









C O N T E N T S

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EXCLUSIVE STORY A Day in the Life of Peep





If Villainess and Villain 2 Wet and Fell in Love



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If Villainess and Villain 2 Wet and Fell in Love

~She Was All but Disowned for Her Spirit Contract, but She's Still Competing with Her Rival~

Harunadon

Translation by Judy Jordan • Cover art by Yomi Sarachi

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AKUYAKU REIJO TO AKUYAKU REISOKU GA, DEATTE KOI NI OCHITANARA vol.2

NANASHI NO SEIREI TO KEIYAKU SHITE OIDASARETA REIJO WA, KYO MO REISOKU TO KISOIATTE IRUYO DESU

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The Water Clan

Brigitte Meidell, daughter of the Earl of Meidell, sat across from her waiting maid Sienna in a carriage trundling down the road.

The month-long summer holiday at the Otoleanna Academy of Magic had begun the week before, and Brigitte would have more chances than usual to leave her cottage this summer. She planned to follow up on invitations from her classmates Nival and Kira to spend time together during the break. And today—she was headed toward the Aurealis residence.

The home of the venerable Water Clan...to which Yuri belonged.

I wonder why he asked me to come...

Brigitte had narrowly lost to Yuri in their academic competition, and since they'd agreed that the loser had to do one thing the winner asked, he'd asked her to come to his house. But why had he chosen this as his request? He seemed to have a reason, but she still didn't know what it was. She would simply have to find out once she got there.

C-calm down! Deep breaths, deep breaths...

She became so nervous every time she thought about it, she worried her heart would jump right out of her mouth. As she tried to focus, which was becoming a daily struggle, she reflected on recent events.

She didn't want to receive a scolding for her visit upon her return, so she had asked the butler to notify her family—saying only that a friend and son of the Duke of Aurealis had invited her to the family residence. She had awaited their response without anticipation, and of course, all the butler relayed to her in

reply was a dispassionate warning that she should "take care not to be impolite."

She assumed her parents still had no interest whatsoever in her. To them, the fact that she'd ranked thirtieth in the written tests and second in the magic-stone hunt probably wasn't even worth thinking about. After all, Brigitte didn't have a spirit with a name. That was enough to leave her worthless in their eyes. She'd always known what their response would be, so she didn't really care. She wasn't going to get her hopes up now, after all these years.

What I'm really worried about...

She had something else on her mind.

"Let's get engaged again. Will you make a fresh start with me, Brigitte?"

When Brigitte saw Joseph and spoke to him for the first time in what felt like ages, he had asked to try again. Ever since, the memory of those few seconds had replayed in her mind endlessly, and the incident made her wince every time.

She simply could not figure it out.

Not long ago, Joseph had mercilessly abandoned Brigitte, his fiancée of many years, because of what Lisa had said about her. So why was he raising the possibility of a new engagement now? She also had some questions for him about Lisa. But while she was frozen in shock, he'd told her with a smile that she could answer him the next time they met, then boarded his waiting carriage.

Since the summer holiday had begun immediately after that, she hadn't had a chance to ask him what he meant. She was in a state of emotional confusion that was creating a strange burden on her heart. In the past, Joseph was the only person she felt she could be honest with. But now that he'd ended their engagement without so much as asking her opinion, that innocent adoration was gone.

But Sienna saw right through her attempts to appear calm. "Miss Brigitte, is something wrong?"

"...I-I'm only a little nervous. I'm fine."

Brigitte would have liked to talk to someone about the situation with Joseph, but all the servants at the cottage seemed to despise him. She didn't want to ignite their anger or worry them unnecessarily, so she shook her head.

"Well, you certainly look lovely today," Sienna said, and she was so earnest about it that Brigitte felt a bit shy.

Brigitte was wearing light makeup and a vibrant orange short-sleeved dress. Her outfit's elegant contours and wide hem were complemented by the single braid in her long red hair. She had wondered if she should dress more formally to visit a duke's house, but Sienna had insisted on her present outfit.

"...Sienna, just to remind you one more time, I forbid you from asking Sir Yuri his thoughts on my clothes!"

"Then it's all right to ask his impression of your overall appearance?"

"Absolutely not! Any questions about any impressions are forbidden!" Brigitte shouted.

Even Sienna had to agree to that, if reluctantly.

What a splendid gate...

After about fifteen minutes in the carriage, they arrived in the suburbs of the capital, where a magnificent mansion towered over them. The Earl of Meidell's residence was far from humble, but the home of the elite Aurealis family was in a class of its own. A high wall surrounded the magnificent manor, painted white and blue. When they passed through the gate, they found themselves on a lane leading to the main house, lined with leafy green trees and babbling brooks as beautiful as a dream. What surprised Brigitte, however, was the glimpse she caught of a lake in the distance.

That's a sight worthy of the famous Water Clan! Although perhaps it's a bit much.

As she stuck her head out the window of the carriage to admire the landscape, the driver stopped the horses.

"You made it! Welcome Brigitte and Miss Sienna."

Brigitte couldn't believe her eyes as she stepped down from the carriage. Yuri

himself had come out to greet them. By that point, she could hardly contain her anxiety.

"I-I'm honored you invited us," she mumbled.

Yuri, who was dressed in street clothes rather than the uniform Brigitte was used to, held out his hand, and she nervously took it. He seemed used to serving as escort—which made sense, given his status as a duke's son.

I wonder how many other girls' hands he's held like this...

The thought made her a little depressed.

Meanwhile, Yuri's attendant, Clifford, was watching them and beaming. "Miss Brigitte, my master isn't used to escorting ladies. What do you think of his first performance?"

"Clifford, please keep your comments to yourself," Yuri said, clicking his tongue at his meddlesome attendant.

"My apologies," he answered, still grinning unrepentantly as he stepped back.

Brigitte couldn't help feeling happy to hear this. It meant Yuri had taken the time to practice escorting a lady, just for her.

Not noticing that Sienna and Clifford were watching her warmly, Brigitte smiled and said to Yuri, "S-so, Sir Yuri, what is your plan for today?"



"Oh, that... Well, my spirit wanted to talk to you."

She blinked.

"Your spirit? You mean the undine?"

Yuri shook his head.

"The other one," he said, sounding peculiarly reluctant.

Twenty or thirty minutes later, Brigitte and Yuri were sitting side by side on a white bench by the lake's edge. Sunlight poured down on the tall tree shading them. The water sparkled brilliantly, almost glowing with reflected sunlight, and Brigitte squinted against it.

She felt like she was escaping the summer heat in some cool mountain resort. When she looked closely, she noticed water droplets jumping from the lake's surface now and then. Maybe small fish were swimming, or maybe small spirits were frolicking. Spirits loved places rich in natural beauty.

The afternoon flowed peacefully on. Next to Brigitte, sitting in the dappled sunlight, was Yuri—although he was far enough away for another person to fit between them. The handsome duke's son was gazing into the distance until he noticed Brigitte staring at him. He turned to her.

"|"

She reflexively looked the other way.

He did that on purpose! I just know he did!

Although her neck was now in a very awkward position, she couldn't bring herself to turn again.

Before coming to the lake, Brigitte had agreed to let him introduce her to his spirit. After that, she had followed him on a tour of the Aurealis residence. But for some reason, they couldn't find the spirit anywhere. Also, while they had passed several servants, she saw no sign of anyone else in his family.

Just as she was starting to get a little tired from wandering around an unfamiliar place, Yuri's attendant, Clifford, seemed to notice and suggested the two of them go cool off by taking in the lake views.

Brigitte had liked the idea and agreed, while Sienna suddenly jumped in with excitement.

"Yes, why don't you two young people go enjoy yourselves!"

Clifford had smiled at her choice of words—"you young people"—amusing, given she was practically the same age herself. With that, the two attendants retreated, leaving Brigitte alone with Yuri.

"Sorry to ask you here for a reason like this," he said. He seemed to think she had turned away out of anger, but she shook her head.

"No, a loss is a loss. I don't mind."

In truth, however, his words stung.

So his spirit invited me here...not Yuri himself...

She wasn't too disappointed, though. She'd known that Yuri couldn't possibly have any reason to invite her over himself.

"But why does your spirit want to meet me?" she asked.

"...I don't know," he said a bit evasively, frowning.

Yuri was contracted with two first-class spirits, which was an unheard-of distinction. Since one of his spirits, the undine, had acted friendly toward her, she hazily assumed the other one would, too.

After all, it's taken the trouble of inviting me here.

On the other hand, she did wonder why it had never shown itself at school, like the undine had. Was there some reason it didn't want to manifest itself anywhere other than the Aurealis residence?

As she was wondering about this, Yuri sighed.

"Ever since we found out the results of the magic-stone hunt, that damn spirit has been making a commotion in my mind..."

Huh?

Before she could stop herself, she was asking him, "Wh-what's it like? I'm so curious!"

"What does it feel like, a spirit 'making a commotion' in your mind?"

Books and stories treated it as a normal phenomenon: Spirits, who usually spent their time in the spirit world, sometimes talked to the humans they were contracted with. But what was it like to have a spirit talking inside your head? Brigitte was so curious to know, and she had often asked the Meidell servants. But she didn't know many people contracted with spirits who spoke human languages—which was why she was so eager to hear about it from Yuri.

She leaned forward, her emerald eyes sparkling with interest and excitement. When her gaze met Yuri's, he startled slightly and scooted a tiny bit away...but Brigitte just leaned farther forward. He tilted his head, perhaps having trouble understanding how to respond.

"What's it like? ... Don't you know already?"

He didn't let it show on his face, but he was secretly panicking.

"No," she said glumly. "I haven't communicated with my tiny spirit even once..."

"No...?! I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. But I still want to know! What does it feel like?" she asked again, undeterred.

His resistance evidently worn down, he rested his hand on his well-formed chin and said, "Well...I suppose it's rather like... having an outsider sneak into my mind. I'm accustomed to being alone in there, after all."

"That...sounds like a very delicate situation."

"It certainly is, although I'm used to it now. It is annoying when I'm lost in thought and my spirits talk to me. Sometimes I chase them away."

"Ah..."

Brigitte covered her mouth with her hand to hide a smile. Who other than Yuri would be able to treat a powerful spirit as cavalierly as he'd treat a cat or dog? But thanks to him, the unfamiliar concept of having a spirit inside one's head now felt a little less alien.

"Now that you put it that way, even I can imagine what it feels like," she said.

"Can you?"

"Yes. Sometimes an image of you pops into my mind and starts talking to me!" she said, giggling.

Yuri was silent. A cool breeze blew between them, rustling the leaves.

—Wait, what did I just say?!

It took fifteen or twenty seconds for her to realize her tongue had slipped. Sure, she was relaxed, but why did she have to go and say something so incredibly revealing? Would he get the impression she thought about him every second of the day? She wanted to faint from embarrassment, but she couldn't with him sitting next to her.

Why isn't he saying anything?!

Was he not making one of his usual sarcastic remarks because he hadn't heard her? Or was he practicing tact and pretending not to have heard? She glanced at him. His expression was as opaque as ever.

If he didn't hear me, I suppose denying I said it would be strange.

But if she didn't deny it, he would assume it was true...and that would be awkward, if he really had heard her... Her mind was spinning so rapidly that she was starting to feel dizzy.

"...Brigitte! Are you all right?"

"Oh, um, yes! Nothing...yes! I'm normal, completely normal. Ah-ha-ha!"

She laughed loudly. Now her strange behavior was patently obvious.

"I didn't hear anything...," he mumbled evasively.

For a second, her brain stopped working completely.

He...he...he heard me!!

She had never been so panicked in her entire life.

And she took off running as fast as she could.



I wonder where I am...

By the time her cheeks finally stopped resembling ripe apples, Brigitte was looking up at a tall ceiling she had never seen before. She let out a long sigh.

Everything had been fine as she ran for dear life away from the lakeside—and Yuri—into the mansion, but she was so upset, she completely lost her way. It seemed that all her diligent efforts toward mental focus were for nothing, because once again she'd made a blunder in front of Yuri. But something else was weighing even more heavily on her.

I never managed to tell Yuri...about Prince Joseph.

Before, she had felt able to talk to Yuri about anything, even though she'd only just met him. She'd told him her whole life story—things she had held inside for years, even kept from Sienna and Carson and the other servants who normally set her at ease.

True, she had skipped over a few things, worrying they would be upsetting for him to hear, but he had listened quietly to everything. She couldn't put into words how happy she was that he didn't make fun of her or laugh like everyone else did. She was certain he would listen with the same seriousness if she told him that Joseph had asked her to reconcile—something she had told no one else.

But she was frightened of one possibility—terrified, in fact. What if she brought up Joseph's name, and Yuri listened as calmly as always, without getting upset? That would prove he didn't care for her.

What's wrong with me...

She bit her lip, her shoulders slumping. She plodded along, wondering when she'd gotten so full of herself.

Suddenly, something banged into her rear end.

"Eek!"

She stumbled forward, planting both hands on the ground to keep from completely falling over, and looked over her shoulder to see a grimly frowning

child. They must have shoved her. They'd probably aimed for her rear end because they were too short to reach her back.

They look like Yuri.

Maybe it was the delicate child's brilliant blue hair and blue eyes that made her immediately think of Yuri. Although their eye color was different, she felt like she was seeing his young self. It was uncanny.

But the Duke of Aurealis had four sons, and Yuri was the youngest. This child couldn't be his sibling. Perhaps they were a relative of the Aurealis family, like Clifford.

...Are they a boy or a girl? I can't tell...

She wanted to stand and stare out of curiosity, but now was not the time. Instead, she stood up, grabbed the hem of her skirt, and curtsied gracefully.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Brigitte Meide—"

"I know," the child interrupted crossly.

Brigitte shut her mouth in surprise.

"I've got something to say to you."

"...M-may I ask what?" she asked nervously, wondering what could make this child so combative when they'd never even met before. The child opened their eyes and mouth wide.

"I bet you think you were invited here today for a date!"

Brigitte stiffened—because that was correct. Despite her cold sweat, she managed a friendly smile.

"W-well, yes...I did think that, but what's the harm if I did?"

"Plenty. Anyway, I bet the reason your spirit never answers you is because you're always thinking about frivolous things."

"Wha-?"

This was too much; her mind went blank.

She'd been mocked all her life, but what had she done to deserve such

treatment from a child she'd never even met? Her thoughts must have shown on her face because the child snorted.

"You tramp!"

...For a second, Brigitte didn't understand what she'd just been called. Her brain refused to process the vulgar accusation.

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"T-t-t-t...?!"
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This kid was unbelievable. More to the point, just how did the Aurealis family raise its children?! Blushing with anger and shame, she spluttered, "I-I'm not the kind of girl who chases boys around! I mean, I only accepted Sir Yuri's invitation because I felt like it and I happened to have the time!!"

"In other words, you're a tramp. He invited you, and you came running."

"||"

This rascal is as rude as Yuri!!

No-worse!

I could probably boil water with my mind right now...

She felt dizzy from fury. As she began to tilt, a large hand steadied her from behind.

"Are you all right?"

She sighed in relief at the familiar voice. He must have followed her when she ran off in a panic.

"Thank you, Sir Yur—"

She started to turn around shyly but froze in an awkward position halfway through. She had never seen this man in her life.

That's not Y-Yuri!

She jumped back. The young man pouted and waved his hands.

"Oh, what a pity. I wanted to take you up in my arms."

"...?!"

She stared up at the tall young man—his voice was just like Yuri's!

His appearance, however, was quite different. He was probably around eighteen. His long blue hair was clasped loosely at his neck, and the mole under his right eye was oddly lustrous. She could tell right away his clothes were of excellent quality. It was strange that the slightly messy way he wore them didn't detract from the elegant impression they made.

He was so gorgeous, she was sure he must be popular with the ladies.

He must be Yuri's brother...

"I'm Clyde Aurealis. Third son." He smiled amiably. "Sorry to catch you off guard. Today's the anniversary of our mother's death, and we've all just returned from her grave."

Their mother...

Brigitte knew that of the four siblings, only Yuri was the son of the duke's second wife. She wondered if that was why Yuri wasn't included.

"My brother doesn't miss a chance, I see, bringing a pretty girl home when we were all out!"

What a flirt!

She was in shock from being called "pretty" by someone with Yuri's voice. However, Clyde's misunderstanding could damage Yuri's honor, so Brigitte scrambled to correct him.

"N-not at all!"

"No? Not at all what?"

"Sir Yuri's spirit was the one who invited me here."

"...His spirit?" Clyde tilted his head, then burst out laughing. "Wow. I suppose they would invite over one of their own."

"What?" she asked, unsure of his meaning.

He leaned in close to her, and before she could distance herself from his handsome face, he whispered breathily into her ear, "Isn't that so...Red Fairy?"

"...!"

She gasped, and he smiled.

"So I'm right. Your red hair does catch the eye, Brigitte." He smiled sunnily, twisting a strand of hair around his finger as he added, "We both know the difficulty."

She stared up at him uneasily. He must have heard all sorts of unsavory rumors about her. He seemed to be enjoying her reaction as he poked fun at her. She was used to that, but his voice was so like Yuri's...she couldn't help feeling a little upset. Anger surged in her chest.

Yuri would never say such a thing...

This felt like ridicule from Yuri himself. A pain shot through her chest.

Clyde gazed intently at her. He was inches away, staring straight at her.

"You're not at all like the rumors make you out to be. I'm always hearing what a stupid, haughty rich girl you are, but you don't seem that way, now that I'm meeting you."

"..."

"After all, I think I see a tear in those pretty eyes of yours..."

His muscular arm reached out casually toward her. She had no time to escape —he was about to touch her cheek.

The second before he did, a voice as cold as ice declared, "Don't touch her."

At the same moment, she was embraced—by Yuri Aurealis, the feared Frozen Blade.

"Sir Yuri?"

"..."

He did not answer her surprised exclamation. He simply stepped protectively in front of her and glared at Clyde.

Clyde's mouth fell open. His outstretched right hand was red—and Brigitte realized that Yuri had slapped it away. He shook his arm, frowning.

"Don't touch her? She's not your lover or your fiancée, is she?"

"No, but she is my guest. I have a duty to ensure she makes it home safely," Yuri declared.

Clyde smiled cynically. "Come now. Are you implying I'm not safe?"

"That was my intention. Did you not understand me?"

His tone was so unlike what a younger brother usually used toward his elder brother that Brigitte turned white.

"Clyde? And Yuri, too? What is going on?" a third voice said.

Brigitte turned in the direction of the voice...and panicked. The men walking toward them down the hallway all had varying shades of blue hair. They had to be Yuri's other brothers and father. Was the whole illustrious Water Clan now gathering here?



She anxiously tugged on the hem of Yuri's shirt. His arms were still around her.

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"Um, Sir Yuri? Shall I greet your family...?"

"No need," he answered.

"But..."
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"Don't worry about it," he said, as if he were trying to sooth a whiny child. At the same moment, he pulled her fingers off his hem and took her hand.

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"Sir Yuri!"
"Let's go."
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It wasn't an order, but his tone was tense. She had no choice but to follow as he pulled her along. When she glanced back, her eyes met Clyde's. He waved with a saccharine smile on his face.

"Let's do this again, Brigitte," he said.

Yuri squeezed her hand and pulled her along so hard, she didn't have time to look back again.

Their entwined hands were so warm. She could feel the heat in his body through her gloves... He must have run all over to find her after she disappeared. She had to ask, despite her nervousness.

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"Sir Yuri, are you angry?"

"Not in particular."

He definitely sounds angry...!

Her spirits sank. Of course he was angry; what a ridiculous thing she'd done.

"I would be, too, considering I ran off and got lost..."

"..."
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Yuri stopped and looked over his shoulder. His well-shaped eyebrows were knit together.

"I did get slightly angry just now."

What did that mean?!

She was caught off guard, but he pulled lightly on her hand again.

...That reminds me...

Suddenly, she remembered something—Clyde had abruptly arrived to sow chaos, so it had completely slipped her mind. She glanced back once more, searching, but the small, blue-haired child was nowhere to be seen.



A Small Guest

After Yuri and Clifford bid Brigitte and Sienna good-bye, the girls left the Aurealis residence. As their carriage rolled slowly along the road at sunset, Sienna peered curiously at Brigitte from the seat facing hers.

"Did you enjoy yourself today, miss?" she asked.

"...I'm not sure..."

Brigitte didn't know how to answer the simple small-talk question. After all, Yuri's contracted spirit—the one who had invited her in the first place—had never appeared.

