriana myself, you see." The words themselves were kind enough, but there was a barely restrained anger bleeding through his cold voice.

Oriana's entire body suddenly felt lighter, and in an instant, the trembling in her legs was gone too. When she peeked around the corner, she saw the four boys, and behind them stood Vincent.

"Err, no, we were just messing around, you see."

Vincent only grew harsher when they tried to make their lame excuses. "Oh? Well, allow me to be frank with you: It's extremely displeasing to hear you discuss my friend in such a degrading way."



The boys kept their mouths shut and flinched. There weren't many students at the school who could talk back to Vincent. Perhaps the main reason was Vincent's status, but that wasn't all of it; they saw how strict he was with himself, devoting immense time to his studies, on top of having a dauntless attitude no matter who he interacted with.

Amid the awkward silence that fell between the boys, Vincent added, "And one more thing..." His lips slowly pulled into a smile. "Oriana is quite adorable when she cries."

The boys gulped, still at a loss for words. Some of them even started blushing in embarrassment.

"So, um...sorry about that."

After that brief apology, the group scrambled out of there as fast as they could, fortunately heading in the opposite direction of where Oriana was hiding.

"Oho, Vincent, that was awfully naughty." Miguel grinned from behind his friend.

"Quiet, you."

As the two bantered with each other, they started in her direction, only for Vincent to freeze in place after a few steps. Their eyes met, and Oriana gave him a small wave.

"You were listening?" he asked.

"Thanks for stopping them. That whole conversation really creeped me out, so you were a lifesaver." Oriana spoke with a level of annoyance that almost suggested she'd been dealing with a bug landing on her shoulder.

Vincent gave a short chuckle. "Well, happy I could be of service."

The smile on his face made her heart squeeze. Her lips trembled ever so slightly. *You're always helping me out like that. Always lending me your strength, Vincent.*

"Yeah, thanks again," she said.



“I’M telling you, it was definitely underwear!”

The boys’ dormitory received quite a shock one early summer morning. After going out running that morning, one boy raced back, mopping up the sweat on his own face with his t-shirt and blushing like crazy as he reported the news.

“It was hanging from one of the trees further back. Since it was close to the girls’ dorm, I’ll bet it was one of theirs. Probably fell after they hung it out to dry.”

“What color was it?”

“Red!”

People were already gathered in the lounge right outside of Vincent’s bedroom door. It was morning routine for him to finish getting ready and climb down the stairs so he could stop by the study hall before classes. Since it was still too early for most of the other inhabitants to be in uniform, they were still clad in pajamas as they clamored together.

Miguel faithfully accompanied Vincent every morning to the study hall. He groggily tottered along beside Vincent, yawning like a sleepy cat.

“Oh, yeah. Dance lessons were running you ragged, so you started running every morning, right?”

“Yep, and thanks to today, I’ve never been more glad I decided to do that.”

“What kind of fabric was it made out of?”

“You seriously think I could see it that well? It was on top of a tree!”

“Then climb it, dummy!”

“Which is why I came back here to search for a ladder, duh!”

Vincent furrowed his brows as he listened in on the conversation. He passed right beside the boys who were deeply invested in the topic, their faces lit up.

“I’m pretty sure the dorm should have a ladder, so I came to grab one.”

“What about asking a janitor?”

“I tried to stop by their office, but no one was there.”

The janitor is missing? And they're looking for a ladder? Vincent faintly recalled overhearing this same conversation before.

Bang, bang, bang.

Someone was rapping on the door. A sudden silence fell over the boys who'd been gushing about girls' underwear. Since Vincent was closest to the door, he cracked it open. Much to his surprise, standing on the other side was a completely makeup-less Oriana, her robe barely hiding the casual loungewear she wore beneath.

"Oh, um...Vincent. Is...is Azraq here?" Oriana asked, flattening her hands over unkempt hair, which probably hadn't seen a brush yet since she must've just woken up and rushed here.

"Huh?"

"Why's a girl here?"

"Wait, don't tell me those underwear belong to—"

Ba-thunk!

Vincent slammed the door shut after stepping outside. His actions must have stunned the other boys, since the other side went completely silent. Oriana's eyes went round with surprise, but he ignored her expression, instead slipping off his own robe to drape over her head.

"What were you thinking, coming all the way here when your hair is still a mess?"

"Can we save the lecture on proper manners for later? Please, I mean it. I need help."

It was never an issue of manners to begin with. True, there were some hardheaded aristocrats that believed it shameful to allow anyone to see their hair before they had brushed it that morning, but that wasn't Vincent's motive; Oriana was always perfectly groomed from her hair to her makeup. Without it, she looked innocent yet provocative enough that he didn't want anyone else to glimpse her.

"Please," Oriana said again. "Azraq is the only person I can rely on—"

"You have me right here," Vincent insisted.

"No, impossible. I can't ask you."

What do you mean "impossible"? Vincent wondered bitterly. Judging by how panic-stricken she was, the boys' guess was probably right on the money about the underwear belonging to her.

It was plenty irritating that they had realized who the true owner of the underwear was, but it only peeved him more that they had also gotten a glimpse of Oriana looking like this. On top of that, she insisted on relying upon Azraq, despite him not even being here. All of it got under his skin.

The more impossible thing is letting any other man see you like this or your underwear.

"I'm your friend, aren't I?" said Vincent.

"Yes, well, there are some things that are impossible even if you're friends!"

"Oh? Well then, why are you okay with Zalena?"

"Well, Azraq is..."

"Yeah?"

"Harmless...is really all I can..."

Ridiculous. She can't honestly expect me to accept such a lame excuse.

Vincent grabbed Oriana by the shoulders and spun her around so her back was facing the dormitory door. He then peeked back inside the building. None of the boys had moved an inch. Despite how enthusiastic they'd been about the underwear topic moments ago, all of their faces had now gone pale, and they were staring straight at him.

Vincent squared his shoulders, voice booming through the halls as he asserted, "You men, like me, are students of the highly reputable Lagen Magic Academy. As such, I expect you to maintain a proud, gentlemanly demeanor."

"Yes, sir."

Everyone present stood up straight and voiced their agreement.

Vincent nudged the door shut and turned back toward Oriana. "Let's go."

"Huh?! But aren't you going to call Azraq for me?!"

As if I would ever do that. He continued walking, ignoring her demands.

"Now," Vincent said, "where did they fly off to?"

"Huh? How do you know..." The color drained from Oriana's face. Finally, she seemed to realize the reason for his recent words and actions. Her cheeks gradually lit up. "This can't be happening. I can't do this."

"It is happening, and you can do this. You said yourself before that I have no interest in girls' underwear." He said that partly as a jab at her, since when the topic arose before, she made it plain that she didn't see him as a man at all on top of treating him like some kind of saint.

"Th-That was so long ago! B-Besides, I mean..."

"Enough. No excuses," Vincent insisted.

"But this is seriously embarrassing!"

"I understand that, which is why I will be the one to carry and hold the ladder while you climb up to retrieve your clothing. Now, where exactly did it fly off to?"

Fighting down her embarrassment, Oriana managed to mumble out the location.

"In that case, it would be faster to stop by the conservatory's storehouse rather than search for a janitor," said Vincent.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot you have a key."

"I do. Now, let's go." Vincent quickened his pace.

Reluctantly, Oriana trailed after him, Vincent's robe still draped over her head.



"BE careful. If it seems too difficult to do by yourself, I'll do it instead."

"No! Absolutely not! I will never allow it!"

As Vincent supported the ladder from down below, he made the most

ridiculous offer she'd ever heard. The two had retrieved said ladder from the conservatory's storehouse before bringing it here, and Oriana had promptly climbed up, hand outstretched toward her wayward underwear. Her face flushed bright red as she peered down at Vincent.

"Close your eyes! I mean it, close them!"

"Yes, yes. I hear you loud and clear." Vincent had kept his gaze aimed at the ground from the beginning, but by her request, he obediently closed his eyes as well.

Oriana had been on the verge of tears all morning, wondering why in the world this was happening. It was supposed to be an ordinary, uneventful morning. And it was, at least until she went out to retrieve her laundry that she'd left hanging out, only to find a piece of it missing.

The dorm mother took care of most of their laundry for them, but some of the students preferred to wash their own underwear. Oriana was among that group.

It had been raining continuously recently, but she was desperate to get her underwear dried by today, so she hung them just outside the window overnight. That hasty decision was her undoing. While she was fast asleep, a pair of her underwear had apparently gone on a little adventure.

Oriana had been in such a panic this morning that she'd sped around the school grounds like a madwoman, trying to find it. Luckily, she had managed to locate her runaway undergarments. She did try to search out a janitor at first, to no avail, and driven by impatience, she finally ran to the boys' dormitory for help.

I figured, knowing Azraq, he'd be able to hop right up the tree and snatch them for me.

It had occurred to her to wait outside for him, but as soon as she realized the male students were already beginning to bustle about, she couldn't bring herself to hold on even another minute. That was how she ended up knocking on their door.

As if this wasn't already the worst morning ever, I still look like a mess from

having just woken up, and the man I have feelings for is holding the ladder I'm standing on while I try to grab my own underwear off a tree! Ugh, I want to cry.

Oriana's underwear was actually a pair of short bloomers. Given their shape, they were often referred to as pumpkin underwear. They were splendid quality and made of silk, and of course the pair that flew off had to be red, of all colors.

I normally wear white! Why did a red one have to fly off? No! It doesn't matter what the color is, I'd still rather they stay put!

Sensual and alluring as Azraq was in his own way, Oriana didn't see him as a man so much as a friend, and Azraq was the same way; neither regarded the other as a potential romantic partner. That was what made it easy for her to enlist his help. In fact, it was no different to her than asking a teacher who was twenty or even thirty years older for help. Sure, it was still a bit awkward, but that was rather minor.

I can't believe Vincent asked me why I was fine with Azraq and not him. As if I could ever tell him the truth. Answering honestly would essentially mean admitting she *did* consider Vincent a romantic interest.

"Did you get it?" Vincent asked.

"J-Just a bit further!"

His voice brought her out of her brief reverie. For the moment, the most important thing was retrieving her underwear and putting it back where it belonged—safely in the closet of her dorm room.

Oriana pressed her hand on the trunk of the tree to support herself while she stretched forward with the other. Only a little bit farther, and she'd be able to snag it on the broken branch she was holding. She maneuvered it ever so slowly and carefully, until it caught on her bloomers.

"Ah!" Oriana gasped in surprise as her underpants came loose from the tree. They fluttered down to the ground below.

"What's the matter?"

"Wait! Don't open your eyes yet!"

It had fallen in just the perfect spot that if he did peek his eyes open, he'd see

them. Oriana hastily started scrambling down the ladder, anxious to retrieve them, but her foot somehow missed a step. Before she could shriek in dismay, her whole body was thrown from the ladder. She braced herself for impact, but the pain of slamming into the ground never came. Instead, Oriana found herself enveloped in warmth. The ground was much softer than she'd expected. Confused, she slowly pulled herself up.

"Sor—"

She lifted her head to find Vincent staring down at her, his face blank. There was no concern in his eyes for her sudden fall, nor panic at being pinned to the ground beneath her. In fact, his expression was so out of place for the situation that, even though her heart should have been pounding because the man she loved was holding her in his arms, she was instead left flabbergasted.

"Vincent?" Oriana squeaked.

"Sorry. Would you mind getting off of me?"

"Uh, sure." Oriana quickly scooted off of him.

"You aren't injured, are you?"

"No, I'm fine thanks to you catching me."

"Glad to hear it." His voice was low and lacked any intonation. Perhaps she'd made him angry.

Oriana could hardly blame him if he was; her attitude today had been most unbecoming. It wasn't like he hugged her because he wanted to, either. Perhaps anyone would have this kind of reaction if a noisy, annoying girl suddenly flung herself on them.

"I'm so, so sorry," Oriana muttered meekly.

"Hm?" Vincent sat upright and glanced at her. The back of his robes and sleeves were covered in mud. The days of endless rain had turned the ground into a goopy mess.

"I made such a fuss, then I managed to trip, too..."

"Yeah. That's dangerous, so for your own sake, be more careful."

His voice didn't sound angry at all. Oriana sneaked a glance at his face to gauge his mood.

"What is it?" Vincent asked.

"Uh, um, well..." She hadn't meant for him to notice, but clearly she was more transparent than she realized. "It's just, you were making a scary face, so...I figured I must have made you angry."

"A scary face?" Puzzled, he reached up and pressed his fingers against his face. "Ahhh... My apologies. That pose brings back some old memories. It's a point of trauma for me."

"Huh?"

"That was how my dignity died once in the past."

"Sorry?"

"I'm speaking of my previous life. If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer you forget I ever mentioned it," Vincent said, looking deeply bitter and displeased. Oriana never dreamed he'd try the same ridiculous joke again about having a past life. Since it was said in jest, perhaps she was better served laughing it off?

"Ahaha." She forced herself to giggle, which only prompted Vincent to scowl. That was the first time he'd ever made such an expression at her. A chill ran through her, and she flinched.

"Don't laugh," he said.

"Uh, right. Sorry about that." Oriana immediately apologized. She still had no idea how to react to his strange jokes. "Anyway, so you weren't angry with me?"

"I was worried, but I wasn't angry."

It did sound as though he was being genuine. Oriana sighed in relief. Only after that did she finally remember the one thing she wasn't supposed to forget.

Oh yeah, my bloomers!

"There they are!"

She had completely spaced them out. Flustered, she snatched them off the ground. They had a bit of mud on them thanks to the fall, but she planned to wash them anyway upon discovering they'd flown off. Now safe in her grasp, she tucked them into the sleeve of her robe.

Thank goodness I got to them before they managed to fly off again, or before someone else managed to snatch them up!

Unable to contain her joy at having successfully retrieved them, she raced back over to Vincent.

“Vincent!”

“Hm?” Vincent had slipped off his robe and was trying to dust the mud off of it when Oriana came flying into him. He stumbled a bit, but he still managed to catch her in his arms. Confused, he started to say “What’s the ma—”

“Thank you for helping me! I love you!” Oriana grinned at him.

Those three words were something friends used among one another, she was certain of it. At least, she was pretty sure someone had told her as much. So surely Vincent wouldn’t hold it against her for saying that. At least, he shouldn’t, right? She hoped not, anyway.

As much as she wanted to cling to him forever, she feared he might discover her feelings if she lingered too long. Oriana extracted herself and turned to retrieve the ladder. “Let’s get this back to the storehouse, then shall we go have breakfast?”

Well, before we do that, I need to go get ready first, Oriana reminded herself. As she pulled the ladder away from the tree, she reasoned that today she could get off by quickly throwing on some light makeup.

When she turned around to look at Vincent, he was frozen in place with his robes still in his hands.

“Vincent? Hello? Are you listening?” For as much as she tried to call out to him, it took a while for him to finally defrost and respond.

Chapter 10: Teardrops on the Morning Dawn

“AH, perfect timing. Vincent, Miguel, how about having a picnic?”

The cafeteria that evening was even livelier than usual. The Astrology professor, Ghislaine, had informed them there would be a meteor shower today. For these events, Astrology classes got special treatment, and students were allowed to observe the stars well into the night.

“You found a good spot?” Miguel leaned forward.

Oriana grinned at him. “Yep. Azraq and Yana have been saving us a spot since earlier.”

After finishing their evening meals early, the three had retreated to the roof of the eastern building, but Oriana had left by herself to come have a small snack.

“We’ll carry that for you.”

“Thanks, Vincent.”

Vincent took the basket she was holding, which had a fruit-filled blechkuchen tucked inside. Miguel took the other one, which had a whole tea set nestled in it.