She had decided to take her leave before night fell, not wishing to be rude, but as she had stepped into the carriage, Yuri had looked as if he wanted to say something.

"What a day it was..."

Hesitantly, she told Sienna what had happened—although she kept secret certain things, such as her conversation with Yuri by the lakeside and how she had held his hand in the confusion of the moment. She was much too shy to tell Sienna such things.

When Brigitte finished, Sienna pressed a hand to her cheek. "A blue-haired child, and the duke's third son, too?" she murmured. "All that happened after you ran away from the lake when you realized your slip of the tongue?"

"Yes... What?" Brigitte tilted her head, confused. That was odd... "Wait a second. How do you know that?"

"Because Clifford and I were spying on you, of course."

"What?! Why?!"

"Because the young gentleman might have misbehaved, miss."

Brigitte gripped her head. They had been watching?! What made them think they needed to?!

"Sir Yuri would never do something improper!"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure! He's not even interested in me that way."

He only thinks of me as his rival!

And that was enough for her—at least she was determined to think so.

She didn't hear Sienna mutter, "For now."

Presently, the carriage stopped at the Meidell residence's back gate, which had been built to provide access to the cottage.

"Thank you, Mike," Brigitte called to the driver. "I won't be using the carriage anymore today."

"Aye, miss."

The good-natured, middle-aged driver nodded and guided the horses on to the cottage stable.

The Meidell's main residence was located just beyond the front gate, while the cottage where Brigitte lived was hidden behind it. The buildings each had their own gate, stables, incinerator, and other facilities. Brigitte supposed it had been set up that way to hide her from outsiders and so that the residents of the main house would never have to see her. She wasn't glad about it, but it did make her life less stressful.

I'm rather tired...

Brigitte was walking toward the front door of the cottage, imagining a hot bath, when— "Hey!!"

She glanced back. To her shock, she saw the same blue-haired, blue-eyed

child who had shoved her rear end earlier that day. They were standing with feet planted and cheeks puffed out sullenly, as insolent as before.

Sienna stepped protectively in front of Brigitte.

"Miss, is this...?"

"Yes! It's the child I was telling you about!"

But how had they made it there? The child was small but not small enough to have hidden in the carriage without being noticed.

"We weren't being followed by another carriage...," Sienna whispered to her. Brigitte's wary waiting maid had apparently been watching out for pursuers. Brigitte was grateful but now more mystified than ever. She gazed at the androgynous little face.

"Did you want to ask me something?" she asked.

"I told you, I have something to say to you. But you left without listening."

Brigitte blinked in surprise. She thought this conversation had ended hours ago.

Wasn't it the bit about me thinking I'd been invited over on a date?

Evidently, it wasn't.

"You can't properly use your spirit, can you?"

"...No, but...?"

"I know the reason. And I'll teach you."

Teach me...?

The word sounded odd in the small child's mouth. As she wondered what to do, Sienna leaned over and whispered, "Miss, I think maybe..."

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"...!"
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That did make sense. It was very awkward to say, but Brigitte, as mistress of the cottage, had to ask directly.

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"So this means..."
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"What?"

"You ran away from home?"

"I— No!!" the child screamed, their face flushing.

"I see." Brigitte nodded, all the more convinced.

The child must have been through so much, especially for one so young. After all, Brigitte had only been at the Aurealis residence half a day, and look how exhausted she was. Maybe the child's homelife was full of hardship.

I still don't know if they're related to Yuri...

The child had been strutting around the mansion so confidently they could hardly be an intruder.

"If that's the case, then no need to fret. You can stay here as long as you need to."

"Hey! Stop mixing up the facts!"

"Don't worry, I won't tell Sir Yuri for a while."

"I told you, I didn't run away!!"

It was decided, then. Brigitte clasped her hands and said, "Let's have something to eat first. My cooks are excellent."

"...Food..."

The child pressed their stomach. They were probably too hungry to turn down her offer.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"...I don't have the kind of name I can tell you."

The child refused to divulge anything.

Brigitte thought for a moment, then asked, "May I call you Blue?"

"...Do what you like."

It was an obvious nickname, given the child's hair and eye color, but she was relieved to have permission to use it. Caught up in the moment, she held out her hand, but the child refused to take it.



The next day, Brigitte was in her room with Sienna and Blue. The night before, Sienna had wiped Blue down with a cloth and let them sleep in her room. The child, who appeared to be around six or seven, was dressed in hand-me-downs from Carson. As for the aristocratic outfit Blue had arrived in, the servants had scrubbed it vigorously. By now it was probably hanging out to dry in the back garden. But judging from the way Blue was sitting on the bed and swinging their legs, the child didn't care much about clothes.

Brigitte never had figured out the child's gender, and since Sienna hadn't said anything about it, she decided not to worry about it.

Early that morning, she had sent a letter to the House of Aurealis asking their thoughts on the runaway child. No doubt they were worried, but Blue would need time to think, so she had written that she would take responsibility for the child for the time being.

"Blue, about what you said yesterday...," Brigitte began.

Her little visitor nodded solemnly.

Her spirit still hadn't responded to her many attempts at communication, and Blue had claimed to know the reason. It was the promise of a child, of course, but Brigitte was desperate enough to hear it out.

Blue stopped swinging their feet and peered at Brigitte, who was sitting in a chair.

"Your house is skilled at fire magic, right?" the child asked.

"Yes." She nodded.

There was no question about that. The family she was born into—the household of the Earl of Meidell—had thrived for generations as the Fire Clan, enjoying high favor with the king. There were nine magical orders: fire, wind, water, earth, flower, thunder, ice, light, and dark. Strictly speaking, there were also rare types of magic that did not fit within these orders, but generally, magic was limited to the nine. Of those, the core orders were fire, wind, water, and earth. Certain families specialized in each, just as the Meidells were known for

fire and the Aurealises for water.

"Do you know why my spirit won't show itself?"

"I certainly do," Blue declared. "It won't come out because you're afraid of fire."

"|"

Brigitte stared at the child.

Because I'm afraid?

She knew she was scared of fire. To her, it was both the object of terror that had burned her hand, and her father himself. That was why she had avoided flames. Even now, the mere flicker of a thought of it set her shaking with fear. Blue frowned as she unconsciously covered her left hand with her right.

"I can certainly understand why," the child said.

"...?"

It was a bit of an odd thing to say. Did Blue mean to say they knew what her father had done to her?

"...But I pity your spirit," Blue continued, adding in a whisper, "and that I cannot abide."

Brigitte finally understood. She had been wondering all along why Blue had followed her home despite seeming to despise her. The answer was simple. The child didn't care about Brigitte; they were fixated on her spirit.

That reminds me—it was Yuri's spirit who invited me to their house yesterday...

She took in the sight of Blue again. It wasn't unusual for spirits to take human forms. As a future spiritologist, she ought to be able to tell the difference. But Blue seemed to mistake her examination for a glare and leaned away.

"What?!" the child snapped.

"...You're saying that if I overcome my fear of fire, my spirit will show itself?" she asked.

Blue nodded with satisfaction. "Exactly."

That was when Sienna stepped in protectively. "Wait just one moment. As Miss Brigitte's waiting maid, I cannot agree to that."

"Sienna?"

"Overcoming your fear of fire means studying it at close range, even handling it, correct? I will not permit you to do anything so dangerous."

She had a point. In the past, Brigitte had fainted if flames were too near. It was natural for a waiting maid to be wary of danger to her mistress...but Brigitte knew Sienna genuinely cared about her, too. Still, Brigitte shook her head.

"No, Sienna, one day even I will have to face my fears."

"Miss..."

Spiritologists served as bridges between spirits and humans. They needed the skills to counsel beings from both worlds and help solve their problems. What good would a spiritologist be if they refused to have anything to do with one of the four major orders?

And how awful that my spirit has been unable to appear because of my fears...

Blue had said they pitied her spirit. Brigitte did, too. She didn't want the current situation to continue forever, either. Also, her spirit had lent her its power to stop the ariel's rampage, even though it knew Brigitte hated fire. What a kind being. She hoped to thank it directly one day.

"Blue, what exactly should I—?"

"Hey, miss!"

The door slammed open as Carson came barging in with no concern whatsoever. His short light-red hair was sticking up in all directions. He was sixteen, like Brigitte, and served as assistant cook and pâtissier at the cottage. It was normally unheard-of for one person to serve both roles in an upper-class residence, but since there weren't many servants at the cottage, he was training in both.

His great-grandmother was a member of the Meidell family who'd eloped with a commoner. Although her energetic descendant and Brigitte were only

distant relatives, they got along well, and Carson treated her like a sister. Which is to say, he was quite rude.

"Please address her as Miss Brigitte, not 'hey, miss,'" Sienna scolded for what was probably the hundredth time.

As usual, he said, "I know, I know," before immediately reverting to "So, miss, how about some baked sweet potatoes?"

Sienna let out a long sigh.

"Sweet potatoes?" Brigitte asked, blinking at him.

But Blue leaped up, eyes full of fight. "...That's it!"

"Huh? What is?"

"You've got to use fire to bake sweet potatoes, right?"

That was obvious, but Brigitte realized what Blue meant.

"You mean I should light a fire in the garden?"

"What? Bake sweet potatoes in the garden? ...Miss, are you sure you'll be all right?" Carson seemed worried. He knew her story.

But if she had to do this to meet her spirit... She faked a confident nod. "Absolutely. Will you get everything ready, Carson?"

"...Your word is my command!"

He ran out as abruptly as he'd burst in, while Blue skipped after him.

"Potatoes, potatoes..."

Does this scamp just want to eat sweet potatoes?

She didn't say anything, though. Blue was too sweet, frolicking along, and their smile was too rare for her to ruin it.

I wonder if Yuri looks like this when he lets his guard down...

Of course, she didn't say that out loud.

It was a blazing midsummer day.

To skip to the end of the story, Nathan, the head chef, instantly shot down

the idea of any sweet potato parties in the garden.

"What kind of fool would roast anything outside on a day like this? You want to kill yourselves?" he shouted.

Carson deflated for a minute, then quickly decided to revert to his original plan of cooking something in the kitchen.

He told them that while sweet potatoes were normally harvested and cooked in fall, some new varieties ripened in summer. They were a little smaller and less sweet than the fall potatoes.

Less than a minute later, he had tied on his apron and rolled up his sleeves and was announcing the day's menu.

"We'll do sweet potatoes in fall. Today, I'll make a simple dessert!"

"Dessert?! Yippee!" Blue exclaimed like a tiny, overjoyed child. They had climbed onto the table to stand right next to Carson, and the two of them were appearing to be fast friends already.

"First we'll peel the potatoes. Step back, Blue, I'm using a knife!"

Carson was always running around the garden like a madman, breaking vases and things, but he seemed at home in the kitchen. He was quite smartly peeling perfect strips off the potatoes, smiling as Blue studied every movement of his hands. He could have roasted the potatoes in the oven, but Brigitte assumed he had changed the menu based on their earlier conversation.

When she saw the frying pan he'd gotten out, she understood immediately. He intended to use the smallest flame possible to make the trial easier for her.

All the servants are so thoughtful toward me...

Warmth spread through her chest. It was thanks to their kindness that she had been able to avoid encountering fire for so many years, despite living among people contracted with fire spirits.

But because of her, there wasn't a single fireplace in the cottage. Cold winds always blew from the north in winter, chilling the Kingdom of Field, and she got through the yearly cold spell by wearing layer upon layer of clothes and tucking magic fire stones in her pockets. The servants did the same—although she knew

it was more inconvenient for them.

The more she thought about it, the more determined she was to overcome her fear. She stuck her head over the counter the servants usually used and peered around the kitchen. Carson wasn't using fire yet. She should have been calm, but her heart was already pounding—she was frustrated with herself.

"Miss Brigitte?"

"I'm fine, Sienna. Just a worrywart," she said, keeping her tone light to hide her anxiety from her sharp attendant.

Carson's hands never stopped moving. He was rolling mashed yellow potato flesh into balls.

"Sweet potato dumplings?"

"Correct!"

He smiled boyishly. Brigitte loved sweet potato dumplings. He'd been making them for her since he was a little boy. He melted a pat of butter in a cast-iron pan before setting the disc-shaped dumplings in neat rows. He threw Brigitte a quick glance before softly intoning a magical name and lighting the range with fire magic. From where she was standing, she could hardly see the flames.

Nevertheless—

I can't breathe...

It was as if a strand of floss was tightening around her throat.

"They look so good!" Blue exclaimed.

The dumplings were caramelizing in the butter, sending up a savory scent as the butter sizzled appetizingly.

Brigitte knew that.

She knew that, but...

Why is even this too much?

She squeezed her eyes shut. Her instincts were telling her to plug her ears, too, but she resisted. If she gave in now, she would never overcome her fear.

Those few minutes felt absurdly long, but finally the cooking was done. Carson turned off the flame and arranged three dumplings each on four plates. He topped them with a drizzle of honey from the pot and a scoop of ice cream chilled with magic ice stones.

Blue was shaking, perhaps from excitement.

"Enjoy!" Carson said as he set the plates before them.

Blue scooped up some of the golden sweet potato topped with melting honey and ice cream and took a bite.

"It's so good!" the child announced, steam and cold air escaping their mouth.

"Right? It's easy. You can make it at home in a steel pan. The mistress here always eats about ten of 'em."

"Carson, I believe you might be a genius," the child said.

"I am. I am the king of the kitchen."

Blue puffed their cheeks out and swung their feet while Carson smiled proudly.

Brigitte took a bite of a dumpling she'd cut in four. Today's version had chopped nuts as a delicious accent.

...At least, it should have been delicious. But she couldn't really taste it.

"Miss, are you all right?"

"Of course."

The instant Brigitte forgot to keep her facade up, Sienna noticed. That was how well she knew her. Brigitte smiled and put the rest in her mouth.

After resting for a few minutes, Blue suggested they go outside.

It was just before noon, and the garden was horribly humid and hot. Carson and Blue flapped their shirt collars, earning a sharp "Watch your manners!" from Sienna.

But Brigitte was freezing cold—except for her left hand, which was boiling. She could almost imagine it burning underneath her glove.

The hand my father grabbed that day...

No matter how many times she had apologized and begged for forgiveness, he had refused to let her escape from the blazing flames.

She could hear her own body cooking.

She could hear the terrifying sound of her skin burning and her flesh turning to charcoal.

She could see her father's cold eyes observing her as she suffered, covered in sweat and tears and snot— In that moment, little Brigitte had realized something.

To her father, she was no more than a useless sack of meat.

"Sienna and Carson, you have red hair. That means you can use fire magic, doesn't it?" Blue asked.

"Yes."

"Just a little."

"Then use your magic, or make your spirit appear."

Sienna and Carson exchanged glances, and Brigitte saw it. Or she should have, but for some reason, she couldn't focus. Everything was wavering like a mirage.

"Not to attack her. Just to show her a few flames," Blue said.

"Please," Brigitte added. "I'll be fine."

She smiled, but for some reason, Sienna said nothing. Carson seemed equally stunned.

Brigitte looked at them questioningly.

"Miss, your face..."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

...Huh?

Suddenly, the world turned upside down. She was panicking. She could hear screaming in the distance. But it was so far away. She was terrified she would keep falling, all alone, forever. Desperately, she reached out a hand.

Someone, please...

The second someone grabbed her falling hand—

"You idiot!"

Her eyes popped open.

Yuri was holding her in his arms and panting. He stared at her, his handsome face distorted.

"What do you think you're doing?"

His hair, more beautiful than the bluest sky, was stuck to his cheeks by sweat. As she gazed into his citrine eyes, she was riveted by the powerful light in them.

Like dandelions blooming under a clear blue sky, she thought in a haze.

His eyes slowly widened, until she recognized the emotion as something resembling pain.

Why...?

She wanted to ask him why, but she couldn't keep her eyes open. She slipped into unconsciousness.

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They were sitting in a carriage.

Little Brigitte was sitting across from her father. She wanted to watch the scenery outside, but it had been drizzling since morning, and each time the horses took a step down the muddy road, the carriage wheels rattled violently. Her father had forbidden her from leaning out the window.

She had turned five that day.

When children turned five, they went to the shrine for the contracting ceremony. For Brigitte, the ceremony was far more special than her birthday.

"I wonder what spirit will come to meet me?"

She had asked the question many times over the past week. Her father smiled wryly, and her mother smiled faintly.

The day was frigid, but the inside of the carriage was warm and cozy, thanks to her father's fire magic. She had waited so long for this day when she, too, would begin learning to make miracles with her own spirit. Would it be a fire-breathing salamander? Or maybe a powerful ifrit? How she longed to see a peri, with its human face. And jack-o'-lanterns must be adorable.

Her father seemed pleased to hear her reciting the names of spirits in a singsong chant.

"Brigitte, you just might be a child genius."

"I wanna be a...a spitolologist, Father!" she answered proudly.

Her father often told her that she was gifted for such a young child. But when she tried to talk to him more about spirits, he told her he was too busy and shut himself in his study, which made her a little sad.

He said he wanted her to contract with an ifrit, like himself, or with a salamander, like her mother. But Brigitte thought she would be happy with any spirit. All she wanted was to have a spirit for a friend.

But what if...?

"What if I become friends with the Legendary Spirit?"

Her mother looked curiously at her excited daughter.

"The Legendary Spirit? You mean the spirit in The Wind Laughs?"

"Mm-hmm!"

She nodded enthusiastically. The beautiful spirit the sylphide had told Lien Baluanuki about had never been seen in the human world, which was why people called it the Legendary Spirit. The only evidence that it might exist were Lien's notes and drawings.

A legendary spirit that no one had ever seen.

People called it a figment of imagination, and yet they dreamed about it and hoped for it. Just the thought of it sent so much love welling up inside Brigitte that she wanted to shout out loud.

What child didn't?

As she wiggled excitedly in her seat, her father coughed.

"By the way, do you remember the man we met before we got in the carriage?"

"Yes, Father!"

"When we get home, we will have an important conversation with him."

"Mm-hmm!" Brigitte smiled and nodded, although she hadn't been listening.

"Darling, don't you think it's still too early for Brigitte...?"

"He has requested it, so what's the harm? It's a chance to bring excellent blood into our line."

Brigitte smiled happily, never imagining that her beloved father would soon be burning her hand in the fire.

"...And the spirit contracted with the earl's daughter, Brigitte Meidell, is...a no-name."

As the priest announced her spirit, whispers rushed through the crowd, while Brigitte stood silently in the center of the storm. She was surprised—but not shocked. A no-name. A tiny spirit. People made fun of them, saying the weak little spirits floating in the atmosphere were the dregs of other spirits.

I'm still happy.

But what would her father and her mother say? Even little Brigitte understood that the earl and countess expected their eldest child to contract with one of the most powerful spirits. But they were kind; they would still be satisfied.

With that belief in her heart, she turned timidly around.

In her father's face, she saw only despair.

"...Brigitte. You..."

She couldn't hear what he said. Maybe he didn't say anything; she wasn't sure. All she did know was that he did not praise her. He did not call her a child genius.

Her memories of what happened after that were increasingly vague.

No sooner had the carriage stopped than her father pulled her out—dragged her out, really. The light rain created dark dots across her best dress, and her hair became damp.

When she got into the drawing room, her father shoved her left arm into the blazing hearth—burning her flesh away with searing pain.

She cried and begged for forgiveness. But instead of forgiving her, her father tightened his grip. Her whole arm felt like it was screaming, but the pain on the back of her hand was so intense she thought she was going crazy.

Her mother did not save her. She was standing in a daze behind her father, as if she didn't know what to do.

Several servants ran up to them; one tried to stop him, but her father punched him with all his might.

Worthless! Good-for-nothing! Sluggard! Useless, useless, useless!

Her father was screaming the same words over and over, insane with rage.

Whenever her father used difficult words, Brigitte used to look them up in the dictionary so she could understand them the next time. She wanted him to praise her. But she didn't want to find those words in the dictionary. She knew what they meant, even though she didn't want to. That was the most horrible part.

Father doesn't need me anymore.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me, Father."

But her father would not forgive her for contracting with a tiny spirit.

The fire raged hotter, and the screams grew. Her own sobs mixed with their voices.

That was when it happened.

She felt like someone grabbed her right hand, which was dangling limply by her side. The hand that took hers was about the same size—a child's hand.

I thought I imagined it.