“You’re both coming? In that case, I’d better get some more cups,” said Oriana. “Wait for me.”

“I’ll go with you,” Vincent offered.

“See ya soon, then.” Miguel saw them off with a smile.

With Vincent close behind her, Oriana returned to the cafeteria counter. They were lending out sturdy wooden cups to students for the occasion, and she requested two extras.

“Oriana, I realize we have enough cups now, but what of the hot water and tea?” Vincent said.

"Oh crap, I forgot. Thanks for reminding me. Ma'am, if you wouldn't mind, a teapot too, please!"

"Sure thing," the middle-aged woman responded, passing over a pot already filled with tea.

Oriana cradled the bottom of it with the sleeves of her robe pulled over her hands, so she didn't burn herself. They carried the pot and spare cups back to Miguel, depositing the cups into his basket before they took off. They walked together side-by-side, with a magic lantern to light their way along the dark path to the eastern building.

"Sure is unusual for you to come alone," Miguel commented. "Zalena usually seems to be the type to run errands for you girls."

"He was none too pleased about being left behind, but I forced him to stay so I could come alone," Oriana explained.

"Why?"

"Mm...that's a secret!"

After learning of Yana's feelings for Azraq, she went out of her way to give them time together, even though Yana hadn't explicitly asked for it. She spent all day with the two of them, but nighttime was a different story. The late-night hour was perfect for romance, and she thought it best they be alone together for it.

"Oho, Oriana, that's a naughty expression you've got on your face."

"Ehehehe," Oriana giggled, embarrassed. Miguel had, of course, been able to spot the grin on her face that she'd struggled and failed to repress. She really needed to pull herself together, for Yana's sake.

"Hopefully the two of them are getting cozy together," Miguel said.

"H-Huh? I have no clue what you're talking about," Oriana blurted out, turning her head the opposite direction in a last-ditch attempt to feign ignorance.



THE five of them took their seats, wrapped in blankets and enjoying the

fragrant aroma of their piping-hot tea. There was an astronomy book lying open on one of the empty sets, but no one bothered to so much as glance at it.

“In Ete Karima, they call shooting stars ‘Rukh’s Tears.’”

Unlike Amanecer, which worshiped dragons as their gods, Ete Karima held birds sacred. The most powerful among them all was a bird named Rukh, who had a number of tales dedicated to him.

“The person who can drink down all of Rukh’s Tears is said to be promised eternal wealth. The one who can catch them will be blessed with children, and the one who manages to make a wish before his tear falls will have that wish granted.”

“That’s interesting. So, you make wishes on shooting stars, huh?”

“As a child, whenever a shooting star began to streak across the sky, everyone would rush out to make a wish on it,” said Yana. “Unfortunately, I never managed to make it in time.”

Oriana couldn’t begin to imagine what it was like to live as a princess, but she didn’t doubt that, unlike the children living normal lives in the city, Yana couldn’t rush out of the palace in the middle of the night. Perhaps she was even restricted from peeking out of windows as a security precaution.

“This is the one place where she can honestly say what she wants.” Oriana suddenly remembered Azraq saying that when they were watching Yana and the kitten together. Perhaps the freedom Yana’s lifestyle at Lagen Magic Academy afforded her was more precious than Oriana realized.

“So, have you ever wished on one?” Oriana asked.

“Yes. The same wish every time.”

“Then we’d better be sure to make our wishes today.”

Yana nodded. “I intend to. Make sure to keep your eyes glued to the sky. If you see one, make your wish immediately.”

“Yep!”

The two girls leaned in close to each other, giggling as they gazed up at the stars.

“Sure is nice how well they get along,” Miguel remarked.

“What? You want someone to cling to as well?” Azraq joked, the edges of his lips curling.

“What’s this, Zalena? You giving me permission?”

“Do as you like.”

Miguel scooted toward Azraq. “What? You really mean it?” The two were about the same height, so by sitting close, they looked like one enormous mountain.

Yana leaned against Oriana, tugging on the back of her clothes.

“What is it?” Oriana asked.

Yana brought her lips to Oriana’s ear, keeping her face hidden from the boys’ view as she whispered, “Azraq seems to be enjoying himself with the other boys.”

“Yeah, but if you think it seems like Miguel’s bothering him, I can put a stop to it.”

“No need. Leave them be. I want to watch.” Yana grinned as she pulled away.

While the two girls faced forward again, Miguel mimicked Yana by cupping his hand and leaning toward Azraq’s ear as he whispered, “Teehee, I’m a copycat.” He grinned, and Azraq chuckled faintly. Although Miguel had suddenly invaded his personal space, Azraq showed no signs of being bothered by it at all. In fact, he seemed to realize that it would make Yana happy to see him getting along with others.

Vincent regarded Miguel with unrestrained exasperation, as if he couldn’t fathom these silly antics between men.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Vincent,” Miguel cooed. “Were you lonely all by yourself?”

“Come again?”

“C’mon, come over here and get chummy with us.” Miguel’s voice was so sugary sweet that if he were to solicit female students the same way, at least ninety percent of them would go along without a second thought.

Vincent, however, blanched and shook his head. “Quit that. I am not interested in that sort of thing.”

“There’s nothing weird about it. Yana and Oriana are doing it too, right? So come on.”

“Don’t lump me in with the girls.”

“Ooh, discrimination,” Miguel gasped.

“Shut up.”

“Must be so nice,” Oriana blurted out as she watched them.

Vincent stared back at her, shocked. “Wh-What must be, Oriana?”

Oriana couldn’t help but eye them enviously as they bantered back and forth, no walls between them. *I finally felt like I’d really, truly become his friend, but I can’t shake the feeling that I’m not—that we’re simply getting along as fellow schoolmates.*

Memories of how he’d acted around Sharon Beezel flitted through her mind one after the other. *That’s right. He was the same way with her. But he’s never acted that casual and open with me...* The more she remembered, the more her jealousy grew until she finally scrunched her face.

“I want you to belittle me, too.”

“Oriana?” Vincent squeaked in disbelief. His reaction was so exaggerated that she laughed.



IT seemed it would still be some time yet before the start of the meteor shower. Having grown tired of sitting around, the group dispersed to find their own spot to lounge on the rooftop. Occasionally, soft whispers would drift their way, carried on the wind. There were apparently other students elsewhere on the grounds doing the same thing.

The smell of summer emanated from the damp forest floor, filling the air. Thanks to the humidity and heat, Oriana’s shirt was practically glued to her skin. An unpleasant sweat beaded on her neck, relieved only by the light breeze.

Oriana had left her seat to refill her cup, and when she returned, she overheard Yana and Azraq's conversation as they stood nearby.

"Azraq, there is not a day I forget all I have stolen from you—your country and your friends."

A tremor shot through Oriana, her fingertips trembling. She hesitated over whether it was right to listen in on this, but it would be more unnatural to suddenly leave. The pot she'd used to refill her cup had already turned lukewarm, but she nonetheless slowly sipped her drink, careful not to make a sound.

"Even so, I will not release you. Win for me." Although Oriana couldn't see Yana's face, her voice was quiet and relaxed.

"Nothing would please me more," said Azraq. He answered as casually as if she'd just asked him how much sugar he wanted in his tea.



Yana giggled at his response.

Feeling someone else's eyes on her, Oriana turned her head. Vincent was gazing over at her from where he was standing at the edge of the roof, leaning against the railing. Not wanting to disturb Yana and Azraq, she shook her head. Vincent smiled faintly and nodded, as if he understood what she was trying to convey. He peeled his gaze away from Yana and the others, instead glancing up at the sky.

"I'm sure my elder brother Shinra must have been loath to let you go," said Yana.

"Only because Prince Shinra loves you so deeply."

"No need to try to spare my feelings."

"My sympathies."

After a brief pause, the princess said, "I suppose I'd better bet on one of these shooting stars that a suitor will appear who can beat you."

"I won't lose, so I'm afraid that will only bring shame to Rukh."

Oriana's fingers traced over the cup. There was no warmth to it at all. Carrying her lukewarm tea with her, she left her spot again. She considered venturing over to where Vincent was, but he had a rather serious expression on his face as his gaze flitted between the stars and his textbook, so she changed course. Still cradling her cup, she slipped over to Miguel.

"Miguel, did you decide what you're going to wish for?"

"Mmm..." He was being unusually cagey.

Oriana took a small gulp of tea before lowering her cup from her lips. "Can't make up your mind?" She tilted her head as she asked.

Miguel flashed his usual smile at her. "You only wish for something when you know it won't come true otherwise." His argument was strangely persuasive enough to convince her.

Nonetheless, Oriana said, "But what's the harm? It's not often we get to do this. Actually, I'm so greedy that I can't settle on any one thing to wish for, so

how about you tell me what you want? I'll wish for it to come true for you."

Miguel stared down at her. He choked out a small laugh. "Well then, how 'bout wishing that we'll be able to have another picnic like this next year?"

"Aww, you're holding out on me." Oriana drained the rest of her cup and smiled. "But since I like your idea so well, I'll make it my wish. You'd better be sure to come here next year."

"Course."

"Maybe next year, I'll invite Heidemarie and the others along."

"That'd be nice— Oh! I just saw one."

"What?! Where?" Immediately panicked, she whipped around to face the others. "Yana, Vincent! One just fell!"

Their entire group immediately paused to glance up at the sky.



ONE by one, they passed out. Before long, the seats on the rooftop were occupied by what one could be forgiven for mistaking as corpses. Not all of them were small enough to slump over in their seats and sleep; the boys instead sank to the floor and used their seats to prop their heads.

"...I fell asleep."

All Oriana could think was that she was glad it was summer, otherwise they might have all caught their death out here from the cold. When she and Yana returned to their room, their dorm mother would probably give them an earful about staying out without permission, but she wouldn't skin them alive for it at least, so it was best for Oriana to resign herself.

She scrubbed at her eyes as she sat up, belatedly realizing someone had draped a robe over her. Not one, actually, but two—Vincent's and Miguel's. No wonder she'd found it so hot.

Yana was wrapped up in a blanket, sleeping soundly in the comfort of Azraq's arms as he sat on the ground. The two were always practically glued to one another, so it didn't strike Oriana as being any different than usual, but Yana would probably be surprised when she woke up.

For her part, Oriana had no intention of trying to go back to sleep. She thought it would be wrong to peep on everyone's sleeping faces, so she instead peered up at the sky and zoned out in her seat.

"You're awake?" Vincent asked, slowly pulling himself up and peering around. Instead of using a seat, he'd sprawled out on the brick floor and slept, so his body was stiff.

"Vincent? Good morning. Sorry, I guess I conked out at some point."

"Nothing to blame yourself for. The meteor shower didn't start until quite late. That said, I should be the one apologizing. I simply thought it would be too dangerous to lift you in my arms and try to carry you down the stairs."

"Oh, no, no. It was fun doing this. Almost like a sleepover."

"I figured you would say something like that."

Vincent plopped himself down beside her. "Mm." His voice slipped out even as he kept his mouth closed. He was probably trying to muffle a yawn.

It took a moment for her to finally realize that he was seeing her right after she had just woken up. She quickly combed her fingers through her hair, trying to groom herself. Vincent grabbed his robe and hung it over her head.

"With this, I can finally say I got to do a pajama party with you," he said.

"Huh? This isn't a pajama party."

Vincent tilted his head. "Must you wear pajamas for it to count as a pajama party?"

"I would think so?" If it had the word pajama in the name, then they were probably essential to the concept. "Besides, I don't think I've had a pajama party with anyone, have I?"

"In our past life, you threw a pajama party and invited every single person here *except* for me."

"Whaaa? I'm sorry the past-Oriana was so heartless."

"Indeed, she was," he said resentfully, which contrasted greatly with how gentle his expression was.

Apparently, she'd successfully managed to respond to his joke this time. Happy, she beamed.

"Did you use your wish on Miss Mahathin and her bodyguard?" Vincent asked.

"You mean my wish on the shooting stars last night? No."

Why Yana? Oriana wondered.

Her confusion must have shown on her face because Vincent forced a smile as he said, "Sorry. I simply figured you were probably concerned with how her trial would eventually end."

Apparently he had been watching Yana and Azraq last night, after all. Oriana was surprised; she never knew he had any interest in Yana's trial.

"I am concerned, of course," Oriana admitted. "I don't know what outcome would be the best for both of them, but I hope whatever it is, it's something the two of them can be satisfied with."

Whoever managed to beat Azraq, Yana would still be heartbroken. In which case, Oriana hoped for his undefeated streak to continue for even one more battle—that their time together might last even a second longer.

"Yes... I feel the same," Vincent said quietly.

It made her happy that he showed such concern for her friends. She smiled softly at him.

"Sleepy... So sleepy... Sleepy..."

The two had been whispering as quietly as possible in hopes they wouldn't disrupt everyone else's sleep, but Miguel suddenly sprang to life, mumbling to himself.

"Sleepy." He crawled over like a zombie and latched himself onto Vincent's hip, clinging almost like an affectionate lover.

"Miguel, get off of me."

"Sleepy..."

If he was that groggy, he should simply go back to sleep, Oriana thought, but

Miguel stubbornly clung to Vincent.

“Miguel, that’s so adorable!” Oriana blurted out, trembling. “Not a morning person, I see.”

“Sleepy.”

Miguel was always so cool and collected, which was why this unexpected side of him made her heart squeeze.

Vincent grabbed his friend’s head, roughly tousling his hair. “If you’re not asleep, then wake up already.”

“Ugh, what’re you doing...” Miguel grumbled. His long braid was still tied at the bottom, but thanks to Vincent, the rest of it was now a messy rat’s nest.

“Miguel, come sit over here,” Oriana beckoned. “I’ll fix your hair for you.”

“Mm...” He tottered over, slipping in between the two of them before plopping down and slumping against Vincent. The latter scowled and shoved him back, grumbling about how heavy he was.

Oriana unfastened the lace pinning Miguel’s hair and used her fingers to comb through it. There were sprigs of it jutting out here and there, but his hair was still silky and beautiful. While she began braiding his hair from her seat, Miguel began nodding off again, his head jerking back and forth.

“Is he like this every morning?” Oriana asked.

Vincent nodded. “Well, for the most part.”

That had to be difficult to put up with for four whole years. Neither Oriana nor Yana had difficulty waking up, so other than Oriana being forced to participate in Yana’s yoga, their mornings were rather peaceful.

“Oriana, would you like some tea?” Vincent offered.

“Is there still some left? In that case, I’d love to have some once I finish Miguel’s hair.”

This whole situation felt a bit strange; waking up early and chatting, braiding Miguel’s hair, and having Vincent pour tea for her. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined this kind of day would come, and yet it felt so natural.

"Hey, Miguel, wake up. Miguel? The sun's rising."

Right as she finished tying his hair, the morning sun began peeking over the edge of the building. She had to squint as it gradually lifted itself from the horizon.

"It's beautiful, Migue—" Oriana sucked in a breath midway through saying his name, caught by surprise when she gazed down at his face. The dawn's light was reflected in his beautiful eyes, and from the edge of them, a tear glistened.

"It's so bright," he mumbled, sounding like a confused child.

"Y-Yeah, I guess it is, and I did bring it up out of nowhere. Sorry for waking you so suddenly." Oriana pulled off the robe Vincent had draped over her head and used it to dab Miguel's tears. He remained quiet, his ashen gray eyes averted from her as more tears fell. "Miguel? What's wrong? Was it really that bright? Are your eyes hurting? Did something get in them?" Oriana was so panicked she shot off a dozen questions at him at once.

Miguel jerked his head, nodding. "Yeah, but it's okay. The tears will help get it out."