Yet in the nightmares that repeated themselves dozens, then hundreds of

times, the sensation grew gradually clearer.

She was fed up with herself for clinging to a convenient fantasy. She despised the weakness that made her want to distort reality. There was no one to save her. No one was on her side. So she thought—but...

I...I think I know this hand.

Letting the sensation pull her upward, she slowly opened her eyes.



Brigitte's Spirit

"...Sir Yuri?"

The figure beside her shifted, and the warmth in her right hand instantly faded.

"You're awake."

He was sitting on the edge of a chair placed next to the bed. Blue-tinted moonlight poured through the window onto his back as his eyes softened in relief.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No...I'm fine. Um, Sir Yuri...?"

"Yes?" She wanted to ask him if he had been holding her hand.

If I didn't imagine it, then that other time, too...

But she couldn't gather the courage to take his hand, now that he had withdrawn it from hers.

"Um...what time is it?" She couldn't say the words on her mind.

"It's the middle of the night," he answered calmly.

"It is?!"

She tried to leap out of bed, but she was too weak. Realizing what she wanted, Yuri hesitantly put his hand on her waist and helped her sit up.

She was shocked. She couldn't believe he was tending to her so devotedly.

Also, if she admitted the truth—she was a little bit captivated by how elegant

his movements were.

"Can you drink something?"

"Y-yes. Thank you."

She hurriedly took the glass he was holding out, and the water was pleasantly cool on her throat. Before she knew it, the glass was empty. Slowly, her hazy thoughts came into focus.

...This is my room, isn't it?

All her familiar things were there. But she couldn't understand why Yuri was in her room. And not only that, the two of them were alone. In the middle of the night.

All right...I remember falling in the garden and Yuri coming, but then what...?

She looked down at herself.

......I'm in my nightgown.

No.

No, no, no. She shook her head. There was no way Yuri could have changed her clothes. Sienna would never have let him do that. The maids must have washed her, changed her, and put her in bed. There was no other answer.

But to be seen in her nightgown by a gentleman who wasn't her lover or fiancé—well, that didn't bother her, but there were plenty of other problems.

My hair is a mess because I was sleeping. I like this nightgown, but it's all wrinkled!

She touched her face—no powder. Everything was a mess.

How humiliating for Yuri to see her like this! She had to comb her hair. She had to smooth out her nightgown and put on makeup!

"S-Sir Yuri, I'd like to tidy myself u—"

"Was that your version of a joke?" he retorted, deadpan.

"I'm sorry," she said, bowing her head.

"Who is this meek maiden?"

"...I've made a huge mistake. Even I know that."

He must have sensed how bad she felt because he didn't press the point. "Your maids were here until a few minutes ago, but they looked so exhausted, I told them to rest."

"Oh..." Something occurred to her. "Does that mean you've stayed with me this whole time?"

Almost twelve hours must have passed since she collapsed.

Yuri gave a little nod. She stared at him.

"I mean, I left to eat in the other room, and I wasn't the only one keeping an eye on you."

Still...

A pail of water was sitting on the floor. He must have used it to cool her neck; she noticed a damp cloth balled up by her pillow.

Before she could thank him, he said sternly, "Anyhow, Brigitte, about this afternoon. Why did you do something like that?"

His tone was so harsh, she didn't answer right away. Although his face revealed little, he was obviously angry. And she knew she deserved it. She shrank, opening and closing her mouth several times before finally saying, "I just...wanted to meet my spirit."

"And you thought forcing yourself to get used to fire was the right way to do it?"

"I thought that as long as I was afraid of fire, my spirit wouldn't show itself."

"Brigitte," he said, as if he were scolding an unreasonable child. "Before, when Lisa Selmin tried to attack you, didn't you say you were scared?"

She hadn't expected him to bring that up. Still, she didn't want to be coaxed into changing her mind.

"...I did. But I can't stay this way."

"Brigitte," he said, this time with even more reproach—but then his hand brushed her cheek.

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"|"
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She gasped. That was a lover's touch. His hand was so gentle that she thought her heart would stop.

"You said you were afraid."

She looked up. He had stood from the chair, repeating his point as if he was lecturing her. His brow was tightly furrowed. His pained eyes gazed down at her.

"You cried that day, remember?"

She shook her head. "...You were the one who made me cry."

Her words sounded surprisingly like an excuse, even to herself. Her throat quivered. She had to stop, or else he'd see her foolishness again.

"I...I didn't cry because I was scared."

"...Brigitte."

But, but...

"I want to be strong like you..."

A strained noise escaped her throat, and then the dam burst.

She could no longer hold back the flood of her emotions. Yuri seemed startled by the tears rolling down her cheeks, and for a second, he pulled his hand back. In that instant, she burrowed her head under the covers and curled into a ball. It was the most obvious means of escape.

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"...Brigitte..."
"...!"
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Even he was unlikely to pull the covers off her. His voice sounded weak. But she couldn't bring herself to answer. It was all she could do to press one hand to her mouth so that the wails would not escape.



Oh, what a hopeless idiot I am!

How much did she have to embarrass herself in front of him before she was done? *Idiot, idiot, idiot,* she silently berated herself.

Still, he was the only person she could show her weakness to.

Yuri Aurealis.

He never flinched, no matter what she or anyone else said to him. He just kept his eyes bravely on the future. She admired him in a way she couldn't express. She wanted to be like him.

But now that she had abandoned him outside her blanket, he mumbled as if he had no friends in the world. "...I'm not strong, far from it."

She stopped breathing. He must have known she'd heard him because he went on quietly.

"I...watched a little girl suffer in front of my eyes."

"...!"

Her heart skipped a beat.

"I wanted to save her, but I was powerless. I couldn't do anything. That was why I've always wanted to become strong...ever since then."

He was speaking haltingly, almost more to himself than to her as he recalled his past. Not so much talking to her as plucking a memory from deep within and placing it before his eyes.

That little girl, was she...?

She did not say the question on her mind. Instead, she said softly, her voice still quavering, "...You are strong."

"Me?"

She thought he would snap back at her or tell her she didn't know enough to say. But she didn't care. If she knew nothing else, she knew what kind of person he was, and she wanted to tell him.

"You're always looking forward, seeking after strength, and that's why you're

the most amazing person I know."

In her heart, she added, And that's why I fell for you.

"...I see," he answered, with just a hint of a smile in his voice. Brigitte smiled, too. There was no way he could have seen her under the blanket, but somehow he seemed to know.

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"Let me see your face."

"I'm too embarrassed."

"Now you're embarrassed?"

"Well...still!!"
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He was completely right. She'd embarrassed herself in front of him countless times. Maybe one more didn't matter.

She coughed and wriggled up so that just her slightly puffy eyes were above the blanket. She stared at him, and he smiled slightly, which made her blush even redder.

"Would you please hold my hand again?"

He looked at her questioningly.

"I think it will make me less frightened of one thing."

"...All right."

She took off her right glove.

She held her hand quietly out to Yuri, and he twined his fingers in hers. Her heart pounded at the dreaminess of it...but strangely, she also felt soothed.

She didn't normally notice it, but his hand was much bigger than hers, and the skin was thicker. *It must be because he's a man*, she thought. At the same time, the sensation overlapped with her memory of a hand holding hers.

It was his hand—

She wanted to ask him so many things, but she didn't think he would answer yet. She focused on something else instead. She closed her eyes and shifted all her attention to the feeling of his hand.

... Father is scary.

She felt the tears about to spill over.

... Mother is scary.

Sweat rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Yuri must have noticed something strange was happening; he squeezed her hand, like a whisper that everything was all right. Despite her shaking, she squeezed his hand back.

I'm frightened of the hearth with the pile of firewood. The mocking words. The cold eyes. The jeering laughter.

She still didn't know if she hated them.

She felt bad for not living up to their expectations, for bringing shame to the family bloodline.

It hurt that she didn't have their love. Every time she saw the hideous scars on her left hand, the truth stared her in the face with terrifying immediacy. The wound was Brigitte herself.

Now I see...I wasn't especially afraid of fire.

Her eyes widened in realization.

I was terrified of everything around me.

At that very moment, her chest began to glow.

"|"

She scrambled to stand up. Even Yuri looked surprised.

Is this like what happened at school...?

The golden glow was similar to what she'd experienced when she stopped Nival's ariel on her rampage. The difference now was that the light was swelling so brightly, she could hardly keep her eyes open. When she shut them, the light still glowed in an afterimage on the back of her eyelids. The whole room had to be filled with blinding light.

What's happening...?!

In her panic, she had no way of knowing that something unusual was happening all around the world.

Spirits suddenly began to gesture and shout. Wondering what was happening, their contracted humans ran to their windows to see what was going on, and they stared in wonder at what they found.

A column of light was streaking into the heavens. Even in the Kingdom of Field, only a few of them realized it was coming from a certain earl's residence. Twenty or thirty seconds later, the column of light vanished.

The event would eventually be called "The Night of Light" and spoken of with awe.

But the girl from whom the light had risen was relieved when it finally faded. She timidly opened her eyes.

"...?"

Her field of vision was still flickering. She blinked a few times, trying to clear the aftereffects of the light. Eventually, she caught sight of—the tail of a small creature trying to burrow its way under the covers.

"A little bird...?" Yuri whispered.

"Yes...it's a little bird." She managed to nod.

Their hands were still entwined, but neither of them noticed.

It was more of a chick, small enough to fit on her palm and covered with soft fuzz that made her want to pet it.

Eventually, it seemed to notice them peering at it. Giving up its attempt to get under the covers, the creature—which appeared to be a spirit—looked at Brigitte and gave an adorable little "peep!"

Its lovely black eyes glittered.

It peeped...!

The *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Spirits* included descriptions of all currently known spirits. Brigitte had read it many times, but as she mentally reviewed its contents, none of the descriptions matched what she was seeing.

But...

There was a story.

Brigitte knew the bird's name—although the illustration she'd seen was nothing like this lovely little creature.

"...It's the spirit in *The Wind Laughs...,*" she said.

"The Legendary Spirit?"

Not surprisingly, Yuri knew immediately what she was talking about. They were probably thinking of the same name at that moment. She was about to say it when—

"Miss?!"

"What was that light?!"

Sienna and Blue burst into her room. The moment their eyes met Brigitte's, they teared up. They must have been worried about her. She felt guilty, but first she had to explain.

"I'm sorry to make you worry. The light just now was..."

She was so nervous she couldn't go on.

For the second time in twenty-four hours, she fainted.

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The shrine was usually enshrouded in a holy solemnity, but that day, it was in a frenzy of excitement. Important men and women had gathered for a meeting to discuss the unprecedented events of the previous night.

The Central Shrine—or, to use its official religious name, the Head Shrine of the Levain Sect—was a massive, magnificent structure built along the outer wall of the capital. Rarely in the long history of the Levain sect had the archbishop and bishops been seated around its large round table as they were today, alongside several invited high priests, priests, and chief priests.

"Well, what have you found out? What was the nature of that column of light?"

"Several priests reported that it shone into the heavens from the daughter of the Earl of Meidell."

"The Fire Clan..."

"I inquired with the earl, but he had no information."

"Then what in the name of the spirits could it have been?"

Attendees were talking over one another in a chaotic conversation, but it was animated by a passion they could not hide. Some of the bishops were secretly thrilled by the mysterious phenomenon. Some of the high priests had watched the overpoweringly beautiful scene in tears, their hands pressed together in prayer. Some had tried to run toward it, but they had not reached it in time.

As the hunched old archbishop watched the clergy in their agitation, he quietly interrupted.

"And what do you think, Professor?"

Although his voice was shaky with age, it cut through the commotion.

"Ah," came the absent answer from Tonari, the spiritologist the archbishop was addressing.

He was wearing a worn-out hat, his mop of hair covered his eyes, and he looked like he hadn't shaved in days. The clergy took in his slightly stained clothes and feral body odor with distaste. Although Tonari had been permitted a seat at the table, he sat in it with his legs insolently crossed. He scratched his nose as the clergy looked at him.

"I'd have to say...that for now, I can't say anything."

Most of the elderly men and women around the table were disappointed. As usual, this good-for-nothing spiritologist was shirking his duties. What a difference from last year's spiritologist. Some of them cursed him under their breath for wage theft.

"But the one thing I can say is that the column of light unquestionably had something to do with a spirit...and that spirit is not listed in the *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Spirits* or the *History of Spirits*," he added.

"...What do you mean to say?"

"Why, it's clear, isn't it? I don't have the slightest idea what spirit or human has powers like that."

Spirits could whip up storms, cleave the seas, and splinter the earth. As a spiritologist, Tonari had seen those phenomena many times. At least among the spirits honored with the title "first-class," such feats were possible.

But this—this was far beyond any of those.

Tonari had seen the column of light pierce the heavens with his own eyes. The light had split the clouds and burst through the roof of the sky. It was a brilliant miracle and terrifyingly beautiful. It was untouchably noble and divine. A thing that made him reach out his hand unconsciously with yearning.

...Of course, he knew it was much too far away to reach, and it had vanished in mere minutes, before he could run to it.

"Is there no one in the Fire Clan...in the Earl of Meidell's household who is contracted with a spirit like that?" he couldn't help asking, but he received no good answer.

Was there no one they suspected? Or...

"This is merely a guess, but...could it be that the power of the spirit was so great that it pretended to be a tiny spirit?" he suggested.

"...What do you mean?"

He picked up the glass set before him and banged it roughly on the table. Fine cracks ran through it, destroying the fine platinum design. Several of the clergy members around the table gasped.

Tonari ignored them and poured water into the glass from a pitcher. The distinguished elderly men and women watched, evidently too shocked to reprimand him.

"You see how the water spills out when the vessel is weak?"

He gestured to the water beginning to seep across the table. By that point, they all understood. Every person was said to have an invisible vessel within them. The contracted spirit poured magic into the empty vessel, allowing the person to use a power that exceeded the bounds of human understanding.

When spirits manifested in the human world, the magic they lent to humans was consumed.

This was why spirits attached to vessels of a proportionate size. To put it another way, spirits did not attach themselves to people without a vessel, and if the vessel was small, only a commensurately weak spirit could attach itself. Wild spirits not contracted with any human consumed their own magical power when they manifested in the human world. When they became exhausted, they had to return to the spirit world to recharge.

"What I'm saying is that the spirit may have remained dormant to suppress its magical power until its contracted human had developed enough to handle it. It wouldn't be any good for the human to die from the power poured in, now would it? But to someone inexperienced, a dormant spirit could look like a tiny spirit."

Murmurs ran through the gathered clergy. As the distinguished priests talked between themselves...Tonari shrugged. This was the Head Shrine of the Levain Sect, a religion that held spirits sacred. But most of them were intent on preserving the old teachings and made no space for irregularities. Eighty percent of them probably didn't grasp the gravity of what was happening. If Tonari's suspicions were correct—

No, it's impossible.

Spirits were drawn to contract with humans whose resonance matched their own or who were otherwise intriguing. Many people didn't understand this, but the same was true of humans. Humans pursued spirits they felt an affinity with, unconsciously accepting them. The contracting ceremony was, in its essence, a natural tying together of a spirit and a human who consented to be contracted —or whose powers matched each other's.

Often, the children of parents contracted with wind spirits also contracted with wind spirits. If the father was contracted with a fire spirit and the mother with a water spirit, the children would usually contract with either fire or water spirits. Both the order of magic and the size of the vessel to hold magical power were thought to be hereditary. That was why distinguished bloodlines such as the Water and Fire Clans emerged. If the person involved in this incident was,

indeed, a member of the Fire Clan...

The contracted human must be outstanding to begin with, but to have the capacity to contract with a spirit that weighty—they must be beyond anything we've ever seen.

The history of human-spirit relations was fairly long, and yet there was not a single comparable example. Tonari had an overwhelming sense that he had glimpsed a being in that column of light that the term *first-class spirit* did not come close to describing.

Just then, a priest standing against the wall whispered fearfully, as if the words themselves were taboo, "Brigitte Meidell."

The room fell silent.

"...Who is that?" Tonari asked. It was a feminine name, but beyond that, he had no idea who this Brigitte person was.

The priest glanced around nervously before answering, "...The Earl of Meidell's daughter. She contracted with a no-name about ten years ago."

"Ah, I see."

Tonari nodded, although he did not like the term *no-name*. The shrine tossed around lots of pretty words about spirits being miracles made manifest, worthy of love, and about how spirits and humans must help one another, but beneath it all, the clergy saw things differently.

How do you think you'd like to be called a no-name?

More than anything, spirits loved freedom. Tonari thought the very idea of "spirit worship" was outrageous, and some spirits felt the same. That was why he was here at the Central Shrine. To deepen connections with spirits and prevent them from becoming estranged...he was making the sacrifice just for one year.

This old man would make a good hostage, if you ask me...

Some people said spiritologists had partly severed their ties to the human world, but the fact that their profession was licensed by the king meant they were tethered to the secular world. Since he had received an official request

from the kingdom, he was not permitted to turn it down without a legitimate reason. The salary was correspondingly generous, but during the several months he'd been at the shrine, he hadn't had what he would call an enjoyable time. Still, he had to admit he'd been fortunate to witness the column of light at close range, since he otherwise would have been away on fieldwork.

I've gotta say, this post isn't the greatest fit...

He much preferred wandering the forests and marshes, encountering wild spirits.

"Anyhow," he said, scratching his itchy head, "can we summon this Brigitte to the shrine?"

The Meidell residence had come up earlier in the conversation. It matched the site where the column of light had emerged, so there was a good chance the girl was contracted with this unknown spirit.

"I'll look into her myself," he offered, thinking this would be the simplest option, but to his surprise, the clergy protested vociferously.

"She's an earl's daughter. It's not so easy to summon her."

"And is it safe to assume she's the one, without conclusive evidence?"

"In the end, a no-name is a no-name. I can't imagine it being connected to the column of light."

Tonari was getting fed up. The conversation was going nowhere.

"Excuse me...!" Just then, a staff pounded the marble floor. All eyes turned to the archbishop. His mouth moved, although it was hidden beneath his beard. "Which priest oversaw her contracting ceremony?"

"What?"

One of the clergy members reacted with obvious alarm.

So it's the chief priest!

The chief priest held the greatest real power at the Central Shrine. His face had turned pale, and his eyes were darting around.

"I-it was I—but I only spoke what the crystal revealed."

The crystal he was referring to was said to have come from the spirit world. Legend had it that long ago, magical waves had formed it. The spirits were rumored to have used it to peer into the human world from their own...and now that it was in the human world, it revealed spirits in their world. It was used in contracting ceremonies, and regional shrines had similar smaller crystals of their own.

As a rule, young, talented priests conducted the contracting ceremonies with five-year-old children at the shrine, so the current chief priest must have advanced quite impressively through his career.

"I'm certain it was a no-name. I've seen them thousands of times. There is no question in my mind," he said.

"Are you sure? Couldn't you have made a mistake?" the archbishop asked.

"Absolutely! I would never make a mistake!" The red-faced chief priest pounded the table with his fist. "I know that g-girl's own father burned her hand because she had contracted with a no-name!"

He slapped his hand over his mouth, but it was too late. The room fell completely silent. Several people were very pale. Despite the chatter of a moment before, none dared speak.

Now I see.

The tawdry truth was coming into view. So this was why they didn't want to introduce Brigitte to a spiritologist.

The contracting ceremony was absolute.

It was absolute law, and it had to be absolutely correct.

But if Brigitte Meidell really had contracted with an undiscovered spirit...even if the spirit had disguised itself as a weak tiny spirit...it would mean the shrine had mistaken the identity of the contracting spirit.

I suppose they can't just come out and admit their mistake.

How would they explain themselves to the Fire Clan, an earldom? Tonari was sure that right now the priests must be desperately trying to figure out how to whitewash their mistake and regain their respectability.

What rubbish...

The girl's own father had burned her hand. If he had to say, not one person gathered here cared an iota about her suffering and despair.

"I think it's a tad early to summon Brigitte to the shrine."

A voice broke into Tonari's disgusted thoughts. It was the Third Prince, Joseph, who had been silent until then. He had been granted a seat next to the chief priest.

The royal family had been closely connected to the shrine since ancient times. On National Founding Day each fall, the Central Shrine held a parade at which the four great noble families skilled in fire, wind, water, and earth magic used their spirits' greatest powers to perform a ceremony that lit up the sky. This did not mean that the royals exercised unilateral power over the shrine, but to Tonari, it seemed that certain priests and this prince had a mistaken understanding of this point. The way the prince showed up at the shrine on a daily basis suggested he considered it his private castle.