"What's wrong?" Vincent asked. He'd left briefly to pour them some tea, but noticing something amiss, he returned. He hurried over to Miguel only to gape at what he was seeing. Miguel was always so difficult to read, so for him to be vulnerable and cry in front of them was almost impossible to believe.

"I had...nothing to wish for," Miguel mumbled, sounding utterly discouraged. The tears were still falling even as he spoke. "I've already received so much, so... I'm plenty happy as-is."

Oriana cocked her head and wiped his face.

"Did something happen?"

Vincent was totally in the dark about what had spurred this on, so he looked to Oriana for answers. Sadly, she wasn't confident she could adequately explain it herself, which was why she instead peered down at Miguel and asked him. "He apparently got something in his eye...right, Miguel? Or is it just that you're still half-asleep?"

“Hm. Did you have a bad dream?” Vincent asked his friend.

“Hey, look, it’s your beloved Vincent. Why not give him a big hug?” Oriana offered, motioning to him. Miguel eagerly launched himself, his arms squeezing tightly around Vincent.

“Urgh! Miguel! Are you trying to strangle me?!” Panicked, Vincent smacked his friend’s back hard, trying to coax him off, but the still half-asleep Miguel continued clinging. All the while, the morning sun continued casting its light on them in the background.

Chapter 11: Show No One Your Tears

“**YOU** sure have been spacing out an awful lot lately.”

“Huh?!” Oriana was so surprised by the remark that she jerked, sending flecks of ink flying. To her horror, it landed on the report in front of her and Vincent beside her, leaving tiny black splotches on his robe. All the color drained from her face in an instant. “Agh! I’m sorry!”

“Nothing to worry about. It only got on my robe. More importantly, you’re being too loud.”

“I am so, so sorry...”

Since they were sitting in the study hall, naturally the other students present glared at them. Miguel was seated across from them, and his shoulders were quietly trembling. With laughter, Oriana suspected. She snapped her mouth shut and turned back to her report.

Autumn was swiftly approaching before they even knew it. At Lagen Magic Academy, it wasn’t the season for fine arts or delicious cuisine so much as studying. Exams themselves were still a far way off, but it was necessary to plan in advance. At least, that was the excuse Oriana had employed so she could sit with Miguel and Vincent in the study hall and...well, study.

“Lost in thought?” Vincent asked in a hushed voice.

He’d clearly seen right through her inability to concentrate on her work. Oriana lifted her head, then lowered it again before finally mumbling, “Yeah.”

“What’s on your mind? Is it something I can help with?”

Oriana shook her head. “No...”

“That’s a shame. If there’s ever anything you think I might be able to help with, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Okay.”

"That said..." His eyes glanced down at her report. "That part right there is wrong."

"Huh? Sorry, which part?"

"This..." Vincent leaned toward her, his shoulder coming close to hers as his finger reached toward her report. She caught a light whiff of his cedarwood scent and had to bite down on her lip.

It was a shame he was being so nice to offer his help, but she couldn't rely on him even if she wanted to. *After all, how could I?* He was precisely what had been occupying her mind so much lately.

Ever since Oriana fell for Vincent, every tiny little interaction he had with her sent her over the moon. She'd even polished her skill of being able to spot him in a crowd. Her thoughts wandered to him during any spare moments she had during the day. Even as she spent her noon break with her classmates, she found herself searching for him. When she opened her schoolbooks, she'd wonder what subject he was studying right now, and when they did actually meet, she was way too self-conscious.

I want all of it to stop, but I can't actually stop myself.

If only she possessed the strength to fight back against this ill-fated love. Or perhaps it would be better if she could ignore the fact that his heart belonged to someone else, then maybe she could convey her feelings, thereby making it easier on herself. Alas, if she actually did tell him, it would completely change who she was as a person. Or at least, it would change how he saw her. She would no longer be a friend but a female student who was in love with him. Oriana tried to tell herself, again and again, that *that* wasn't the kind of friend he desired.

"Since we started studying together, my academic ranking has gone up," Oriana said.

"Oh, has it?" Vincent lifted his face, lips breaking out into a smile. That expression was always so beautiful that it made Oriana grin as well.

"Ehehe, thanks for the help!"

"When you put your mind to it, you're the type to spare no effort to

accomplish your goals,” he said.

“R-Really? I am?”

“Yes. It’s a shame; you had the ability to make it to the Special Class if you so desired.”

“Ahaha, I think you’re overestimating my abilities.” Oriana chuckled, thinking he was joking.

Vincent, however, gazed back at her with profound tenderness. “You put in all that effort to memorize magic circles and to set up those dance lessons, remember? It’s your ability to do all those things that I respect so much.”

Oriana thought her jaw might drop all the way to the floor. *The* Vincent Tanzine had just told her he respected her. How many students had he spoken those words to before? Her whole body froze, all the heat concentrating in her cheeks, overwhelmed by the fact that the person she loved had just complimented and recognized her efforts directly.

There was an audible *splat* as her ink dripped and stained her report once again.



“**LORD** Miguel, do you have a moment?” Oriana beckoned to him as he stood with the rest of the Special Class. Vincent was already gone; she’d researched his routine and knew he’d left on his own to head for the Herbology facilities. He was either with Professor Heinz or out in the fields experimenting with his implement.

Reeled along by her invitation, Miguel slipped out into the corridor where she was waiting. She continued motioning him closer, so he hunched over his gigantic frame, casting a shadow over her. As they stood in the corner of the hall, Oriana fished for something inside her robe.

“Here...” She slipped out a box of lollipops she’d had her dad send her from a famous confectionery.

“Are you bribing me?” he asked.

“Most certainly, milord.”

"Well, I'll take it."

"You honor me." Oriana exaggeratedly pressed her hands together and bowed, as if showing reverence.

Miguel exaggeratedly held his hands together in reverence before accepting his prize and examining it, eyes lit up and a grin spread from ear to ear. "So? What's up?"

After they made their way to a nearby lounge, Oriana bowed her head low in gratitude before broaching the topic. "What does Vincent like? It was easy to figure out what you like, but I can't even begin to guess what Vincent prefers. I'd like to give him a gift, as thanks for how much he's looked after me."

They were standing close at the edge of the room, near some bookshelves. Part of the reason they had avoided the couches was because there was only a limited number in the lounge, which meant people often couldn't find an open seat. On top of that, Oriana and Miguel were pulled in so close so that they could whisper to each other, which was ill-suited while sitting down, so they opted instead to exchange words at the corner of the lounge.

"Whaaat? I wish you'd have asked for mine too. I'm not that hung up over candy, y'know." Miguel pouted.

"You don't like them?! Even though you eat them all the time?"

He shrugged. "Guess you could say it's a habit. Having a bit of sugar helps calm your nerves, right?"

"I guess...? Well, I never dreamed you didn't like candy that well. Sorry about that. Should I take those back?"

"No, I need them, so I'll happily accept your gift."

Oriana found that odd. If he didn't particularly like them, why did he *need* them? Regardless, she nodded. "All right, well either way, tell me what your preferences are while you're at it. I want to get you something you like, too."

"Huh? Seriously? Yay! Hm, what should I ask for... Mind if I give it some thought?"

"Go ahead. Just keep it within the limits of what I can buy with my

allowance."

"Gotcha."

Oriana was pleased, seeing that he was satisfied, but in the process, she nearly forgot why she'd called him here. Flustered, she shook her head and said, "Anyway, do you have any ideas about Vincent?"

"Hmm... Things Vincent likes, huh? How about you give him you?"

"Me, huh? True, that is far more valuable than anything else I might buy and offer," she answered cheekily. Her own value far surpassed a child's allowance or even the dowry her father would put together for her.

"Pretty sure Vincent would love that. If you became his bride, I mean."

"Sorry, Miguel, but I'm going to have to put an end to this little joke of yours." Oriana held up a hand and shook her head. She was not so easy she'd sell herself short; she knew how to say no.

Besides, she wanted to keep it a joke. She knew she had to. Alas, it'd become more and more difficult to do that as of late. Not only would her cheeks light up and give her away, but she struggled to find a way to brush it off naturally.

I can't help it, she thought. Vincent's just so kind to me.

Not only that, but he was also always there for her, too. Oriana often felt like she was given a special place at his side and doted on. Every time, she felt so happy as if she was floating on air, her heart singing, until the inevitable crash when she reminded herself that Sharon was the girl Vincent truly loved.

Ever since the night of their so-called date, Oriana hadn't spotted Sharon at Vincent's side anymore. Sharon hadn't been present at all when they were third years though, and since Oriana wasn't in class with them, perhaps it wasn't all that surprising. There was, after all, quite a gap between the Special Class and Class 2.

"Sorry. Did I upset you?" Miguel, the 6'2" giant, suddenly peeked at her face as she stared down at her feet. He gave her a perfectly calculated sad puppy dog look.

"I can't believe you! Please, milady, you're married, and besides...I already

have a wife to whom I've promised my future!" Oriana pressed her hands over her mouth and trembled dramatically, moved by how adorable Miguel was being.

"How could you?" Miguel feigned hurt. "When you promised you'd consider being with me!"

"What are you two doing?"

In the midst of their theatrics, pretending like a married couple in the middle of a tryst, Oriana froze solid as ice. Her voice hitched as she squeaked, "D-D-D-Did you hear our conversation just now?!"

"I did," said Vincent. "Though, this is the first I've heard of you having a wife."

Oh, thank goodness. At least he didn't hear the part I wanted to keep from him, Oriana thought, relieved.

Vincent eyed her. For some reason, his gaze seemed almost accusing, which made her shrink back.

Nervously, Oriana asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Vincent said, being unusually cagey.

Miguel clapped him on the shoulder, leaning in close to his ear and dropping his voice low enough so Oriana couldn't hear anything. Whatever it was, it prompted Vincent to glare at him.

Miguel smiled mischievously and turned back toward Oriana. "Welp, see ya. If you want an answer to your question, try asking the man himself."

"W-Wait, Miguel!"

He ignored her, innocently waving as he said, "Bye-bye!" No, there was nothing innocent about it. He was only *pretending* to be innocent.

"Ask 'the man himself' what, exactly?" Vincent inquired with a smile.

With no way to stop Miguel from leaving, Oriana stood there, now alone with Vincent.



SINCE the other professors seemed to think Vincent was close to Professor

Heinz, they often asked for him to relay messages and whatnot to Heinz. They had to use their brains all the time for class, so apparently they weren't interested in physical exercise on top of that. Vincent made a convenient courier given that the Herbology facility was so far from the main school building.

Vincent would normally welcome the opportunity to be of service, if only because it provided him a chance to discuss the Dragon Tree with Professor Heinz, but not this time. No, today after he finished doing as he was asked, he sped right back to the school.

Lately, Oriana had grown more motivated with her studies, which meant she stopped by the study hall often after class. If he made his way there quickly, he might be lucky enough to find her still there.

He struggled to tamp down his own impatience as he stopped to retrieve his textbook from the Special Class's classroom. Everyone else had already dispersed, so naturally, Miguel was nowhere to be seen either. Vincent simply figured he was off somewhere biding his time. Miguel was something of a phantom, suddenly there before you realized it and gone just as quickly. Although personally, Vincent likened him more to a stray cat that had grown attached to him, as inappropriate perhaps as it was to say as much of his best friend since childhood.

As he was on his way to the study hall, he overheard a familiar voice giggling.

"Oriana?"

Vincent would never mistake the sound of her laughter. He retreated back down the hallway to the lounge he'd passed moments ago. Inside, he spotted Oriana. She and Miguel were standing in the corner of the room, their backs turned toward him. They were pressed in close, chatting with one another.

So Miguel can actually get her to laugh that loudly, huh?

Jealousy smoldered in his chest. He suddenly found himself wishing she would only smile like that with him. He loved her far more now than he even had when he first saw her at their entrance ceremony, standing by the class roster. It didn't matter whether he realized how jealous he was being, he was powerless to stop it. The love in his heart was almost like rust on metal,

stubbornly refusing any attempts at removal. It had become a part of who he was.

Vincent stepped forward—the least he could do was call out to them—but as he did so, he overheard part of their conversation.

“Pretty sure Vincent would love that. If you became his bride, I mean,” said Miguel.

What...on earth is he saying? Vincent stopped in his tracks, paralyzed. What kind of conversation could possibly lead Miguel to say such a thing? He couldn’t even begin to guess. *And after he kept telling me I needed to take things slow!* It was quite obvious that Miguel was trying to nudge her toward seeing Vincent in a romantic light.

No, he must have his reasons. Perhaps Miguel had determined it was time for their friendship to move to the next level. As much as Vincent didn’t want to get his hopes up, his heart pounded with anticipation. He swallowed hard as he waited for her response.

“Sorry, Miguel, but I’m going to have to put an end to this little joke of yours.”

Oriana normally always shot back a joke in kind when someone teased her, which was why her flat-out rejection of the idea made him forget to breathe entirely. Even if she wasn’t interested, he thought she would be gentler about turning him down.

We’ve grown to be such close friends that I thought maybe...

Miguel stooped and peered into her face, apologizing.

Oriana brought her hands to her mouth, her entire body trembling. And as he watched, Vincent’s heart panged. *Is she crying?* Was the thought of marrying him that terrible of a joke that she’d shed tears? *And Miguel’s seeing her crying face right now?*

The first time she’d cried in front of him, she’d refused to show him. The second time, he’d practically forced her to let him see by grabbing her. The thought that Miguel was seeing her cry when Vincent had hardly got the opportunity himself made his jealousy roar like an unchecked flame.

“I already have a wife to whom I’ve promised my future!”

“How could you? When you promised you’d consider being with me!”

“What are you two doing?” Vincent cut in, unable to stop himself. It was understandable enough that Oriana didn’t sense him behind her, but even Miguel had been oblivious.

With Vincent’s appearance, Miguel quickly put distance between himself and Oriana, but it was already too late; it vexed Vincent to think that when he wasn’t present, they would stand this close.

“D-D-D-Did you hear our conversation just now?!”

“I did. Though, this is the first I’ve heard of you having a wife.” He figured she didn’t want him to overhear any part of it, so, feeling mean-spirited, he made a teasing jab at her. He couldn’t help it; Oriana looked so visibly relieved that it was hard for him to tamp down his emotions.

Ridiculous. No matter how many years pass or how many lifetimes (three, if I’m keeping count), I still haven’t matured at all. No doubt his annoyance was evident by the way he looked at the two of them.

Nervously, Oriana asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...”

Vincent never intended to scare her. He swallowed back his unpleasant feelings and examined her eyes. He couldn’t tell whether she’d cried at all or not.

Miguel suddenly clapped him on the shoulder, whispering, “Whoops, sorry ‘bout that. I screwed up. I’ll leave you with a parting gift though, so try not to be too mad, yeah?”

“Whoops, sorry”? Are you kidding me?! Even if someone had murdered his parents, he likely wouldn’t feel this level of loathing.

Miguel flashed an apologetic (if you could call it that) look at Vincent before glancing back at Oriana. “Welp, see ya. If you want an answer to your question, try asking the man himself.”

“W-Wait, Miguel!”

Miguel's supposed "parting gift" was most effective; Oriana seemed panicked and flustered by his words.

"Ask 'the man himself' what, exactly?" Vincent asked.

He couldn't even begin to imagine whether this would be a pleasant or unpleasant conversation, but at least Miguel had essentially given him a leash to tether Oriana with so they could talk. Like an oversized dog that had just been scolded by its master, she lowered her gaze guiltily.

What had the two been talking about without him? Had Oriana really been crying? The more he tried to rack his brain for a way to ask questions without hurting her, the more his heart throbbed painfully.

Dammit. Vincent wouldn't swear out loud, but he did at least in his head.

Miguel and Oriana had always been close with one another. The only reason he hadn't grown jealous of the two was because in his last timeline, Oriana's attention had been firmly on him.