Of course, that's none of my business...

Taking no notice of Tonari and his skeptical glances, Joseph turned to the archbishop with an amiable smile.

"She's an exceedingly sensitive person, you see...and I think an impromptu summons to the shrine could be too much of a shock. She might even faint."

The priests seemed to find this perplexing. The bishop seated next to the archbishop cocked his head very slightly to the right.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but am I mistaken in thinking you ended your engagement to Miss Meidell...?"

"Oh, yes, that did happen," Joseph said, smiling faintly. "We had a minor mixup. Brigitte understands."

"Ah, I see..."

"The school that Brigitte and I attend, Otoleanna Academy, is currently on summer holiday. Perhaps it would be better to ask her about her spirit during the school inspection afterward?"

The school inspection was a traditional event during which the priests visited schools to ensure that students were building successful relationships with their spirits. The Central Shrine was charged with inspecting three schools nearby, including Otoleanna Academy. The spiritologist typically joined the Central Shrine priests on these inspections.

Several of the clergy signaled their agreement with Joseph's suggestion. It must have been like a dream come true for them. This time line struck Tonari as rather lacking in urgency, but if he pushed back at this point, he would invite even more of their ire. Although he was disgusted with them, he decided to simply listen passively to the rest of the meeting.

After it ended, several of the clergy stayed to chat, while others immediately left. Joseph was among those who remained, and Tonari took the chance to saunter up to him while he was staring at a mural.

"Prince Joseph. I get the feeling you don't want me to meet Brigitte."

"..." Joseph said nothing and walked out of the room.

Tonari wasn't sure if he'd heard the whispered comment or not. He watched him go, wondering how it would all turn out.

I don't know what the prince is up to, but as far as Brigitte goes...I hope she makes it to the inspection in one piece.

He licked his lips unconsciously. What spiritologist wouldn't be exhilarated by the prospect of meeting an undiscovered spirit? He gazed at the magnificent mural covering the wall for a moment, then followed Joseph out of the room.

But there was one thing neither he nor anyone else gathered at the shrine that day realized.

The mural portrayed an imaginary spirit with divine wings that was a revered symbol of the shrine—and it had been present in the human world for eleven long years, dwelling in the body of a young girl.



[&]quot;Open your mouth, miss."

"Say 'aaah,' miss."

Two days after the column of light appeared, Brigitte was still spending most of her time in bed. She had a low fever and felt sluggish. Sienna and Carson were even more attentive than usual, but to Brigitte, their attention was slightly suffocating.

Right now, for example, both of them were holding spoons full of porridge up to her mouth...which only exhausted their overly pampered patient.

Sienna and Carson had both been depressed and guilty since she collapsed. It probably made them feel better to constantly tend to her needs, but she wished they would take a nice long break. To that end, she had a plan.

"Um, Carson?"

"Oh, would you like another spoonful of porridge?" he answered excitedly, while Sienna pouted.

Brigitte smiled and shook her head. "I'd simply love to see lots of those delicious sweets you make, Carson."

"What?"

"And I'd like to see Sienna stuffing her mouth with them."

"What ...?"

They both froze at the same moment. To make sure they got the point, Brigitte followed up with "I'm sure if I did, I would be better in no time!"

"…!"

Carson and Sienna exchanged glances. Their decision was nearly instantaneous.

"Then I'll go down to the kitchen with Carson right now."

"Just you wait, miss. I'll bake you a mountain of sweets!"

"I can't wait," Brigitte answered.

Oblivious to her expression of relief, they pushed past each other out of her room. Brigitte watched them go, then wolfed down the tasty porridge and piled the plates neatly. She still felt a bit dizzy. She wasn't sleepy yet, but she thought

she had better rest.

I wonder if it's because of this little fellow...

She gently poked the chick, toddling around her pillow. It answered with a lively "cheep!"

At first glance, it looked like an ordinary chick. However, its yellow wings transitioned to a beautiful red at its chest. Ever since it suddenly appeared two days earlier, the spirit had been by her side. She wondered if it thought she was its mother; she'd heard that newborn chicks imprinted on the first thing they saw.

Although, this isn't a chick; it's a spirit...

Ordinarily, contracted spirits didn't spend all their time in the human world because as long as they were there, they consumed their contracted human's magical power. Although an incredible amount of magic was bestowed on people contracted with first-class spirits, at the same time, powerful spirits required an unimaginable quantity of magical power to manifest.

In that sense, Yuri really was extraordinary. Hardly anyone could keep their cool like him with their spirit present for such long stretches. And if Brigitte wasn't mistaken, the little chick beside her was also close to a first-class spirit.

"Perhaps your spirit is simply lazy."

That's what Marjory Naha had said to her in the infirmary after her spirit showed signs of awakening.

It won't come out because you're afraid of fire.

That's what Blue had said two days earlier.

Putting those two things together, Brigitte felt like the answer was obvious.

So...this little fluff ball was keeping most of its power subdued for my sake, planning to emerge at the right time...but my fear of fire kept it dormant?

She guessed that instead of returning to the spirit world, it was staying with her so she could get used to the sensation of burning through magical power—a sensation she normally would have been familiar with since the age of five.

...But I shouldn't be making wild guesses like this.

She turned her thoughts to something else.

The chick's identity wasn't clear yet. She wanted to try out some magic, but everyone had warned her to wait until she was completely recovered. Most of all, though, she was overjoyed to have finally met her contracted spirit.

I've been wanting to meet you forever!

"You sweet thing," she cooed, stroking the red chick's head, and it squinted with pleasure. Brigitte couldn't help smiling at how adorable it was.

I wonder if it's the kind of spirit that doesn't talk?

That would be a tiny bit disappointing, but in time she could learn to deduce its thoughts from its behavior and expressions. Perhaps sensing her feelings, it opened and closed its pink beak endearingly.

The truth was, there was something Brigitte had always wanted to do. Although it wasn't common practice, if she ever did meet her contracted spirit, she had dreamed of calling it by a name other than its species name. She had spent the past two days trying to come up with a good idea, and now, for the first time, she tested out her options.

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"Red!"
""
"Scarlet!"
""
"Sunshine...!"
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The chick displayed a surprising lack of reaction.

I guess I don't have a gift for names...

Suddenly, she sensed someone watching her. She looked over her shoulder and saw a child peering through the slightly opened door, and when their eyes met, the little spy shrugged.

"Hello, Blue. Did you come to play? Come on in!" she said cheerfully.

Blue stepped timidly into her room. She hadn't seen the child since the incident with the column of light.

"...Sorry," Blue said, stopping next to the door with face downturned. Apparently, they shared some of the servants' guilt for her collapse.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"But I was the one who came up with the idea, not you."

"I went along with it because I thought your idea was good," she answered decisively.

Blue wasn't responsible for what had happened. If anything, she was grateful the child had followed her home out of concern for her spirit.

"Peep!"

The chick spirit chirped softly.

The corners of Blue's mouth turned up a little. "Glad you could finally come out."

"Peep!"

"...Yeah, I guess."

"Can you understand it, Blue?" Brigitte asked in surprise.

Blue looked away. "Not a word!"

Not a word!

But somehow...Brigitte could hear the gratitude in the chick's voice, too.

"Also, I finally figured it out," Brigitte said.

"Figured what out?"

She smiled proudly. "You're Yuri's contracted spirit, a fenrir, aren't you?"

As Blue stared back in shock, Brigitte's smile turned a little impish.

Fenrirs were first-class ice spirits who took the form of wolves born from the ice. The fierce beasts roamed the frozen earth in packs, shaking the ground

beneath their feet. Brigitte had read about them in the *Illustrated Encyclopedia* of Spirits, which made no mention of them taking on human forms. But individual spirits varied in ability, and not all species were fully described.

In hindsight, she realized Blue had probably tracked her scent the day they followed her home from the Aurealis residence. No wonder Sienna hadn't spotted them.

Meanwhile, Blue seemed quite shaken to be discovered. The spirit must have been confident in their disguise.

"H-how did you know?"

"Because your big fluffy tail is sticking out!"

Blue glanced over their shoulder, and their eyebrows shot up. "It is not!"

"Gotcha!"

In truth, she'd caught a glimpse of a blue tail through the door of her room the day before.

"You tricked me! Ugly girl!"

"Ugly?!" she shrieked. The word was taboo to girls her age.

I know I'm not the prettiest, but...!

She jumped out of bed in protest.



"I don't care how cute you are or how much you look like Sir Yuri! Some things one must never say!"

"I'm only telling the truth! Ugly, ugly, uglyyy!"

"Once isn't enough? Four times?!"

Blue stuck their tongue out at her.

What a sassy little...! Brigitte's clenched fists trembled.

"Now, now, what's all the racket?"

"Sir Yuri!"

"Master!!"

Brigitte hopped back in bed at Yuri's visible annoyance, while Blue sidled up to him cloyingly.

"Master, that girl is harassing me! She beat me to a pulp!"

"You shouldn't be bothering an invalid."

Yuri glowered at the spirit grasping his legs but otherwise ignored Blue's complaints. On the surface, they looked like two adorable brothers playing around innocently.

But the reality is revolting!

"Sir Yuri, that is not true! I'm the one being harassed!" she protested fiercely.

Yuri looked at her and sighed. "What are you thinking, trying to compete with a spirit?"

"Master! You believe me, don't you?"

"Sir Yuri! Please believe me!"

They continued their desperate appeals, while Yuri watched them suspiciously. Finally, he turned to Blue and said, "...The pâtissier is making something with sweet potatoes in the kitchen."

"Sweet potatoes?!" Blue's face lit up. The next instant, the child had dropped to all fours and taken on a lupine form—a fenrir.

It's h-huge...!

Brigitte looked up in awe at the enormous wolf, their jaws releasing icy puffs with each breath.

"I'm going down there!" the wolf said in the same excited, childish voice, before striding jauntily out of the room.

The beast quickly disappeared down the hallway, as if they didn't even remember their spat with Brigitte.

Sir Yuri certainly knows how to handle that spirit.

He rounded on her then, like a parent about to scold a naughty child.

"Brigitte, you're not well. Stay in bed and rest."

Ouch! Embarrassed, she crawled under the covers. "But Blue was..." She stopped, slapping her hand over her mouth.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry...I gave your spirit a nickname without asking you first."

"That's fine. They seem to like it."

They do?

She wasn't so sure.

Yuri walked over to her and without warning shaded her eyes with his hand.

"You're still flushed."

Coolness radiated from his palm; he was using ice magic to soothe her fever. She let her eyes close.

It's so nice...

With his hand still there, he said, "I'm thinking of going home tomorrow."

"Of course... Thank you for staying for so long."

"I did it because I wanted to."

He had stayed by her side for three whole days. The day before, his attendant, Clifford, had come to check on her, too. She was very glad the

cottage had a room for honored guests. There weren't many servants, but all of them were excellent. They had welcomed Yuri and Clifford hospitably in her stead.

"Rest well this week, all right?"

"I don't have any plans for a while, so I'll be fine... Although next week Kira and I are going to Nival's summer estate."

They'd made the plans for the end of the summer, and Brigitte was excited. After all, she was as good as disowned from her own family. She hadn't been to the Meidell domain in eleven years, and she had never been on a trip by herself. She remembered playing around the family's grand villa...but the memory was very hazy.

"Ah," Yuri said, nodding coolly. "Then I'll go, too."

...What?

Brigitte stared at him, wide-eyed. Then, after the words had sunk in, she shouted it aloud. "What?!"

"Peep!" the chick spirit chirped, hopping up from the blanket.



Magical Beginnings

They had been jostling along in the carriage for two hours that morning. The Weir domain—that is, Nival Weir's hereditary land and imperial stock farm—sat to the north of the capital, past quite a few hills and dales. While the capital was the center of fashion and trends, a two-hour journey was enough to reach another world. All around were green mountains and pastures dotted with grazing cows and sheep. Just the sight of it was relaxing, and she opened the carriage window and felt the cool breeze on her face.

"Miss Brigitte!"

"Miss Brigitte!"

Noisy voices interrupted her reverie. Evidently, Kira had arrived before her. As Brigitte stood to climb from the carriage, blushing from this warm welcome, Nival offered his hand. She took it gratefully, and he broke into a grin.

"It's lovely to see you both!" Brigitte said. "Nival, thank you for inviting me to your estate."

"No, Miss Brigitte, thank *you* for making the long trip here. Welcome to my—Wait, what are you doing here?!"

He pointed accusingly at Yuri and took a step back from the carriage. Brigitte glanced over her shoulder to see a profoundly irritated Yuri.

"What am I doing? Accompanying Brigitte, obviously."

"I don't see why she needs accompanying!"

"I wrote you a letter telling you I was coming."

"You think I'd read a letter from the likes of you?!"

Ignoring this clearly good-natured feud, Brigitte turned to Kira.

"Miss Brigitte, have you been well?" Kira asked.

"I have! You look well, too."

Brigitte couldn't help smiling as Kira's dark eyes twinkled, like a night sky full of stars.

"You cut your bangs! It's a lovely style for you," she said.

"Oh, Miss Brigitte...!"

Kira's blushing face wasn't hidden by long hair anymore, and Brigitte thought the change suited her perfectly.

"First things first, let's go to the house so you can bring your luggage in," Nival said, his spat with Yuri apparently over. Brigitte started walking to the carriage to take out her luggage. But before she had a chance, Yuri picked it up, clutching their two heavy-looking bags in his arms.

"Oh, Sir Yuri, you don't have to..."

"It's fine," he said, before walking off toward the house, and Brigitte hurried after him.

Why is he so dashing...? No, stop!

She chased away the unwanted thoughts. If Nival and Kira caught on to her, they were sure to think she was strange.

She hadn't seen Nival or Kira since school let out, and she hadn't seen Yuri for two weeks. The cottage carriage wasn't very nice, so she was grateful Yuri had offered an Aurealis carriage. But since neither Sienna nor Clifford was coming with her, she had been alone with Yuri for two hours. He had been unaffectedly considerate the whole time.

He asked me how I was feeling and how my spirit was...

If she wasn't imagining things, he seemed to worry about her a lot. Thanks to her happiness and embarrassment, she wasn't sure she'd managed to answer very coherently.

Funny that Blue didn't show up the one time I could have used the help. Yuri had said the sassy spirit liked to sleep in, which reminded her that according to Sienna, Blue been a late riser when staying with them, too.

In any case, it had been all Brigitte could do to keep from blurting, "Oh, cows!" "Oh, sheep!" "Oh, goats!" every time she spotted an animal on the ride to the Weir domain.

They went inside the three-story mansion, which at least from the outside looked magnificent. The furnishings were simple but elegant. Nival said his mother had redone the interior about ten years ago when the house was renovated, and Brigitte could tell she had good taste. At the moment, none of his family was at the vacation home, but five servants welcomed Brigitte and Yuri warmly.

"Please make yourself at home on the second floor with Kira, Miss Brigitte. Yuri and I will be on the first floor," Nival announced.

"I've already put my things in the room on the right. I hope you don't mind...,"
Kira said.

"Brigitte, is the room next to Kira's all right?"

"Yes... Thank you, Sir Yuri."

He nodded and strode up the stairs with her bag. Noticing how weighed down he was, Nival shouted, "Let me help!" but Yuri didn't even pause.

Brigitte looked at Kira and smiled wryly.

"By the way, Kira, how's Lisa?"

Kira's face clouded over. "Actually...I heard she hasn't left the dorm, even after the summer holiday began."

"Really?"

"Yes, but my parents asked me to come home, so I haven't been able to see her."

She looked down helplessly.

The baron's daughter, Lisa Selmin, had been close with Brigitte's former

fiancé, Prince Joseph. He had broken off their engagement after Lisa claimed Brigitte was bullying her, but she must have hated Brigitte just as much after that. Lisa had made Kira steal her pen during the written exams, followed Yuri around, ridiculed Brigitte in public, and even chased her with a torch during the magic-stone hunt. The memories of the harassment alone were awful. In the end, she'd been suspended from the academy of magic, but no one had seen her since, even after the suspension was over.

"But, Miss Brigitte, Miss Lisa isn't the type to be that reckless," Kira said earnestly. Their families were close, and the two girls had been childhood best friends, or close to it.

Kira had admitted to Brigitte that she was the one who stole her pen, but Brigitte guessed Kira had simply been following her friend's orders. She hadn't asked for the details. Kira had promised that she and Lisa would apologize together, and Brigitte believed her.

"I think she must have some reason. Please..."

"Kira, it's all right," she said, shaking her head. "I know she must have had a reason for what she did...and there's something else that strikes me as odd."

Come to think of it, Kira should know the answer.

Brigitte decided to ask her the question that had been bothering her.

"Do you know anything about Lisa's contracted spirit?"

"Yes. It's a third-class wind spirit... Why?"

"...No reason. Thanks." She'd suspected as much.

Lisa's not contracted with a fire spirit.

During the magic-stone hunt, Brigitte had been wearing the hair ornament Yuri had given her. It was a magic item with the power to deflect any order of magic one time. Thanks to that, she had been able to deflect the torch that Lisa threw at her. But that meant one thing.

Someone other than Lisa or her contracted spirit lit the torch she was carrying.

Joseph's face flashed across her mind.

Maybe I'm jumping to conclusions...

Brigitte remembered Joseph and Lisa flirting. Lisa must have thought Joseph would propose to her after he broke off his engagement to Brigitte. Even Brigitte had assumed so after he had ended their relationship at that party. But three months had passed, and no sign of an engagement had come. If anything, he had abandoned Lisa when she was in dire straits and asked Brigitte to get back together right before summer vacation.

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Why is he doing this...?
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"Peep..."

A soft, high voice interrupted her thoughts. The chick spirit poked its head out of Brigitte's chest pocket.

"You woke up!"

The chick had slept through the ride to the Weir domain. The long-awaited spirit was fussed over and adored by all the servants, but it got quite a scolding when it tried to nest in Brigitte's long hair.

"I will not have your hair turned into a bird's nest after I've gone to the trouble of combing it with scented oil!" Sienna had said. After that, the chick had taken to snuggling in Brigitte's pockets or puffed sleeves.

"...You have a chick?" Kira asked, her eyes growing wide before she smiled. "Oh, by the way, we're having a barbecue for lunch."

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"...Peep?!"
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Likely fearing for its life, the chick scrambled back into Brigitte's pocket.

That afternoon, they used the wood oven in the garden to cook lunch. Of course, they were all children of nobles, so they didn't actually do the cooking, just chatted while the servants efficiently prepared their meal. The table was laid with skewered pork and beef and plump sausages. There was a rainbow of fresh vegetables, too—onion rings, carrots, eggplant, peppers, and corn. Nival's family had many vegetable fields in their domain, in addition to the imperial stock farm they ran. All the vegetables had come from these fields.

I've never eaten outside like this before!

Brigitte's heart pounded as she sat beneath her white parasol. Something like this would never happen at her cottage. Sienna had bought lunch for her at food stalls in the capital before, but that was very different. She was a future spiritologist, however. She would need to make solo research excursions to forests, marshes, beaches, and all sorts of other places. Getting used to eating outside was good preparation for her future—even if this was more like eating at a fine hotel.

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"Brigitte."

"Yes?"

"Can you light the fire?"