But that's not the case this time around.

Oriana could fall for anyone. It wouldn't be strange no matter who she developed feelings for. Since Miguel was a good man himself, she could hardly be blamed if she came to love him.

"Um, well... You see, my good sir..." Oriana was suddenly being formal with Vincent again. Of course, he understood it was her attempt to keep things lighthearted.

But she doesn't know, he thought.

No, she didn't know how long he had yearned to speak with her normally. How jealous he'd felt of Miguel for having such an easy time talking to her.

Vincent snatched her wrist in his hand. It was far more forceful than anything he'd ever done before, which prompted her to swallow hard. He dragged her from the lounge and climbed up the stairs. It didn't matter where they went; he just wanted to go somewhere private.

"V-Vincent?" Oriana's tentative voice was the only form of protest she tried to put up as he pulled her along. She could have yanked her hand away or

stopped in her tracks if she'd wanted to, but she kept pace with him, letting him guide her.

Once they made it to the fourth floor, Vincent found a deserted classroom. He pulled Oriana inside with him and nudged the door shut. For a few seconds after, Oriana kept her gaze on the door before timidly asking, "A-Are you angry?"

"Yes, I'm angry." The words came right out of his mouth without him having to give the question any thought.

"Eep," Oriana let out a strangled squeak.

"Because you always, *always*—"

"Y-Yes?!" Oriana jolted in surprise.

A pain shot through Vincent's chest, like a dagger digging in. He dropped her wrist and pulled away. After a short pause, he continued, "You always, always speak to Miguel instead of me." It shocked him just how childish he sounded. He had a hard time believing those words had come out of *his* mouth.

Oriana was similarly confused, unsure of what to say. Unfortunately, Vincent wasn't in the right mind to neatly explain his emotions to her.

"Well," Oriana started, "it was just a coincidence that this time—"

"So by pure coincidence, you let him see your tears, hm? After how vehemently you insisted I not look?" Vincent groused.

Oriana's face flushed, her entire body trembling as she protested, "That was different! And besides, I didn't cry in front of Miguel."

"You were crying just a moment ago, weren't you? Seems like I was the only one who thought of us as friends."

"Come on, I was not crying!" Oriana grabbed his arms and yanked him down, forcing him to stoop. Vincent was so flabbergasted that he gawked at her as she peered into his face, only mere inches between them. "Look! You don't see any traces of tears, do you? My makeup would have run if I'd cried!"

Vincent had no knowledge of how makeup worked, so he had no way of judging either way. All he could tell was that she was irresistibly cute. Even so, if

she insisted this much, then that had to mean he'd misunderstood.

"My apologies," he mumbled as he averted his gaze, feeling like he had no right to look her in the face.

Oriana huffed, apparently satisfied that he'd recognized his mistake.

Vincent was ashamed of himself for letting his emotions get the best of him. He also felt guilty for pushing them on her and embarrassed that she'd seen him like this. Thus, he remained quietly rooted in place until she tugged on his upper arm.

"Hey, kneel down."

Vincent obeyed her command, squatting down low. If she demanded he kowtow and press his forehead to the floor, he had no compunction about following along. He was still hanging his head when he felt her hand flatten over his scalp. Gently, she patted him.

"There, there."

For a moment, Vincent couldn't even process what was happening. It wasn't until she'd gently tapped her hand on his head several times that he finally realized.

"Huh...?" He lifted his chin to find her right in front of him. She'd stooped down, one hand hugged around her knees as she patted his head.

Vincent hurriedly dropped his gaze. There was no way he could look at her directly. An unrestrainable wave crashed over him, shaking him to the core. *My cheeks are so hot.* His heart was overwhelmed both by surprise and delight. A warm glow of happiness spread throughout his body.

"That's right, let me keep patting you like this. There, there."

Vincent still wasn't entirely sure what she was doing. The one thing he did know was that he was ridiculously happy right now. Her hand continued for a while after that, petting him again and again. Her movements were a bit awkward and unsure at first, but the more she did it, she seemed to grow accustomed to it. Her palm had softened enough to encompass the bend of his head, no longer stiff and flat like before.

After a few minutes like that, Oriana said, “Vincent, you’re just as much my friend too, you know.” She spoke the words slowly, her tone like that of a gentle parent trying to console a pouting child. Briefly, she pursed her lips before awkwardly mumbling, “I say just as much, but you’re actually the best male friend I have. S-So don’t you forget it.” Embarrassed, she spit the words out so fast they ran together, which only proved they were spoken in earnest. Much as the word friend displeased Vincent, having the word “best” attached made him happier than he could express.

Vincent slowly peered up. He wasn’t confident he could smile properly, but he tried anyway, almost on the verge of tears as he said, “Yeah...”



“...SO, what were you two talking about? Since Miguel told you to ‘ask the man himself,’ I can only assume it was about me?”

Oriana was lost in bliss, enjoying the feel of Vincent’s hair on her skin when he suddenly sprung that question on her. She pulled her hand away from his head and retracted herself, but before she could make it far, he grabbed her wrist again and stopped her.

“You should know better than to think you can run now,” he said.

“R-Right... Haha, haha.” She forced herself to laugh, eyes traveling down to Vincent’s hand. His bony fingers were wrapped securely around her wrist. Even his palm was so much bigger than hers, but she didn’t find anything scary about that, perhaps because he showed no intention of hurting her. In fact, if anything, she was happy he’d seized her.

If I swore to him I wouldn’t run away even if he let me go, I wonder if he’d stop holding onto me? Since him latching onto her posed no issues, she decided not to bother.

“Does it have something to do with why you have been so spaced out lately?”

Bullseye.

Even though Oriana wanted to play it off, she figured that would be difficult. She’d been way too conscious of him recently, and now they were standing super close. She wasn’t confident she could successfully brush his question

aside.

After a brief pause, she said, “I gave Miguel candy.”

“Pardon?”

“Daddy got his hands on some super yummy candy, and I figured Miguel would enjoy it more than I would.”

Crap. I’m talking unnaturally fast. I need to cool it before I blow it.

“So, I was thinking of getting you a present, too,” Oriana continued.

“In other words, I come second.”

Actually, Miguel was the one who came second since Vincent was her main goal in all of this. Either way, she quickly shook her head. “No, see, that’s what’s been bothering me lately. I kept wondering what you’d like. I couldn’t come up with anything, so I asked Miguel.”

“In that case, you could have just asked me directly.”

“Yeah, you got me there. I swear, I’ll be sure to do that in the future.”

“Please see that you do.”

Oriana realized too that, for whatever reason, she had a habit of refraining when it came to Vincent. She had no problems relying on other people, but the thought of leaning on Vincent made her feel guilty more than anything else.

I’m sure it’s probably because I’m in love with him.

Even so, Vincent had noticed and confronted her, pouting as he did so. He probably thought she’d completely ignored him as a friend, but rather than cut her off for it, he came to her with his feelings. *And right now, he’s telling me to ask him directly. He’s giving me permission to come to him, no matter how trivial the matter.*

“Hm, as for what I like... I haven’t given it much thought. Allow me to give it some consideration ‘til we meet next.”

“Whaaa?”

Vincent’s response was so unbelievable that her previously thundering heart abruptly stilled.

"Think about what?" Oriana asked.

"About what I like. That's what you wanted to know, right?"

Was it really necessary to think about what one liked? Vincent must have glimpsed the serious expression on her face and guessed what she wanted to say because he gave a strangled laugh and explained, "I think I told you before that I haven't practiced introspection much. Ridiculous, isn't it? Something as simple as my own preferences, and I can't even answer off the top of my head."

Seeing the way Vincent lived as the heir to a ducal house, Oriana felt a pressing urge to do something for him. Specifically, she wanted to stuff him full of his favorite food.

"Lately, I have been so busy that I haven't had time to do anything that wasn't strictly necessary. That's why nothing immediately comes to mind. If I give it some thought, I am sure I can come up with something."