Me?!
```

Brigitte was surprised to hear this suggestion from Yuri. Charcoal was piled in the brick oven, but it hadn't been lit yet. He was waiting for her.

"Miss Brigitte, can you do magic now?" Nival asked, looking as surprised as she was. After all, in the past, she'd been unable to summon her spirit or do any sort of magic. Kira pressed her hands to her cheeks, looking a bit pleased with herself.

"I gather Miss Brigitte hasn't shown you her contracted spirit yet, Nival," she said.

"Her contracted spirit...?!" He glared at Brigitte as if to say, What is the meaning of this? He must have been feeling left out.

Flustered, Brigitte looked down at her pocket.

"I'm sorry, but would you mind coming out?"

"Peep...," it answered, before chirping weakly and poking its face out. The moment its eyes met Kira's, it disappeared again.

"...Doesn't seem to like you much," Nival noted.

"Y-you're imagining things," Kira said, looking away.

He gave her a pointed look before asking Brigitte timidly, "That column of light that rose from the Meidell residence the other day... That wasn't...?"

She nodded hesitantly. Sienna and Carson had told her the incident was the talk of the capital. She guessed that her father was the target of these rumors, but so far, he hadn't asked her about it.

"My ariel was acting strange that night. She showed up out of the blue and then dived right through the windowpane to get out."

"W-was everything okay?"

"Yes, but we had to put in new glass!"

That wasn't what she meant, but he was flashing her a toothy grin, so she just nodded. "I'm glad."

"Anyway, Brigitte, can you do it?" Yuri asked.

She thought it over. Since everyone had warned her to wait until she was used to the sensation of her magical power being consumed, she hadn't used magic once since the chick spirit appeared. The truth was, she desperately wanted to try as soon as she could. How could she not want to? But...

"I want to... But how do you use magic?"

"I'll teach you. Let's practice nearby first."

It was an embarrassingly childish question, so she had asked very quietly—but Yuri didn't laugh at her.

That's all it takes to put me at ease. I am not difficult to please!

The servants, too, bowed pleasantly and left the garden. Yuri and Brigitte rose and went to a safe place where nothing would get in their way. Nival and Kira followed.

"Since you'll be lighting an oven, you just need to use a basic spell to produce a weak flame," he explained calmly.

She nodded.

"Magical power is constantly flowing through the contracted person's body. Imagine concentrating it in your fingers and palms... Do you mind if I take your hand?"

"What? Oh, um, not at all."

After a short pause, she nodded. He must want to sense the flow of magic more easily. He held out his left hand, and she placed her right, unscarred hand in it. They were joined together now, and his face was very close, too...but withdrawing her hand would make the embarrassment worse, so she bit her lip and kept it there.

I'm glad I'm wearing gloves...

If he'd touched her bare hand, it probably would have been sweaty.

"Hey! Don't think you can take advantage of the situation to hold Miss Brigitte's hand!" Nival whined.

"This is the most efficient way. Would you like to—?" Yuri started to snap back, but then he broke off. "... Never mind. Brigitte, let's continue."

"A-all right."

She nodded, too dazed to pay attention to their bickering.

"Focus your attention on your right hand... Good. Can you feel the magic gathering there?"

"Yes. I definitely feel it."

The hand clasping his felt like the nexus of all her self-conscious nervousness. She could feel the flow of magic inside her body—along with the magic circulating in Yuri's body.

It's so cold and refined...

The coolness of his hand, imbued with his mastery of water and ice magic, felt so nice.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," she answered calmly, and he gently withdrew his hand. She brought her right hand in front of her, took a deep breath, and let it out. Needless to say, she'd chosen the magic for lighting a fire. It was among the most common of the lowest-level types of fire magic.

"Fire!" she shouted intently.

Red flames instantly rose from her palm.

She felt nervous—but not scared. Her limbs did not quiver in the presence of her past source of terror. She could stand tall—and she knew why.

It's because Yuri is next to me.

Also, the gloves Sienna and the other servants had given her—made from dragon skin and scales and magical spider thread that was resistant to fire—were protecting her.

I'm totally fine.

Nival and Kira were cheering her on. She had successfully invoked her magic. But her joy only lasted a second...

...Huh?

Something strange was happening.

The flames were still raging in front of her palm. As they abruptly swelled, sweat began to pour down her face. Before she knew it, the ball of fire was radiating heat far stronger than the summer sun. As she blinked in surprise, it grew bigger and bigger.

I think...this might be getting dangerous!!

Yuri was slightly panicking as well; he probably hadn't expected this. Suppressing her agitation, she smiled.

"Ah-ha-ha, you sure are a good teacher, Sir Yuri!"

"Are you trying to blame this on me?" He saw right through her.

"Sorry," she muttered.

He sighed. "...Brigitte, are you ready to have water poured on your head?"

"Is th-that the only option?"

He nodded gravely. It seemed he would have to put out the fire using his water magic.

"...A-all right, then. Go ah—"

Just then, something wiggled in her breast pocket.

Huh?!

"Peep!"

The tiny chick spirit was fluttering bravely toward the raging flames. She stuck out her free hand to stop it, but the red bird dodged and made its way to the edge of the fire.

"Peep!" it cried from midair.

Its pink beak opened wide—and its tiny mouth swallowed the fireball whole.

"What?!" Brigitte yelped in surprise.

Beside her, Yuri was staring in disbelief. The fireball, which had been ready to explode any second, had vanished completely.

The chick alighted on the ground and burped with satisfaction.

For a few seconds, they were all silent.

...It ate the f-fire...?

Brigitte felt like she had seen something similar before. Yes...it was like the time Nival's ariel had gone on a rampage—and then the thundering storm had vanished like mist.

What if it didn't disappear after all? What if this little fluff ball ate it?

"Is your spirit all right? It isn't grilled chicken now, is it?" Kira asked. The sight must have given her quite a shock because her eyes were squeezed shut.

"Peep!" the chick answered, giving its feathers a good shake before flying back to Brigitte and burrowing into her pocket.

Brigitte didn't understand exactly what had happened, but she knew the chick had saved her, so she stroked it from outside her pocket. It chirped happily.

"Miss Brigitte, do you think that spirit might be...?" Nival asked hesitantly.

"...You think so, too?" she answered, smiling a little.

The most famous story in *The Wind Laughs* told of a fire spirit that took the form of a bird. It was natural to make the connection.

I didn't read anything about it eating magic, though...

The mythical spirit was said to have beautiful wings. Brigitte and Yuri

suspected the chick might be that very spirit—although they didn't have proof yet, so she didn't want to start any rumors.

Anyway...

It was hard for her to believe that she, Brigitte Meidell, the girl everyone mocked and called the Red Fairy, might be contracted with this legendary spirit.

After the fireball incident, they asked a servant to light the oven, and then they had a lovely barbecue. They all ate plate after plate of grilled meat and vegetables. Brigitte had no idea charred meat and vegetables would taste this good if you ate them outside. It was a major discovery.

She bit into a sausage seasoned with salt and pepper. Juices ran onto the plate. It might not have been fitting for an earl's daughter, but she picked up the plate and drank down the last drop.

I'd like to do this in the cottage garden...

She planned to suggest it to Nathan, the head chef. She was sure Carson would love the idea. Still, she worried the smells would bother her parents in the main house.

But maybe if the wind is blowing in the right direction?

As she was mulling over her strategy, a hand reached out and placed something on her plate, and she glanced up. Yuri was using a pair of tongs to load her up with grilled meat.

"Eat some more," he said in his deep, alluring voice. The tongs definitely did not suit his handsome face. He could insist all he wanted, but she was chowing down on a sausage at that very moment.

"I've had plenty, thank you," she said.

"I think you should put on some weight."

Nice manners!

She frowned. How indelicate could he be? But he was probably just worried about her. She wanted to think so, at least.

Kira, who was much thinner than Brigitte, speared a slice of grilled carrot and

said to the chick spirit, "You know, you could grow bigger, too, if you eat some of this."

"Peep?!"

Brigitte had a feeling that the chick's face was expressing terror at the offering. That reminded her of something.

"By the way, I want to come up with a name for my spirit, but I can't think of anything good."

The truth was, she couldn't think of anything the spirit liked, so she was hoping they might have a good suggestion.

Nival tore another piece of steak off his skewer and looked up. "A name? ... How about something that reflects your power and authority? The Splendid Spirit of Miss Brigitte or The Great Miss Brigitte's Chick?"

"Peep...?"

What hideous taste!

"Let's see... I think Roasty Toasty has a nice ring to it! Or maybe Rotisserie Chick?" Kira suggested.

"Peep...!!"

She's just as bad...

Brigitte wasn't sure, but she thought the chick's beady black eyes were pleading in metaphorical tears. The chick couldn't talk, but it was clearly displeased. She knew that much.

"Sir Yuri, what do you think?" she asked.

"Why not something like Peep?" he suggested nonchalantly.

Everyone groaned.

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"Sir Yuri..."
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"Yuri, I swear..."

"Sir Aurealis...that's just..."

"...What?"

He couldn't get much less creative.

But one member of the group seemed pleased by it.

"Peep!!"

Fluffing its feathers, the chick spirit hopped around the table.

Brigitte stared in surprise.

But when I suggested names it ignored me!

Her eyes welled with tears of shock and frustration.

And so it came to pass that the chick spirit was named Peep.



The two days at Nival's vacation home flew by. They toured the imperial stock farm and the factories where dairy products and fruits were processed. The garden party on the sprawling estate was delightful, and Brigitte had a feeling Nival and Kira got even closer that day.

Nival had two sisters who were quite a bit older than he was. He said they pushed him around, so he had been overjoyed to move to the dorm when he had started at the academy of magic. He was not only president of his class but also of his dorm, which was a surprise to Brigitte, who commuted.

Kira was smiling much more. Before, she had hidden behind her long bangs and talked in a whisper, but now she made eye contact with Brigitte and Nival and spoke clearly. She still seemed nervous around other people, but Brigitte was confident that she would be all right in class.

On their last night together, the four of them were lounging in one of the spacious guest rooms. Kira was sitting on Brigitte's left, Yuri was facing her, and Nival was to Yuri's right. Textbooks and workbooks were spread on the table among them.

I've never studied with friends before...!

Brigitte felt like she was walking on air. She had spent her whole life until now without friends. She had toiled endlessly over her homework in her room at the

cottage. But not now.

Nival looked around the group.

"So, everyone, how much homework do you have left? I've only got a few pages of applied magic."

"I'm done with everything," Yuri said.

"I've just got human sciences left," Brigitte said.

"I have six worksheets for fundamentals of magic, half the workbook problems for applied magic, the report for history, and...," Kira said.

Everyone fell silent.

It went without saying that Yuri was the top student in their grade. Brigitte had ranked thirtieth on the last exams, and Nival had been sixteenth.

Kira was despondent. "Compared to you, I'm by far—"

"The dumbest," Yuri said bluntly. Kira covered her face with her hands.

"Sir Yuri!" Brigitte blurted.

"I was just pointing out she's no good at planning."

There was no denying that. Given that they had only a few days left of summer vacation, Kira must have had awful time management skills to leave such a mountain of homework. For her part, Brigitte approached assignments methodically and had intentionally left the human sciences assignment so she'd have something to work on at their study group.

"You ought to be kinder with your words!" she scolded.

"I'm sorry, Miss Brigitte. You don't have to defend me...," Kira said, shrinking back in embarrassment.

"Peep! Peep, peep!"

The chick spirit popped its head out of Brigitte's breast pocket and began chirping energetically. It appeared to be poking fun at Kira. Brigitte felt like it was actually laughing at her. Come to think of it, Kira had been very thoughtful toward the chick for the past two days. Brigitte wondered why but decided to change the subject.

"Kira, do you like birds?" she asked.

"Oh yes," she answered. "My family was poor nobles, and when I was little, we ate all sorts of meat."

"Oh..."

Kira glanced hungrily at Peep.

"Peep...!!"

The chick began to shake. It tried to burrow into Brigitte's pocket, but in its panic ended up with its round rear end sticking out. She tapped it down helpfully before turning back to Kira.

"Kira, would you like me to help you with your homework?"

"Oh, would you?!" she answered, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed. "I would love that. But I couldn't ask that of you. Our class president will help me!"

"He will?" Nival echoed.

"I mean, I hope he's able to..."

"That's even worse!" he moaned.

Ignoring him, Kira opened her workbook. Brigitte watched them, brushing her hair from her face.

"Th-then...Sir Yuri..."

"Huh?"

"I wouldn't mind...if you helped me with the human sciences homework."

Ack, I didn't mean to say it that way!

Her nerves were hardly an excuse for putting her request so rudely. Yuri stared at her as she mentally debated restating her question.

"What the hell was that?" With no warning whatsoever, he laughed.

Nival and Kira looked flabbergasted. Meanwhile, Brigitte was so stunned, she dropped the textbook she was holding onto the ground.

"Hey, are you all right?" Yuri asked.

"I'm f-f-fine...!!" she answered, although her stuttering gave away the fact that she was not at all fine.

Yuri stood and walked around the table. Evidently, he was going to pick up the book for her. And then sit down next to her to help her study. Brigitte's heart was about to pound straight out of her chest.

"You're a beast, Yuri!" Nival howled.



"I think we're in the way... Let's go over to that corner," Kira suggested.

The two of them moved their things, and with that, the group had split into two pairs.

"...So what do you have questions about?"

"Um, uh, well, this problem..."

Brigitte was in a panic. But Yuri explained everything patiently...with only a few barbed comments thrown in.

Less than an hour later, she was finished with the assignment. Her shoulders were a little tense, so she stepped onto the guest room balcony. Yuri was already there, leaning over the railing. He glanced over his shoulder, and his expression softened.

"Done?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

Inside, Kira was still struggling over her work as the ever-helpful Nival shouted "Wrong!" "Wrong again!" and pressed a hand to his forehead.

I should probably help her later, even if she says I don't have to.

Brigitte walked over to Yuri.

"Here you go," she said.

He glanced sidelong at the steaming cup.

"It's milk tea. With maple sugar, of course."

"Thanks," he said, and took it.

I'm surprised Yuri has such a sweet tooth.

She had discovered this over the past two days. Earlier, she'd been terrified when he called her "a good person" for giving him her pudding, but now she realized the reason was simple. Now, when she studied his mouth closely, she could detect a faint smile. She resisted the urge to grin at how cute he was. He liked sweet drinks, and he helped himself to the cake and cookies.

Strange that he doesn't gain weight!

She was very jealous and wanted to ask his secret. In her case, Carson was constantly bringing her cakes and tarts. Resisting the temptation was truly a struggle.

She sipped her cup of tea, which had less milk than his. The weather was slightly chilly, so a warm drink was perfect. She raised her head.

This must be what people mean when they talk about starry nights.

She could see so many more stars here than she could in the city, and they looked much closer, too. Now and then, a breeze blew across the second-floor balcony, ruffling her long hair. Summer insects were humming softly.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.

Yuri shifted slightly, and she glanced at him. For some reason, he was staring at her. She blinked.

...Why's he looking at me?

When their eyes met, she shyly blurted out, "Why did you decide to come with me to Nival's vacation home?"

He didn't answer right away. Finally, never taking his eyes off her, he said, "Because I was worried about you."

Her heart was thudding so loudly, she thought he would hear it.

"I-I'm not so weak that you have to w-worry about me," she said, flustered. Even she knew she didn't sound very believable.

He's always rescuing me...

When she was sad, or overwhelmed, or...anytime, really, he was always by her side. Even if he did always have to get a word in.

"I know. I'm just a worrier."

She shook her head silently so that he wouldn't guess her feelings.

Because you were there for me...

Meeting him had widened her world. He had given her so much support. He meant so much to her. If she tried to put it into words, she was sure her feelings would overflow and he would see everything—so she said nothing for a while.

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"...Summer will be over soon," she finally commented.

"Mm-hmm."

Still leaning on the railing, he sipped his tea. Then he looked at her.

"Brigitte?"

"Yes?"

"Are you hiding something?"
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Her heart skipped a beat at the abrupt question. She had been trying to act natural, but he must have seen through her.

Prince Joseph...

She wanted to tell him what had happened. But instead—she shook her head. Yuri always came to her rescue. She didn't want to become dependent on his kindness and thoughtfulness.

Also, I wonder if the reason he's always helping me is...

Now that she had overcome her fear of fire, she was able to clearly remember the sensation of someone holding her right hand the day her left hand was burned.

Was Yuri staying with her out of guilt? If that was the case, the guilt would be too much; she wouldn't be able to face him. So she pushed back her true feelings and smiled.

"No, nothing. If anything...I'm a little worried about my contracted spirit."

That was true. She still didn't know what kind of spirit Peep was. The answer wouldn't change her own feelings, but it could change how other people felt. She couldn't help being anxious.

But Yuri simply announced, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "I'll protect you."

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"...!"
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She gasped and looked up at him. She knew he could probably see the passion in her face under the starlight—but she didn't want to tear her eyes away. That's how beautiful he was—beautiful and gallant and dashing.

I think he just said he likes me...

Just as her feelings were running away with her, Peep poked its head out of her pocket.

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"Peep....."
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Was she imagining things, or was it blushing? Its little body felt warm, too.

Yuri frowned, but the chick's eyes just glittered more brightly.

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"Peep...!"
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"...Ah, I see. Of course, I'll protect you, too."

"Peep!!"

Apparently pleased, Peep burst out of Brigitte's pocket and flew at Yuri. As the little animal sweetly pecked his arm, his expression grew more and more awkward. Any romantic mood was totally gone.

"I suppose Peep must like you because you thought of the name."

"Should I be flattered or not?" He sighed. His undine and fenrir were quite attached to him, too.

I've heard certain people are easy for spirits to get attached to...

Yuri must be one of them. If so, she was a little jealous—very, if she was being honest. It was one of the characteristics a spiritologist needed. She didn't realize that she herself was quite popular with spirits.

"That reminds me, I haven't seen your undine or Blue much lately," she said.

"Undine has been playing in that creek lately. Blue is shy and doesn't come out much."

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Shy?
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She had been wondering why they hadn't appeared, even when surrounded by delicious food. They must be nervous around Kira and Nival. It seemed even Blue could be endearing at times.

Yuri shook his head guiltily.

"I promised not to tell anyone."

Brigitte couldn't help giggling as she imagined Blue causing a commotion in Yuri's mind. Yuri was pressing his temples as if he had a headache—and the gesture reminded her of something important.

"That reminds me, Sir Yuri. Peep still hasn't spoken to me in my head!"

She longed to experience that form of communication with a spirit.

Yuri blinked at her. "Don't you think it's because Peep's constantly manifesting? Plus, I don't think this fellow speaks human."

"In that case, I'd be happy just to hear a peep in my head!"

Yuri was silent, apparently not understanding. Perhaps he didn't share her romantic vision. Giving up on him, she joined her hands in prayer and turned to Peep.

"Please, Peep, won't you try? Can you say something to me silently?"

"Peep?" the chick spirit said, perched on the balustrade, tilting its head curiously.

"I'd like you to tell me what you're thinking!"

"Peep!" it responded, nodding as if to say, *Oh, I understand!* before turning around and shaking its tail feathers.

...Meaning Peep did not understand. And Brigitte had no idea what that innocent little dance meant.

"Ugh! I wonder why it's not working!"

As she drooped sadly, Yuri burst out laughing.

"Maybe because you're always thinking about me!"

She froze. When she turned awkwardly toward him, she saw he was pressing his mouth in realization and regret.

Desperate to clear the air, Brigitte plastered a smile on her face and assumed her usual pushy tone. "That was unkind, Sir Yuri!"

Her voice was a bit unstable, but she thought she'd done a decent job of saving her pride. But he didn't laugh. His cheeks were unmistakably flushed.

"...I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to be unkind."
"I"

She felt suddenly feverish. Her heart was pounding. She wanted to look away out of embarrassment, but for some reason, she couldn't take her eyes off his.

Just then, Kira bounced onto the balcony.

"Excuse me, Miss Brigitte, but Sir Nival is such a strict teacher! You have to rescue me...!"

Her timing was perfect—if she'd arrived a few seconds later, Brigitte might well have leaped over the balustrade from humiliation.

"Of course!" She nodded, running to Kira.

"You look flushed, Miss Brigitte."

"I'm f-fine. The milk tea was rather hot!" she replied as she walked inside with Kira. She could feel Yuri watching her leave, but she didn't have the nerve to look back.

"Peep! Peep!"

Ignoring them both, Peep kept shaking its tail feathers.

A few days later, the summer holiday had just ended.

Sienna was glaring warily ahead, while Brigitte was standing in a daze behind her, blinking in disbelief at the figure before her. But this was no mirage, and it did not vanish.

"Hello there, Brigitte. I see you've been in the sun!"

A carriage was stopped in front of the cottage, and the passenger stepping out of it was Brigitte's former fiancé—the Third Prince Joseph Field.



Prince Charming

It had all started that morning. Summer vacation at Otoleanna Academy of Magic was over, and today was the first day of the new semester. Brigitte had put on her uniform for the first time in a month and was tickling her spirit playfully as she waited for the carriage to arrive.

I think you might have grown a little...

Plumper, that is. The chick still fit in the palm of her hand, but if she wasn't mistaken, its girth had expanded. Its spindly legs poked out below its squat little body in the most endearing way.

Spirits were believed to live far, far longer than humans. Born in great numbers from the mana pervading the atmosphere, some spirits were said to emerge immature and develop slowly over incomprehensible spans of time. Although they did not have bloodlines, some copied human society by creating pseudo-familial relationships.

Brigitte had never heard of a spirit's form changing over such a short period—but she could imagine one reason why hers might have done so.

Maybe it's because Peep ate the fireball I created at the cottage...

She wasn't sure if that could be called food, but she thought it might be an explanation. Also, she was fairly sure Peep had eaten the storm unleashed by Nival's ariel to protect her.

Does it grow when it eats magic? Does it mature as a spirit?

"Peep, are you going to grow into a chicken?"

"Peep?"

The spirit didn't seem to understand.

"Miss Brigitte!"

Just then, the door to her room slammed open. She assumed it was Carson from the bang, but she assumed incorrectly.

"Sienna?"

Uncharacteristically for her, Sienna was panting and looked upset. Brigitte leaped to her feet, sensing instinctively that something was wrong, while Peep burrowed into her hair. Normally, Sienna would have raised an eyebrow and plucked Peep out, but this time she didn't even notice.

"What's wrong, Sienna?" Brigitte asked.

She answered breathlessly, and bitterly.

"...Prince Joseph Field is at the doorstep."

Brigitte wanted to sigh as she remembered these events of a few moments before. She resisted the urge, however, because Joseph was sitting across from her in his carriage on the way to school. He had appeared without warning and invited her to ride to school with him.

"Brigitte, are you angry?"

".....No, it's nothing like that," she answered stiffly.

He should have known that a mere earl's daughter could not turn down a direct invitation from a member of the royal family. If she did, her position would become even more imperiled.

"...Forgive me for saying this, but would you mind not doing this sort of thing again?"

"Why not?"

"Because I am no longer your fiancée, Prince Joseph."

She lifted her eyes, although not so much that it would be unnatural.

Joseph, the Third Prince of the Kingdom of Field, had golden hair and eyes. As

he sat across from her, a sweet smile on his handsome face, she felt as if she'd gone back in time. But she knew this was no illusion. He must have been thinking the same thing because a hint of melancholy crossed his expression.

"Can't you call me Sir Joseph like you used to?"

"|"

She was speechless. Joseph had disgraced her in front of a crowd of students when he broke off their engagement. After accusing her of harassing Lisa, he had ignored her pleas and hadn't believed a word she said. And now he was acting like none of that had ever happened.

"...I'm sorry, Brigitte." He held out his hand.

She shrank back, while the back of her head bumped the carriage window. An awkward silence fell over the chamber. Joseph stared at his hand hanging there with nowhere to go, then smiled thinly.

"Yes, I hurt you deeply by believing only what Miss Selmin said. I genuinely regret that, Brigitte. That's why I want us to try again...as I said before class let out for the summer."

Brigitte could not answer. She simply watched him conflictedly.

I used to like this person.

She knew that her feelings had been far too shallow to call "love." When her father had abused her and abandoned her in the cottage to be laughed at by the world, Joseph had been the only one to reach out a kind hand. She was grateful to him for that, and she felt indebted. She wanted to do whatever she could for him, and so when they were engaged, she had followed his every order.

"Or...," he said, the warmth suddenly gone from his voice, and Brigitte flinched. "Do you like someone else now?"

"...I..."

The carriage stopped. She was relieved, but of course she knew it wasn't over.

"Your hand."

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"...Thank you."
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Responding stiffly to his practiced motions, she stepped out of the carriage with his help. Instantly, the students nearby began to whisper to one another. Of course they did. Brigitte and Joseph had arrived in the opulent white carriage of the royal family. How could they fail to gawk when out stepped the prince and his former fiancée? The pair would be the talk of the school for the rest of the day. A depressing thought.

Then, belatedly, she noticed that the one person she least wanted to witness this scene was standing nearby.

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"Sir Yuri!"
"_"
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His eyes widened slightly as he looked at her. Behind him was the same Aurealis carriage that had taken them to Nival's vacation home.

"Hello there, Yuri," Joseph called, ignoring the frozen atmosphere. Yuri did not answer, so Joseph went on. "I came to school with Brigitte today. I'm hoping we can get back together."

"What?" Yuri blurted out. "Your Highness, are you fully aware of what you did to her?"

He was as good as asking *Are you insane?* It was worse than disrespectful toward the prince...but Brigitte was happy he said it.

Joseph, however, did not let his self-assured smile slip. "I could say the same to you, Yuri Aurealis," he said.



For a brief moment, Yuri was taken aback. At least it looked that way to Brigitte.

"Let's go, Brigitte," Joseph said.

"Oh, um..."

As she hesitated, Joseph pushed her back and started walking. She wanted to stay, but Yuri was staring at the ground. It felt like a rejection.

She glanced back several times, but he remained rooted in place at the carriage stop.



When Brigitte was young, everything frightened her. Her parents. Fire. The hearth. The mocking laughter. Crowds of people. The world was so frightening that she despaired.

In that difficult time, the only person who smiled and reached out a hand was Joseph—just like Prince Charming on a white horse in a fairy tale.

"Brigitte, did someone call you names again?"

She hurried to wipe the tears from her cheeks when she heard his voice behind her.

It was six years ago, at a tea party hosted by another earl's family. Brigitte had been invited because she was Joseph's fiancée, and at first, she had managed to smile, albeit awkwardly, as she sat with the earl, his wife, and his daughter. But gradually, they began talking about changelings...and someone mentioned that in this kingdom, too, a couple claimed that their baby had been stolen by spirits.

"How frightening! Imagine having your very own baby exchanged for a spirit!"

"If I were its mother, I would never forgive it. I'd be tempted to pop that little pretender in a cooking pot and roast it alive."

"Don't you think it would be better to throw it straight into the hearth fire?"

"But I've heard that sometimes you can't tell it's a changeling even if you stick its hand in the hearth! ...Isn't that so, Miss Brigitte?"

Everyone tittered cruelly and stared at her. They seemed to be looking straight at her gloved hand.

The hand her father had burned.

The hand with the hideous scars.

Unable to stand it any longer, Brigitte fled from the table, found a place to hide, and cried.

But Joseph ran after her and found her.

"...I'm sorry, Sir Joseph," she said, sniffling.

She knew her behavior was not appropriate for the prince's fiancée, a future princess. No matter what anyone said, she ought to maintain a noble and dignified appearance. Otherwise, she could not stand by Joseph's side. She knew that, but whenever they went out in public, she would shake uncontrollably.

After a pained glance at her puffy red eyes, Joseph smiled.

"It's fine, Brigitte. In the future, you don't have to force yourself to come to things like this."

"But Sir Joseph..."

"Don't worry. I'll manage on my own."

She didn't know what to say. The truth was, she wanted to overcome her situation. She wanted to be someone people didn't laugh at anymore. If Joseph was by her side—she thought that one day she could do it. But he was saying she didn't need to push herself.

It wouldn't be right to trouble him by insisting...

"All right," she answered reluctantly. He smiled with satisfaction.

Of course. He was always kind to her, his eyes were always gentle, and he was her shield from the world. But little by little, he was changing.

"The dumber a girl is, the more I like her."

That was the start of it. He told her to wear pink dresses, talk more loudly, put on heavy makeup, get bad scores on tests...and every time he asked, she did her best to obey.

"Stupid Brigitte Meidell."

"Miserable Red Fairy, abandoned by her father."

Every time she heard people say these things, something deep in her heart cried out. But she was desperate to make herself into what Joseph wanted. For some reason, though, each time she forced herself to go against her own timid nature, she grew more estranged from him.

After they started at the academy of magic, their relationship worsened.

"Sir Joseph, shall we ride home together?"

"Sorry, I've things to do today."

Joseph was in the class next to hers, Class 1, so they didn't have much chance to interact at school. She summoned her courage to visit his class a few times, but he was always cold and aloof. She pretended not to care, telling him they could try again next time...but the truth was, she had noticed the change in him a long time ago.

He had grown close to a girl in his class. He would take her to empty classrooms and not come out for hours. He would bring her to parties and dance with her. Brigitte constantly heard the nasty rumors about their relationship, even when she wasn't listening for them.

She had never directly spoken to this girl, a baron's daughter called Lisa Selmin. She'd seen her a few times, though. She was lovely...and unlike Brigitte, she had a strikingly natural smile. So that's the sort of girl he likes, Brigitte thought, but she didn't say anything to him.

Regardless of the details, she'd been his fiancée since they were five. Maybe it would have been all right for her to mention his unfaithfulness once or twice —but she didn't, because she wasn't good enough for kind Joseph.

It's my fault. He didn't do anything wrong. He only tired of me because I'm a bad person...

She went home every day and wept. Her inability to change was humiliating. She hated that Joseph didn't love her, but worst of all was that she couldn't do

anything about it.

Then one day, he ended everything.

"Brigitte Meidell, I declare my engagement to you officially over!"

In that moment, it hit her. She was so sad, she wanted to laugh.

Aaah...I've been abandoned again.



Why are these the memories that always come back to me?

The truth was, she was having some difficulty focusing on class that day. Her mind kept going in circles around Joseph and her memories. She was frustrated with herself for hardly even hearing what her teachers said. But more than that, she couldn't stop thinking about the exchange between Yuri and Joseph that morning.

"Your Highness, are you fully aware of what you did to her?"

She was sure Yuri had said that for her sake. But Joseph had smiled and answered him confidently. What had he meant by "I could say the same to you"?

Brigitte had caught a flash of tension in Yuri's face, as if Joseph's words had hurt him. She was too worried about it to focus on anything else.

Nival and Kira must have heard the rumors, but they didn't ask her about it. Her classmates didn't, either. She was grateful for their thoughtfulness, but she hated not being able to ignore them, too.

The day's classes ended before she could gather herself. She decided to head to the library, though she didn't have much hope of finding Yuri. Taking the stone path next to the library, she made her way to the neatly kept garden with the little gazebo. When she saw the back of a blue-haired figure sitting on the ivy-covered bench, she froze. She had met him there many times before...but for some reason, today she was a little surprised.

Somehow, I thought he wouldn't come today...

She wondered if he was reading as usual. He had a book in his hands, but as she stood listening, she heard no sound of pages turning. Wondering why, she leaned forward. The leather sole of her shoe scraped noisily on the paving stone.

She panicked slightly, but he didn't turn around. She was sure he must have heard the sound. Steeling her nerves, she walked around until she was standing in front of him.

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"Sir Yuri, I..."
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But the instant her eyes met his, she stopped talking. Perhaps it would be strange to try to explain what had happened that morning or give him an excuse.

After all, Yuri and I are no more than rivals...

He must have sensed her unspoken thoughts.

"Was that why you've been acting strange lately?" he asked.

"...Yes, but..."

"...You must be happy."

"What?"

"You've always liked him, haven't you?"

He sounded vaguely resentful. The rustle of a turning page in his book struck her as cold, and she stared down at him in a daze. She had told Yuri once that she used to care for Joseph, and he had listened to her story with quiet respect. He had given her the courtesy of listening to the trivial story of her life that she'd never shared with anyone. He had even said that Joseph was lucky to be loved by her. That was probably why he was congratulating her now. There was nothing strange about it.

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But...
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She didn't like it. No—she hated it with a passion.

"I am n-not happy!"

"...No?"

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"Not one bit! I mean, I..."

I like you.
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She wanted to say that, but her mouth wouldn't form the words for fear he would reject her. She heard a soft "Peep..." from near her shoulder. Peep's voice was hoarse, like it sensed her emotions.

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"Anything else? I'm leaving."
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He closed his book and stood, evidently having had enough. Turning his back on her, he made to walk off.

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"..."
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But after just a few steps, he stopped awkwardly—thanks to the hand pulling weakly on the hem of his shirt.

"... What do you want from me?" he snapped without turning around.

Brigitte's mind was racing as she gripped his shirt with her right hand. What did she want from him? What did she want to do? She didn't have a clear answer. She knew she was hassling him—but still...

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"...I'm not happy. Not at all...so..."

"So?"
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The corners of her eyes grew hot. She was struggling for breath like a runner after a sprint, and her tears would overflow the instant she forgot to blink them back. Still, she whispered in a weak and shaky voice, "So...please don't push me away."

She didn't want him to leave her side. It took all she had just to tell him that much. She heard his breath catch.

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"...All right."
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That was all he said, but he took the hand that was still gripping his shirt in his. Under her blouse, her heart pounded erratically. In the end, she couldn't keep back her tears.

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"I won't," he said.
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" "
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"I won't, so don't cry."

"..."

"When you go and start crying...I don't know what to do."

She sniffled. "...I'm not crying."

"...Uh..."
```

He turned around to face her. At first, she didn't know what he was doing, but slowly he touched the corner of her eye. She stood there in shock as he wiped her tears away, not caring at all that his bony fingers were getting wet.

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"You are most definitely crying."
"...!"
```

His face was almost touching hers. Heat radiated through her. Were they going to kiss? Their hands were still entwined.

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"I told him not to push me away, but this is a bit close...!!

"Admit it. You're crying your heart out."

"I...I admit it, so...!"
```

Her tears were the last thing on her mind by that point. She tried to pull her head back. Finally, apparently pleased with himself, he let go of her hand. She staggered back a step and squatted.

"What's wrong, Brigitte? Are you all right?"

She didn't have the energy left to answer him, but in her mind she growled back.

Obviously not, you cretin!!

For a while longer, the two of them kept talking—or at least trying to.



A Love Close By

The next morning, Brigitte—who, at least as far as she could tell, had made up with Yuri—left for school two hours earlier than usual.

I don't want to get stuck going to school with Joseph again...

Sienna and the other servants had been quite worried by his visit to the cottage the day before—or to put it more accurately, they were livid. They knew the whole story about how he had broken off the engagement. It wasn't long ago that they'd used fire magic to burn a mountain of pink dresses that he'd insisted Brigitte wear.

Brigitte imagined that by now Joseph might be standing on her doorstep, scowling at the servants.

What's the use in thinking about it?

She turned back to the notes she was taking. Luckily, the teacher's lounge had been open when she got to school, and when she explained that she wanted to study, a teacher had unlocked the classroom for her.

After she'd been studying for around an hour, her classmates started to arrive. She returned their greetings as they came in. They seemed relieved to see her mood improved from the day before. Eventually, Kira and Nival arrived.

"Good morning, Miss Brigitte."

"Miss Brigitte, good morning!"

"Morning... I'm sorry I made you two worry yesterday."

Kira shook her head. "Not at all! I'm just happy you're feeling better!"

"...Are things all right with His Highness? If there's anything I can do...," Nival offered, lowering his voice.

"No, but thank you," Brigitte answered. "I feel like I need to resolve things with him myself."

She didn't know exactly what Joseph had meant by his words the day before. She did know that she had absolutely no intention of reinitiating their relationship. If she stuck to her decision, she figured that eventually he would give up.

"Peep, peep..."

Still, Peep must have picked up on her anxiety. Poking its face from her hair, it gazed at Brigitte's jaw with a vaguely melancholy expression.

Kira stared at it in surprise. "Wow, Peep has grown!" She was close enough with the spirit to call it by its nickname, so it was no surprise she noticed.

Brigitte nodded, impressed. "Yesterday when I woke up, I noticed it was a little bigger."

"Oh, really? I think it's wonderful that Peep is putting on some meat," she said, smiling and clapping.

"Puep...!" the spirit squealed, making a sound Brigitte had never heard before as it dived back into her hair.

"Peep, are you all right?!" she asked worriedly.

"That spirit hates you, Kira," Nival interjected.



"It does not! It seems to me you're the one who Peep stays away from," Kira retorted.

"What?! I treat Miss Brigitte's spirit Sir Peep with the utmost respect—"

The two of them were at it again.

They do seem to get along well in spite of themselves...

Nival was ruggedly handsome, while Kira reminded her of a lovely little animal. At first glance they seemed like a bad match, but their quarrels were becoming legendary in Class 2. Brigitte watched them warmly as she took her things out of her bag.

$$\Diamond\Diamond\Diamond$$

After school, Brigitte tidied up her desk and prepared to head over to Class 1, next door. She would much rather have gone to the library or the gazebo to read, but she couldn't avoid the task at hand.

I have to be crystal clear about turning Joseph down.

She'd believed she'd gotten the message across the previous morning, but judging by his actions, she hadn't. She would just have to talk with him until he understood.

I don't ever want to hear Yuri say I'm happy about this again!

Renewing her resolve, she stood, but just then, the other students in her class started whispering.

She followed their stares—and bit her lip in chagrin.

He'd beaten her to it. Joseph was walking into her classroom.

"Hello, Brigitte."

"...Good afternoon, Your Highness," she answered.

Ignoring her stiff reply, he smiled amiably. "I came by to pick you up this morning, but the servants told me you'd already left."

"Oh, did they?"

"May I take you home?" he asked.

She was at a loss for words. After all, for the entire year and some months since they had started at Otoleanna Academy...

He never once took me home, even though we were engaged! I asked him to a million times!

He had some nerve to act like they were the perfect happy couple now!

As Joseph approached Brigitte, who was rooted to the ground, Nival stepped between them.

"...Do you need something? I was talking to Brigitte, and I'd appreciate if you didn't interrupt us," said Nival—a former candidate for the role of Joseph's future assistant.

Brigitte's heart thudded. She recognized the utter contempt in Joseph's eyes.

He looked at me that way the day he broke off our engagement...

When he had mercilessly discarded her, he had regarded her as something filthy. Her whole body wanted to shake from the memory, but she desperately held herself together and looked resolutely up at Nival.

"...Don't worry. I'll be all right," she told him.

He stepped aside, although he was still glaring daggers at Joseph. But Nival and Kira and their other classmates were still there by her side. They seemed upset and tense in front of the Third Prince, but they weren't trying to get away.

Joseph surveyed the room with mild surprise. Then he turned his golden gaze directly on Brigitte.

"Where did you go after school yesterday? You weren't here when I came for you."

"...I had something important to do."

She had gone to the gazebo right after class to talk to Yuri. But she didn't need to tell Joseph that.

"...That's a problem, Brigitte."

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"...?"
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"I can't believe you went to see someone else when you have me."

The classroom fell silent.

"Your Highness..."

"Ugh, don't glower so."

For some reason, he was snickering at her sorrowful expression. Why? she silently asked him. Why are you acting like I cheated on you?

Everything about that was wrong. She couldn't understand why he was acting as if it were true.

"... As I told you yesterday... I am no longer your fiancée."

"Yes, and?"

Her throat was quivering with nervousness, but she managed to get the words out. "I have things to do today as well, so I cannot go with you."

"Is that so? I'm sorry to hear it." He nodded, not terribly upset, then smiled. "Then how about tomorrow?" As she stood there like a statue, he whispered in her ear, "I know you still like me."

"..."

"If you say yes, I'll leave."

So if she didn't say yes, he would go on endlessly attacking her reputation in front of her classmates.

That's almost a threat...

But she still didn't understand. Why was he approaching her after everything that had happened? As far as she knew, he had no reason to cling to her.

"He was the kind prince who rescued the detested Red Fairy."

His subjects adored him. They thought he was an ideal prince. They'd more likely expect Brigitte to beg him to take her back than the other way around.

"Well, Brigitte?" he said, smiling.

She still didn't capitulate, and this seemed to annoy him slightly. He reached

out a hand and tried to pull her to him by force.

At that very moment, a commanding and unexpected voice rang out.

"I'll thank you not to touch her."

She looked around to find Yuri marching into the classroom. Her classmates parted to let him past. He walked down the aisle like it was his birthright, his blue-black hair swinging. He came to a halt at her side as she silently called his name, unable to speak for shock. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, like he was stealing her from Joseph.

What's going on?!

Totally forgetting where she was, she flushed bright red. But Yuri let her go again right away and turned to Joseph. The prince had the advantage of height...but Yuri's citrine eyes met his arrogant gaze fearlessly. Brigitte remembered what Yuri had said to her that night at Nival's vacation home.

He said he'd protect me.

True to his word, he had come running. He was sheltering her behind him this very moment.

"...Yuri Aurealis," Joseph growled.

His easy smile of a moment earlier was gone, and to Brigitte, at least, he appeared genuinely upset.

It was the same last time, come to think of it...

When Joseph warned Yuri to start treating Lisa better, he'd raised his voice. "Have you no shame? Show some respect."

"I could say the same to you," Yuri retorted.

Joseph scowled.

Yuri was obviously echoing Joseph's words from the previous morning, and he wasn't backing down.

"With all due respect, Your Highness..."

"What?" Joseph interrupted rudely.

Yuri glared at him. "Your behavior toward your *former* fiancée is more than a little unpleasant."