"In that case, let's think together," Oriana suggested.

"I'll only bore you."

"Didn't you just tell me to ask you questions directly?"

Vincent flashed her an indecipherable smile, as if he was hesitant to let her step past his walls. Oriana pretended not to notice his feelings, though. *After all, you're the one who gave me permission to do so just a minute ago.*

"When's the last time you did something that wasn't 'strictly necessary'?" Oriana asked.

"That's a good question. Hm, when was it..."

"Then how about this, what sticks out in your mind the most?"

Vincent obediently contemplated her question. She waited quietly in the meantime, not wanting to interrupt him. In the silence, however, her mind immediately wandered to his hand, which was still latched onto her wrist. Vincent seemed to have completely spaced it out, which was likely why he hadn't yet let go. Part of her didn't want him to forget about it, but on the other hand, if he remembered, he'd probably pull away.

In the end, she decided to leave it up to him. There was no way she could

forsake his warmth.

"I guess it was...a letter," Vincent blurted out, finally arriving at an answer.

"A letter?"

"Yeah. I wrote a letter."

"Is a letter really that unnecessary to write?"

Vincent chuckled. It felt like his fingers were squeezing tighter around her wrist, but maybe that was her imagination.

"It wasn't really an emergency," he explained. "I simply wrote a response letter because I wanted to."

Personally, Oriana thought all letters were like that, but apparently Vincent considered them unnecessary. It being a response can only mean that someone must have penned a letter to him initially. Oriana nonchalantly glanced at Vincent, regretting that she'd ever asked.

It must have been Sharon, she thought. It was especially apparent by the way Vincent gazed out the window, wearing the gentlest look on his face—one she'd never seen before. She knew immediately he was thinking of the woman he loved.

I'd write you letters too, you know. Dozens and dozens, if need be. But in her case, he might not pen a reply, deeming it unnecessary. Oriana could just picture it now: only getting a response when he considers it absolutely essential. It made her want to cry.

"In that letter..." Vincent gazed up at the sky as he continued, "I wrote about how I'd eaten a muffin for breakfast, with lemon on top of it. I struggled so much over whether to bother mentioning it since it seemed pointless, but...in the end, I did. I wrote about it because I thought it would make her happy. I pictured her smiling in my mind, and I wrote something completely unnecessary."

His voice was so soft and so warm. Oriana pretended to nod, even as her thoughts drifted. *I guess this is what it's like, falling in love with someone whose heart is already set on another.* It made her chest ache so painfully it was

stifling. Sharon seemed to know so much more about Vincent than she did. As much as she suffered for her unrequited love, however, Oriana didn't want to return to the past before she'd developed these feelings.

"So...you like muffins?" Oriana struggled to make sure her voice didn't falter.

"They're all right."

"Well, what about lemons?"

"I think I might like them." He flashed a boyish smile at her—one she might expect on a much younger boy who'd successfully casted his very first spell—and looked straight at her. Oriana beamed right back at him.

This sucks... Oriana suspected that no matter how many lemons she gave him, they would never taste as sweet to him as the day from his memories. *Ugh. Now I really hate lemons.*

It was a shame; she finally knew a little more about the preferences of the boy she loved, but suddenly, she never wanted to see that yellow-colored fruit ever again.

To Be Continued...

Afterword

HELLO, Eiko Mutsuhana here. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for purchasing the second volume of this series.

Our setting is the same, but the characters depicted in this volume are quite different from the last. Our couple finally thought their love was mutual and now they've been sent back to the past once more. Alas, in their third timeline together, when Vincent finally reunites with his former lover, Oriana has no memories of their previous life.

Vincent has to work feverishly to protect her, to make her fall in love with him again, and to guard everything that the past Oriana gave up while trying to save his life. Oriana, meanwhile, is thrown completely out of her element by his approach. I hope you enjoyed seeing this new dynamic between them.

I thought long and hard about how to title this series at first. My goal was for first-time readers to be interested immediately, but I also wanted others who'd read my other works to be excited for it as well. In this volume, our main characters swap positions as Vincent is back at square one with a girlfriend who doesn't remember him. Nothing could make me happier than if this series could bring even a bit of joy to you, dear readers.

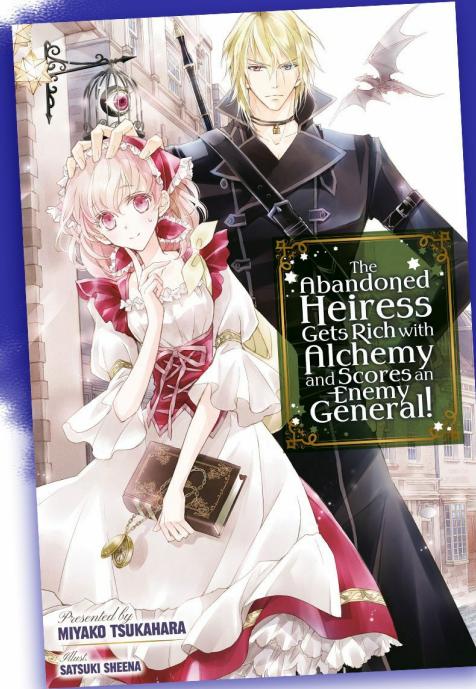
With all of that said, I would like to thank the amazing artist, Yuki Nekozuki, who took over the art for this volume to further portray the timeline switch. I would also like to convey my gratitude to Cross Infinite World, and everyone else who contributed to make this publication possible. Additionally, I must thank my family and friends for supporting me throughout the writing process, and you readers for being kind enough to buy my work.

Let us meet again in the next volume—at Lagen Magic Academy!



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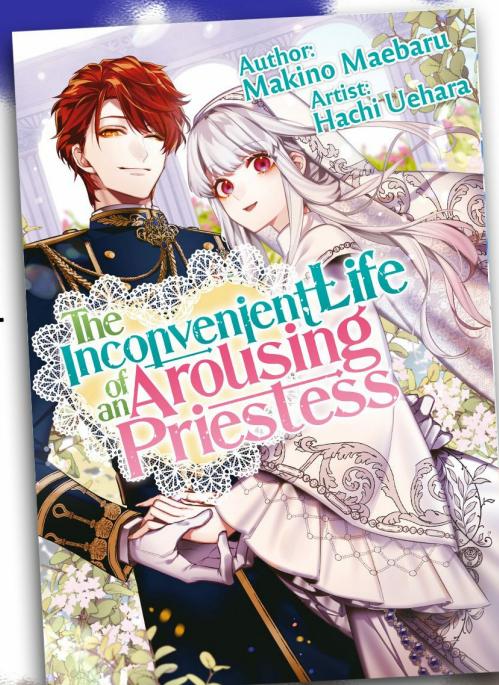
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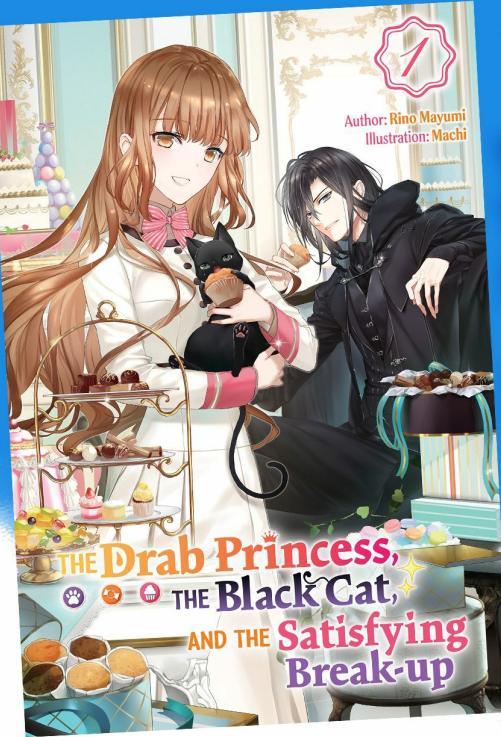
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