"...!"

A flash of something murderous flickered in Joseph's eyes at Yuri's unambiguous words.

Brigitte, who was watching from close range, began to shake. Then, as if returning to his senses, Joseph turned his mouth up in a smile and asked her in an artificially calm tone, "That's what he says...but what do *you* think, Brigitte?"

Everyone was watching her now. She had always hated being stared at. Normally, that alone might have been enough to tie her tongue.

But now...

Yuri was by her side.

Nival and Kira were close by, watching worriedly.

She could feel the warmth of Peep burrowed in her hair.

"...Well, since you asked," she said, resting her hand on her cheek and sighing sadly. "It's difficult to say this, but I'd rather you didn't follow me around anymore."

"...What did you say?"

Brigitte raised her head and grinned.

"I like someone else now."

All time seemed to stop at that moment—but of course, it hadn't. She coughed, then turned to Yuri, who was frozen like the rest of the students, and said, "Excuse me, but I must be going. Sir Yuri, shall we?"

"Um, of course..."

She walked out of the classroom with the dazed Yuri. There were some spectators in the hall, but she ignored them and strode on. The smile was still plastered to her face. But in truth, she wanted to sink to the ground then and there.

Damn, I said it out loud...!

She hadn't meant to tell him her feelings in front of a crowd. She'd meant to keep them tucked away at the bottom of her heart.

I think I might cry...

After all, she knew Yuri didn't care for her in the same way. He must be completely fed up with her for being so conceited. But she was too afraid to ask, so she was trying to avoid talking to him. But he never was one to give her any slack, and he refused to leave her heart to its lonesome struggle.

"...Brigitte."

Without stopping, she looked timidly over at him. His expression was terrifying. She felt her heart shrinking. She couldn't stop shaking as he turned to her and asked, in a strained voice, "......Is the person you like Nival?"

She stumbled and almost fell.

Why—why in the world does he think that?!

She had said she liked someone, and after that she had asked him to leave the classroom with her. That should have been enough for every person in the room to realize who she was talking about. She hadn't seen Joseph's face, but she was fairly sure he knew what she meant. Nevertheless, the object of her affection himself had his brows knit in pain.

"N-no...it's not Nival...," she said, managing to shake her head.

"Then...is it that young pâtissier at your house?" he asked solemnly.

Noooooo!!

She wanted to scream at him. There was only one person other than Nival and Carson whom she was close to, who was the same age as she was, and who was the opposite sex. So why was that one person so confused? He was brilliant and contracted with incredible spirits and more dashing than anyone—so why couldn't he figure out the answer to this simple problem?

B-but...

That was precisely why she couldn't say it. That would mean confessing her feelings to him. She'd been able to say it earlier, thanks to the heat of the moment, but they were alone now, and she didn't have the nerve left to say it

again.

Yuri, however, ignored her plight completely and renewed his interrogation with redoubled intensity.

"Is it someone I know?"

"Yes, I mean..."

"Aha. I didn't think it was possible, but do you mean to say it's Clifford—?"

"I d-d-don't know!!"

Just stop!!

It was like that day by the lake all over again. Finally unable to take any more, she took off running.



What in the world is going on...?

Clifford was utterly confused. He sensed keenly that something was amiss with his master. Yuri Aurealis was nicknamed the Frozen Blade because of his gaze, but Clifford had never understood the meaning of those words so powerfully as he did that day.

Yes—if he had to name the emotion being directed at him, he would call it suspicion. After Yuri had come home from school and gone into his private study, Clifford had noticed Yuri staring at him.

He seemed normal this morning...

He had no idea why Yuri was acting this way. He considered pretending not to notice, in the hopes that his master's mood would improve, but there was no way he could stand another day of this. He could feel his life shortening by the hour.

Taking a deep breath, he glanced over his shoulder. The piercing eyes met his, carrying both that suspicion and a certain watchful sharpness.

"If I may, Sir Yuri..."

"What?"

That's what he wanted to say! Suppressing his urge to sigh, he kept his tone polite, intent on getting his message across.

"If you would like to correct my behavior in some way, please go right ahead."

He wished Yuri would do what he typically did and bluntly say what was on his mind. Although Yuri didn't have the nicest way of putting things, Clifford almost never resented what he said. If his master wasn't satisfied with his work, Clifford preferred to hash out the problem until it was resolved. He was confident that over eight years of service, he and Yuri had developed a relationship that could weather any sort of conflict.

His message must have reached him because Yuri scratched his head absently and sighed.

"...Then let me ask you this, Clifford."

"Yes?"

Clifford stood rod-straight and unmoving. Yuri was at his most intimidating right now, and Clifford knew he was going to ask him something terrible. He pushed away the critical voices echoing in his head.

"What do you think of Brigitte?"

.....What?

His mind went blank. Where did that come from?

"Um...why are you asking me?"

"Because it is exceedingly important."

Clifford had no clue what that meant, but Yuri couldn't have been any more serious. Something must have happened that day between him and Brigitte. They had grown quite close over the summer, visiting each other's house and spending time with friends at a vacation home in the countryside. Everything had appeared to be smooth sailing.

I doubt they fought or anything like that.

If they had, Yuri would have no reason to direct his ire at Clifford. Trying not

to let his face show his thoughts, he mulled over the possibilities.

If Clifford had still been attending Otoleanna Academy, he probably would have known all the details, but unfortunately, he'd graduated the year before.

He wished he could ask Brigitte herself what was going on. For a moment, he thought of Brigitte's orange-haired attendant, Sienna, with whom he had been secretly corresponding. He considered sending her a letter, but he doubted his master would let him out of his sight long enough to do so.

"Clifford?" Yuri said, pressing for an answer.

Clifford was getting more and more confused. He racked his brain for an answer. In a situation like this, his instincts as an attendant told him that rather than a personal opinion, he should supply the answer Yuri wanted to hear.

A boy and girl are friends...and they've just spent the summer months getting closer...

He was in such a panic he felt like he was slightly missing something, but the general picture was definitely accurate. He continued scrambling for an answer.



But the girl is derided as the Red Fairy... Aha!

A bolt of inspiration shot through him. Perhaps the question was much simpler than he thought.

What if he wants outside confirmation that they make a good couple?

Yes, that must be it. It had to be.

Recently, Yuri seemed attracted to Brigitte. He had never shown much interest in other people, but more than once Clifford had seen him run himself ragged for her sake. Yet because she was contracted to a tiny spirit while Yuri was contracted to two first-class spirits, their status differed dramatically. That must be why he wanted an objective outsider's opinion.

That made things easy. Clifford liked Brigitte, and he would enjoy nothing more than playing matchmaker between the two of them. He chose to give a placid smile.

"Well, I think she's a very beautiful young lady."

"...Anything else?"

"When I talked to her, she struck me as surprisingly friendly and charming. She does put on airs at times, but I believe it's her way of hiding her shyness. I find it endearing."

He put on his sunniest smile and praised her to the skies.

"...You're saying you like her?"

"Certainly!"

I endorse your relationship one hundred percent!

The instant Clifford confirmed his feelings, however, Yuri's expression darkened.

Oh no!

Clifford must have misread the situation. The blood drained from his face, but suddenly a light, whispery voice rang out.

"You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Shallows-by-the-Cliff."

"Undine..."

Clifford looked up at the water spirit, who addressed him using the meaning of his name. Glancing at Yuri, he saw his master was staring into space at his desk, chin in hand. This would be his chance to sneak in a conversation with the smiling spirit.

"Sorry, but would you mind telling me what's happened at school?" he whispered.

"Who, me? Why?"

She looked like she'd rather not bother, but when Clifford joined his hands in pleading, she grudgingly descended from midair.

"Oh, fine. Just this once," she said, whispering the story seductively into his ear. It tickled a bit, but he kept a straight face long enough for her to fill him in.

"...Why the pitying look?" Yuri asked.

Clifford gave a crooked smile. "Nothing..."

So that's what's going on!

He'd never have guessed that Yuri mistakenly thought Brigitte had fallen for himself. It was extremely strange that Yuri would think this, but then again, his experience with women was nonexistent. It wouldn't be surprising if Yuri had misread Brigitte's feelings.

...Or maybe it would.

Brigitte must have gotten quite a shock.

Based on what the undine said, Brigitte seemed to have feelings for Yuri. She'd practically confessed to him, only to hear him ask her repeatedly who she liked. She must be feeling awful right now.

"Sir Yuri, I'm saying this to make sure we understand each other. There is nothing between Miss Brigitte and me."

"...You might not think so, but that doesn't mean she doesn't." Yuri groaned.

Clifford sighed. Technically that was true, but...

Does he not realize his own feelings for her?

For a bystander, this was infuriating. He was itching to give Yuri various kinds of advice. But if he wasn't careful, he could inadvertently make things more awkward between them, and he didn't want the pain of witnessing that.

Well, no amount of worrying would help. As he tried to decide what to do, the door to the study suddenly opened to reveal Clyde. Smiling with amusement, he walked to the center of the room.

"Sir Clyde..."

Clifford was exasperated by the way he burst in without knocking. He wanted to chide him for it, but Clyde was his superior. Clyde knew that, which made Clifford even angrier.

"Do you have some business with Sir Yuri?" he asked him.

After a cursory glance at Clifford, Clyde peered curiously around the orderly study. He and Yuri had always gotten on poorly. As far as Clifford could remember, this was the first time he'd ever visited his younger brother's private rooms.

"Just happened to be passing by and overheard a few things. Now what's this about little Brigitte liking someone?"

These were the walls of a duke's mansion, and the Water Clan's residence, at that. There was no way a person passing in the hall could overhear a conversation in an adjacent room. He had to have been eavesdropping.

"It's none of your business," Yuri snapped coldly.

"I believe it is. After all, the person she likes could be me."

"That never occurred to me."

"Whyever not?"

"Because she's a good judge of character."

Clyde's cheek twitched at this extremely bold assertion. "Damn you... If you hadn't interfered last time, I might have made some progress with her."

"Keep your delusional fantasies to yourself and get out of here."

"Is that how you speak to your older brother?"

"I've never in my life thought of you as my older brother."

The argument dragged on. Only half listening, Clifford let his thoughts wander.

I wonder how Brigitte is doing.

Brigitte and her attendant, Sienna, were friends, so he imagined they were having a similar conversation right now. One thing worried him, though. Sienna was loyal to Brigitte, but she had a habit of toying with her feelings. She probably couldn't resist teasing her charming young mistress simply for the fun of seeing how she would react.

I hope Miss Sienna gives Miss Brigitte the support she needs! Clifford fervently wished.



Erghhhh... What should I do??

At the same time, in the Meidell cottage, Brigitte was tossing and turning on her bed. So much had happened that day, including Joseph's visit to her classroom. But the only image in her head, before it could explode, was Yuri's face.

She was utterly distressed that Yuri had somehow gotten the idea in his head that she liked his attendant, Clifford. She had fled at top speed without contradicting him and was now cursing herself for it.

"Aaah, what do I do ...? What in the world should I do ...?"

"Peep?"

It was unclear whether Peep, who was exploring the wrinkled sheets on Brigitte's bed, was responding to its distressed mistress. The little chick was waggling its tail feathers adorably with each step, but Brigitte was so distracted, it didn't even occur to her to nuzzle the spirit with her cheek.

"Would it be strange to tell him now that I don't like Clifford? Like I was bringing the conversation up again?"

"Peep, peep!" The chick waggled a tiny foot at her.

"Well, which is it, Peep?"

"Peep, pepeep!"

She had no idea what that meant, and her anguish only intensified. The spirit and its mistress tossed and turned some more on the silky sheets.

"Miss, are you still awake?"

Before she could answer, the door swung open. She panicked, since she was wearing only a thin nightgown, but Sienna rushed in and threw a robe over her shoulders before Carson could see her.

"...Carson." Sienna glared at the heathen who had just barged in. "I've told you a hundred times, it's thoughtless of you to visit a young lady's room at this hour of the night."

"Oh, don't be so particular."

The assistant-chef-slash-pâtissier, whom no one could accuse of being particular, waved his hand dismissively.

"Anyway, miss. I wanted to ask you about tomorrow night's dessert— Hey, what's wrong?"

Noticing her unhappy expression, he broke off. Sienna was also staring at her, as if she wanted to ask her a question. Normally, Brigitte would have brushed it off. But right now, she was desperate enough to ask a chick spirit for help, so she gathered her courage to explain.

"Well, you see...Sir Yuri mistakenly thinks I like his servant, and I don't know what to do..."

That was an extremely simplified version of the situation, but Sienna and Carson seemed to understand.

"That reminds me, Blue-Hair said something related to me once."

Blue-Hair?

The nickname was a bit rude for a duke's son. Brigitte considered telling him as much, but he would probably just say, Yeah? Anyway, about Blue-Hair... She

decided to pretend she hadn't heard him. Sienna must have decided the same because her mouth remained pulled tight in a straight line.

"What did Sir Yuri say?" Brigitte asked.

"Let's see...I think he said, 'What's your relationship to Brigitte like?"

"|"

She gasped and leaped out of bed, while Peep flew up to her shoulder.

"And what did you say back?"

"Me? Uh, I think I said, 'She's the mistress, and I'm her servant,' or something..."

His voice trailed off.

Brigitte sighed in relief. It was bad enough worrying about the Clifford problem. If Carson himself had told Yuri they weren't romantically involved, there probably weren't any misunderstandings on that front.

"I'm glad to hear that," she said.

"...Oh. You are?"

Huh?

For some reason, Carson pouted and hurried out of the room. Had she said something wrong? She looked to Sienna for help, but her stalwart servant only sighed.

"Miss, pardon my presumptuousness, but may I offer some advice?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Have you considered simply telling Sir Aurealis that you like him?"

Brigitte froze, her mouth half-open. Her mind couldn't wrap itself around this earth-shaking suggestion. The second she did understand, she turned beet red and shouted back in protest.

"But I don't I-I-like him...not like that!"

"Peep?!"

Her volume must have shocked Peep because the chick dived from her

shoulder back onto the bed.

Sienna watched the beautiful arc of its flight before turning back to the blushing Brigitte. Her next words were truly shocking.

"Actually...I'm secretly in love with Sir Aurealis."

...Um... Brigitte froze again. The blood drained from her face.

"Oh!" She began to sway from the shock.

"Miss Brigitte!"

Sienna thrust out her arms to prop her up, but Brigitte was limp as a doll and could do no more than stare at the ceiling. Sienna somehow managed to pull her over to the bed. Lying on the soft sheets like an invalid, her eyes open, Brigitte murmured, "N-now I see..."

""

"Y-you have my support, Sienna. But...I just... I never even noticed that you liked Sir Yuri, and..."

The world was turning black as she spoke.

Sienna, now genuinely panicked, held Brigitte's shoulders and shook her. "Miss, stay with me! I was joking!"

"...Joking?"

She sounded quite decisive.

...That was a joke?

Brigitte was so relieved, she let out all the breath she had been holding in. Sienna took this as an opportunity for a bull's-eye blow.

"I was joking, but look how you reacted!"

Oof.

She was right.

"It's because you have feelings for him, isn't it?"

And again!

She glanced around as a choking feeling rose in her throat.

"...Yes."

She hid her face under the covers and nodded.

"Then don't you think you ought to tell him?"

No way—that's impossible!

But it would be even worse if he went on thinking she liked someone else. She didn't know what to do with all the emotions swimming around inside her.

"I—I think I'll start by telling him tomorrow that I don't have any feelings for Clifford."

"...Yes, that's good."

"If I do that, he'll stop having these strange ideas, won't he?"

"...Yes. I'm sure it's been weighing on him, so you really ought to do that."

Sienna gazed at her warmly, and Brigitte promised herself she would do it.

$$\Diamond\Diamond\Diamond$$

The next day, Brigitte arrived at school in high spirits. But Yuri was in a different class, so she normally didn't see him until after school. She passed the day in anxious anticipation.

Perhaps, because she'd confessed that she liked someone in front of the whole class the day before, her classmates seemed to be observing her from a distance. Most of them, however, were acting almost envious. It seemed that rather than being annoyed with this bold confession by a nobleman's daughter, they admired her for it.

"Sniff... Miss Brigitte..."

"Nival, please stop crying. You never had a chance to begin with."

For some reason, Nival kept breaking down in tears. Each time, Kira tried to cheer him up...but Brigitte didn't have the mental fortitude that day to get involved.

I bet he's in the library today!

After school, she initially headed for the gazebo, but stopped on a hunch. Turning on her heels, she marched toward the library. Her hunches were rarely wrong.

"Sir Yuri!"

As usual, he was in the reading area...but instead of reading, he was staring glumly up at the skylight. At the sound of her voice, he slowly lowered his head.

"Sorry," he said listlessly.

Huh?

"I don't have the energy to talk to you today."

Huh?!

She stared at him in shock. Cool, composed, haughty Yuri Aurealis would never say such a thing! She turned pale and hurried over to him.

Banging the long table in agitation, she asked, "What's wrong, Sir Yuri? You didn't eat a mushroom growing by the side of the road, did you?!"

"Of course I didn't."

"If it wasn't a mushroom, then what in the world...?"

"I didn't pick up anything off the road." His voice was somehow listless. His expression was gloomy, too, and he looked unwell.

I wonder if he's got a cold or something...

He must be ill.

Poor thing!

"You should go to the infirmary. I'll walk over with you!"

"I'm fine... Who's the favorite?"

"What?"

"That pâtissier or Clifford? Which is it?"

What is he talking about?

She stiffened. He must have eaten something strange after all. But after thinking for a few seconds, she realized what he meant. If he was talking about Carson and Clifford, this had to be an extension of their conversation the day before.

"Carson told you himself, didn't he? He and I are servant and mistress, nothing more."

In truth, he was more like family—much closer and dearer to her than her real family. But if she mentioned that, things would get even more complicated, so she kept to what Carson himself had said.

"He never said—," Yuri started to say, then broke off.

"What were you going to say?"

"...Nothing..."

His oddly evasive answer irritated her. He wasn't acting like himself at all.

He's always sarcastic and unpleasant and rude, calling me stupid over nothing, and...

And always bursting with confidence, the coolest guy around. That was why she had fallen for him without meaning to.

This other personality didn't suit him.

"And as for Sir Clifford..."

He gazed glumly at her. She reached for her fan, then realized this was no time for evasiveness and sat down across from him at the table instead.

"I think he's a wonderful person...and that's all."

"...That's all?"

"Yes, and—"

Breaking into a sweat from sheer embarrassment, she felt her face flushing redder by the second. Her heart was pounding, and her throat was parched. But she was determined not to flee like she had the day before. She took a deep breath.

"And the person I like is—someone else!"

Her proclamation resounded through the library. *Someone else, someone else, someone else...* Her shrill voice echoed back to her. As she snapped back to reality, she wanted to pull her hair in frustration.

Someone else? I could have put that better!

But now that she'd said it, she couldn't take it back. She resisted the urge to curl into a ball on the ground by sprawling confidently in her chair.

"...Someone else, eh?" Yuri muttered lethargically. "Well, that's good."

Good?

She turned toward him, puzzled. His expression caught her off guard. He was smiling. Why did he look so profoundly relieved?

Could he maybe...?

...No.

No, no, no.

She tugged her cheeks, telling herself to stop being so conceited. That was the only way she could be sure all the things she shouldn't say wouldn't come leaping out of her mouth.

I'm just imagining it. He doesn't care about me one little bit!

How annoying it would be if his academic rival, Brigitte, fell in love with his right-hand man. Of course he was relieved to find out that wasn't the case.

Oh! I almost forgot about our competition!

Remembering her other reason for coming to see him, she raised one finger in the air. Of course, this was in part a strategy to forcefully change the subject because she didn't know what else to say.

"We haven't had much chance to compete lately, what with the summer holiday."

"...You want a third go at it?"

He rubbed his chin pensively. His mood seemed instantly improved. He hated to lose every bit as much as she did, and the competitive fire was already glimmering in his eyes. "I do. Isn't this weekend the school inspection by the Central Shrine?"

The shrine was part of a spirit-worshipping religion. All five-year-old children went to the shrine closest to them, a sacred place, to contract with a spirit. And every year, priests were dispatched from the Central Shrine to inspect Otoleanna Academy of Magic. Several students judged to have developed a strong relationship with their spirits would traditionally be invited to a banquet at the shrine, which the archbishop himself also attended. Brigitte was proposing a simple competition: Whoever got invited to the banquet won.

"I'll have a significant advantage, you know," Yuri said.

"Who cares? That just makes me want to win even more."

Flipping her long hair over her shoulder, she smirked confidently.

The previous year, Yuri had been invited along with Joseph to attend the banquet. Brigitte knew that, of course, but this year's representatives hadn't yet been chosen.

"Also, are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You still don't know what kind of spirit Peep is."

He's worried for me...

Her heart fluttered at his words, but she shook her head confidently.

"I'll be fine! It's a perfect chance for me to learn more about Peep!"

"Peep!" the chick answered energetically from between locks of her hair. She grinned as it poked its face out.

The priest hadn't so much as glanced at her during last year's inspection. But this year would be different. With Peep, she felt that she could achieve something.

So far, my score is one loss and one tie...

This time she'd win!

"We're on, Sir Yuri! Be ready, because I'm sure to win this ti—!"

She was shouting passionately when the librarian in glasses suddenly appeared.

"Um, excuse me, but can you please keep your voice down in the library...?" she said nervously.

Brigitte found herself apologizing profusely once again.



The Spirit Awakens

The day of the school inspection arrived before Brigitte knew it. Now that she was competing with Yuri, she woke up raring to go.

But the truth is, I don't have to do anything special.

Students were called into a separate room one by one to summon their spirits in front of the priests. After that, the priests and spiritologist interviewed the students and sometimes their spirits for up to ten minutes. On a later date, the names of the students invited to the shrine were announced at school. It was all extremely simple.

Because the inspection was part of the academic program at all schools of magic, it was relatively straightforward and relaxed, compared to the magic-stone hunt. But for Brigitte last year, it had been hellish. Back then, she had still believed she was contracted with a tiny spirit, and she didn't yet know how to summon it. Engaging in a few minutes of leaden conversation with the uncomfortable priest and spiritologist made her stomach ache.

But this year, I'll be with Peep!

She squeezed her fists. As if in response, the chick spirit peeped cheerfully.

As there were nearly a hundred students in each grade, the interviews lasted four days. On the first two, all the first-year students had finished their interviews. Today, the third day, second-year Class 1—Yuri's class—and Class 2—her class—would have their turns.

That reminds me, Prince Joseph hasn't been around to see me since that day.

She thought about it as she flipped through a library book while she waited

for her turn. It had to be because she'd turned him down in front of everyone. Ever since, he'd stopped coming to the cottage or talking to her at school.

Maybe he'd finally lost the urge to interfere in her life. That was a reassuring thought but also a little sad. When she was young, she'd viewed Joseph as the only person on her side. She had depended on him and looked up to him. Now she didn't understand him at all.

Maybe I never really understood him...

"Miss Brigitte, I'm going to see Miss Lisa again today," Kira whispered, interrupting Brigitte's train of thought.

Kira had already finished her interview. Evidently, she planned to go back to the dorms and visit Lisa, who was still holed up in her room.

Brigitte thought for a moment before standing. "Then I'll go with you."

"Um, but..."

"After all, I'm a part of all this."

Students were encouraged to study while they waited, but lots of people passed the time chatting or left the classroom until their turn. Brigitte was toward the end of the list and had plenty of time before she was called. Leaving the class would probably be fine.

Kira looked hesitant but finally nodded and said, "All right." She had been visiting Lisa since before the summer. Maybe she felt at loose ends, since Lisa refused to respond to anything she said.

To be safe, the two of them told Nival, the class president, they were leaving.

"Nival, we're going to the dorm for a little while," Kira said.

"Should I come?" he asked, jumping up, but Brigitte stopped him.

"Wait, isn't it almost your turn to be interviewed?"

"You're much more important, Miss Brigitte— I mean, what you're doing is much more important," he answered.

"What are you talking about? You're the class president! You need to set an example for all of us," she said, exasperated.

"Oh, I suppose you're right...," he mumbled, sitting back down dejectedly. For some reason, Kira and their other classmates seemed to pity him.

"Stop looking at me like that...!" he moaned.

"Let's go, Miss Brigitte," Kira said.

"Okay."

Leaving the anguished Nival behind, the two of them left the classroom. But as they walked down the hall, someone called out.

"Meidell, would you lend me a hand?"

Brigitte stopped and turned around. Mr. Inad, the young medicinal herbology teacher, was standing in the hallway. He was the same teacher who had flown into a rage when Brigitte answered her summer written test in blood, changing her perfect score to a zero and telling all the other classes about it. Brigitte had apologized at the time, but their relationship remained strained.

Aware of this situation, Kira timidly stepped forward.

"I can help you, Mr. Inad. I've already completed my interview."

"That's all right. Meidell's help will be adequate."

Kira cocked her head, and Brigitte frowned, but they couldn't very well stand there arguing with him.

"All right," she said to the teacher, before turning to Kira. "Kira, can you go on ahead to the dorms?"

Kira nodded, and Brigitte followed Mr. Inad down the hall.

"What would you like help with, Mr. Inad?" she asked.

"You'll see when you get there," he said firmly.

They continued silently down the hall. After going downstairs to the first floor, they turned down several more hallways and finally ended up in the storage area of an unfamiliar meeting room.

I thought he wanted help with his class. What could he need down here...?

And they had interviews that day. Couldn't he get ready for class after the

weekend?

"Um, Mr. Inad?"

"We're almost there," he said, without stopping. Finally, he pointed to a door. "Here we are."

Taking out an old key, he opened the door. Beyond it was a small room crammed with scrolls and boxes she assumed were full of class supplies. He gestured to go inside, and she did. It was dusty and damp in the room; nobody was cleaning down here.

"So what should I—?" she was saying, when the door slammed behind her.

She spun around, then froze. She could hear the key being turned hurriedly in the door.

"...Don't hate me for this," Mr. Inad's muffled voice said from the other side.

I already hate you...!

She almost said it out loud but stopped herself. She couldn't talk back to him the way she did to Yuri. That would only make the situation worse. She covered her mouth and waited silently.

Mr. Inad was evidently pleased with her response, because she heard his footsteps fading away.

When she couldn't hear them anymore, she took her hand off her mouth. First, she tried the doorknob, but as expected, it was locked and would not open.

Next, she looked around the room. There was a small window high on one wall, and while it did let in a dim light, it was too high for her to reach, even if she stood on a shelf.

Is there any other way out of here...?

She inspected the room again as she considered the situation. She could only think of one reason why Mr. Inad would do something like this to her.

He's harassing me.

She knew how outraged he'd been by her behavior during the test, and how

he'd spread the word around—but that was two months ago. Why would he do something like this now? She sighed.

"Hello there, Brigitte," a voice said.

Someone stepped casually from the shadows. Thanks to the light, the figure was silhouetted—but there was no mistaking that familiar voice.

Brigitte gasped. "Prince Joseph..."

"Thank you for coming. I've been waiting for you."

She guessed the gist of the situation from those words. Mr. Inad was in league with Joseph, although his task probably ended with bringing her here.

Why...?

She knew this was no time to sit around speculating. She stepped backward. "I'm very sorry, but I have something I need to do."

"Brigitte."

He ignored her and closed the distance again. She took another step—but there was nowhere to go in the small locked room. Her back against the wall, she gulped.

"If you get any closer—"

"You'll do what? You can't use magic, can you?"

She clenched her teeth. Strictly speaking, she *could* use magic. But even when she'd tried to use the most basic magic, she'd produced a terrifically powerful ball of fire that she couldn't control, even with Yuri's help. She could not knowingly create an explosion in this small room. If her luck was poor, it would kill them both instantly. As Brigitte struggled to find another option, Joseph smiled kindly.

"Say you'll come back to me, Brigitte."

"No."

The perfect smile twitched. "...What?"

"I don't want to go back to you, Prince Joseph."

I thought I told him that the other day...

She glared at him, trying to communicate that thought.

His golden eyes slowly narrowed. "...Is that so? I see."

Huh?

He took her rejection surprisingly well. As she wondered what was going on, he lowered his voice to a sultry whisper. "Are you pouting because I never kissed you when we were engaged?"

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"...What?"
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Taking advantage of her moment of incomprehension, he stepped forward and grabbed her jaw. While she was frozen in shock, his handsome face approached hers. She screamed and tried to push his chest away.

But he was so much bigger than she was that he didn't even flinch.

She tried to escape, but he grabbed her left hand roughly and didn't let go even when she stumbled. He smiled, evidently amused to be tormenting someone weaker than he was.

"Maybe I should just take you right here."

"…!"

Goose bumps covered her body. She could not believe that a member of the royal family would say such a thing in a dusty storage closet.

"Please stop joking around!"

"How resolute of you. But you're shaking."

And that shaking only worsened as he hooked his arms underneath her armpits. She heard him laughing, his face buried in her hair.

Hot breath fell on her neck. Wherever he touched her, the hair on her skin stood on end. She was so terrified that she wanted to scream. But she wouldn't let the welling tears spill from her eyes. Another figure flashed across her mind.

Yuri...

She thought of that noble young man with blue-black hair and yellow eyes. He

was more composed and intellectual than anyone she knew—and more dashing. She drew him in her mind's eye.

It was strange.

Just thinking of him lit a flame in her trembling heart.

Prince Joseph isn't the same kind person I used to know...

She refused to give in to anyone who would resort to such a spineless scheme. She didn't want him to think she was surrendering.

"Stop! Let me go!" she shouted.

"... Noisy girl. Shall I have my spirit shred your clothes?" he hissed.

He was contracted with two spirits, a fire spirit and a wind spirit. Neither of them was particularly aggressive, but they were agile. With wild spirits, there was room to negotiate. But contracted spirits prioritized their masters and were impossible to convince.

"Peep!!"

Peep...!

The little chick jumped out of her hair, which Joseph was still pressing down. Its beady eyes flashing, it flew at his face and attacked with beak and claws.

"Peep! Peep!!"

"What the hell?!" Joseph swatted at the tiny attacker.

Slap!

With an audible noise, Peep was batted away, and its tiny form slammed to the floor.

"Peep!" Brigitte shouted.

In a frenzy, she managed to break free of Joseph's grasp and crawl to where the spirit lay. She scooped the little bird in her hands—but Peep lay limp, only a faint breath escaping its parted beak.

"Peep..."

This was too much. Hot tears poured down her cheeks, while a wave of heat

and pain crashed across her skull. She couldn't think.

"Why, why?"

She could hear Joseph brushing the dust from his clothes. "I'm only asking one thing of you, Brigitte," he said flatly, as if his passion had cooled.

She turned around in a daze. His even features were covered in scratches.

He pulled something from his breast pocket.

"Is that ...?"

"Of course you would know."

A branch of the seven-cauldrons tree...

The seven-cauldrons tree was a deciduous tree with red berries. Fairies were said to detest it. In villages where the old ways persisted, young girls often carried branches of the tree to protect themselves.

But what Joseph held was no ordinary branch. It was the color of fresh blood, perhaps from being smeared with crushed berries, and she could see the powerful magic it held. She had never seen one in real life before, but she had read of them.

"A magic breaker..."

It was the only item that could forcibly sever the contract between a human and their spirit. They were kept at shrines to save people who had attracted the unwanted favor of the Unseelie Court—the fairies who did harm to humans. When the pointed tip of the branch touched a person's body, fairies would keep their distance and eventually stop coming altogether.

However, magic breakers had hardly ever been used in the history of the kingdom. Even the fae of the Unseelie granted people power, and once the bond was broken, a child might never again contract with another spirit.

But how had Joseph gotten his hands on such a special item from the shrine?

He must have read the question on her face. "I got this from a priest who has a liking for me. Shall I prick your arm with this branch, Brigitte?"

"That spirit is getting in my way."

Crouching and holding Peep to her breast, she inched backward. She did not take her eyes off Joseph. The moment her vigilance weakened, he would make good on his terrifying words.

But I don't understand why...

Joseph knew about Peep. Maybe he had known even before the column of light appeared—maybe long before Brigitte herself knew.

"...Your Highness." The words spilled from her mouth.

"What?"

"Why did you get engaged to me?"

She had been wondering that for a long time. It probably wasn't the right time to ask. Still, she suspected that if she didn't ask now, she would never know the real reason.

For a second, his eyes widened in surprise.

"...It's obvious, isn't it?" he said, smiling. The smile was the kindest she had ever seen on his face. "Because you're the stupidest, most miserable person in the world, Red Fairy."

$$\Diamond\Diamond\Diamond$$

When exactly had people started calling him the idiot prince behind his back? He couldn't remember, but it was probably before his earliest memory.

He couldn't do things that were taken for granted in the royal family. Things that everyone else learned in a snap, he still couldn't do after endless repetition.

"But your older brothers learned this so quickly..."

That was a favorite line of his private tutor. She had said it so many times, he felt his ears were going to melt off.

When he went to the shrine at the age of five for the contracting ceremony, he had contracted with weak mid-level spirits, only barely above low-level. His

reputation declined even more.

The king hadn't expected anything from him to start with. Joseph's mother was the Second Queen, but she always complained that the male child she had conceived with so much difficulty was good-for-nothing. For Joseph, though, the worst thing of all was that his two older half brothers, sons of the king by the First Queen, were fine young men.

Joseph was both dull and morally corrupt. His older brothers were always cheerful around him, shining like stars. Each time he saw the smiling, adoring crowds surrounding them, Joseph's heart filled with black bile.

By copying his brothers, Joseph became skilled at covering his faults with a shallow smile of his own, but everyone still ignored him.

That was when he heard the rumors about the Red Fairy. Her name was Brigitte Meidell, and she was the same age as he was. She came from the famed Fire Clan, yet she was contracted with a no-name. To top it all off, her father had burned her hand and banished her from the house to live alone in a separate cottage.

Joseph was intrigued. One day, he happened to meet her at a tea party held by another noble family. He had smiled at her and said, "Miss Brigitte, tell me what you like."

She had been staring glumly at the floor, and she seemed surprised that he was talking to her. Although it was a hot day, she wore thick gloves on both hands. They would be concealing hideous scars—how pitiful.

The conversation didn't go particularly well, but they talked—and that day, he made up his mind.

I'll make this girl my fiancée.

He felt no sympathy for her, nor was he attracted to her. He had been treated the way he had because he was the dullest of the three princes. But what if?

What if an even greater fool were by my side?

That was his initial thought, and the strategy turned out to garner him unexpected praise.

I heard Joseph reached out to that useless Brigitte.

He must be very kind. His smile is simply stunning.

How fortunate the Red Fairy is to have the pity of a prince.

Nobles who had always ignored him or mocked him were suddenly applauding him. They said he had an excellent character, that he was more virtuous than his brothers. The prince with the kind smile, they called him—each time he heard something like that, his mood soared.

But best of all was his first meeting with his future father-in-law, the Earl of Meidell. Because Joseph was making a personal visit to the Meidell residence, Brigitte was not present. She was forbidden from entering the main house. This was quite unusual, but the earl did not seem embarrassed by it.

"Truly, you have saved us, Your Highness. Thank you for taking our good-fornothing girl as your fiancée."

The earl had bowed his head stoically.

These were not words a man typically used to describe his own daughter, but Joseph smiled generously and nodded. What more could he expect from a man who had burned his daughter's hand in the hearth? His wife was nowhere to be seen, but Joseph guessed she must be a similar creature. He didn't care either way.

"...Actually, we had another request for her hand," the earl admitted, sounding relieved.

"What's that you say?"

"The offer was withdrawn, of course. It was the son of a certain family—"

Needless to say, Joseph shivered with delight at this news. He knew all about the boy his own age who was far more gifted than his own older brothers. Of course he did—people compared them all the time. The lucky bastard had happened to have contracted with two top-level spirits. Even he had forsaken Brigitte, but Joseph was rescuing her.

Yessss...what a glorious feeling to beat that rat!

That day he stayed in his room, buried his face in his pillow, and laughed

silently. If he hadn't, the doorman would have come to check on him. Joseph was no longer the idiot prince. He wasn't about to get himself a reputation as an eccentric.

His relationship with his new fiancée proceeded better than he could have imagined. As soon as they were engaged, he realized how timid she was. He'd heard that many members of the Fire Clan had fiery tempers, but Brigitte always hid the scars on her left hand and constantly glanced around, anxious and scared of everything.

When they went out in public, she hid stiffly behind Joseph, clinging to his sleeves. It was intoxicating. Joseph was the only person in the world this miserable girl could depend on. The thought of it filled his chest with pleasure and elation. He would reach back and squeeze her little hand, smiling much more brightly than usual.

But as their relationship continued, he learned something unexpected. She was far more intelligent than the rumors said. She could reel off information from books she'd read and recite poems with ease. She was awful at embroidery and chitchat, but when it came to her studies, she was downright gifted.

When Joseph learned this, he panicked.

He was praised for his kindness because he kept the miserable, useless Brigitte by his side. He didn't need a fiancée who was more gifted than he was. What purpose would that serve? With their enrollment in Otoleanna Academy of Magic approaching, he had to prevent anyone else from discovering her talents. That was when he hit on an idea.

"My favorite girls are the stupid ones."

He told her to wear pink dresses, act conceited, and make mistakes on her tests. He demanded many other things, too. Each time, she nodded solemnly and did her best to become the kind of girl he liked. Even in the face of his absurd demands, her attitude toward him did not change. At least, he didn't think it did. He pretended not to notice that her expression was regressing to the hopelessness of when they met.

After all, she was always gazing up at him and murmuring, "Sir Joseph, you're

so kind."

Her eyes were so pure and admiring.

When they'd first met, he found it bothersome. But after she said it so many times, he realized that she meant it. She knew nothing of the laughingstock Third Prince. She believed in him completely as the person who had rescued her from seemingly inescapable darkness. Maybe that was why he felt a certain peace when he talked to innocent Brigitte.

Those days ended abruptly, just before they began at Otoleanna Academy.

On that day, Joseph visited the shrine for the first time in a long while. He had been there often, ever since he was a small child. Staying in the palace was torture; it was where he was constantly compared to his brothers. But at the shrine, everyone treated him with the warmest hospitality. He may have been young, but he was still a royal.

On a whim, he asked a priest he was especially close with to let him take a magic crystal home with him. It was a very special object used at contracting ceremonies to see the contracted spirit of the person standing before the crystal. He planned to use it to get a look at the no-name hanging around Brigitte. What a laugh it would be to see a spirit so much more worthless than his own.

But his plan went awry in the worst way.

He snuck into her room while she was sleeping and held the crystal before her —but the spirit he saw in no way resembled a no-name.

Faced with the incredible truth, he bit his lip. An icy, bloodred rage flooded his mind. He had been starting to believe she was the only one for him.

I never imagined you would betray me, too, Brigitte.

Brigitte Meidell was supposed to be the most abject and foolish girl in the world. Now, years after the fact, he was learning that even she had deceived him. He made up his mind on the spot.

I'm done.

He didn't need her anymore.

I'll leave her and find another stupid girl.

After they started at the academy, Joseph's treatment of Brigitte turned icy. Of course, when other people were around, he still played the amiable knight in shining armor, protecting his fiancée. Brigitte seemed confused but never complained. After all, she considered him her savior.

Joseph soon found a girl to take her place. Lisa Selmin, the daughter of a country baron without a soul to support her. She had a reasonably pretty face, but she was uncultured and stupid—just what Joseph wanted. His subjects would adore a prince who kindly doted on a slow-witted girl who was practically a commoner.

"Brigitte Meidell, I am officially breaking off our engagement!"

A year after starting at the academy, when the time was ripe, he left her. It was all he could do to hold in the laughter when he saw the disbelief spread over her face.

Of course she can't believe it.

She must have been shocked to be accused of harassing a girl she'd never even talked to. It was a lie, of course. Joseph had told Lisa he needed a justification for ending his engagement, and she'd invented the story.

But he'd underestimated Lisa's foolishness. Even though they weren't yet engaged, she cooed his name in a sugary voice and tried to hold his arm in public. She seemed uninterested in chastity, and he even heard her boasting loudly about her encounters with him.

He was sick of it. Brigitte had pretended to be conceited on his orders, but he'd never once seen her act so unladylike.

A trained dog would be smarter than this girl.

Brigitte had been called a changeling and exiled from her own home, but she was the daughter of a distinguished family. She had been taught to be polite and graceful. Lisa was nothing compared to her. But Lisa had no self-awareness, and eventually, she took to looking at him with puppy dog eyes and asking when they would be engaged. By that point, of course, his interest in her had evaporated, so he hid his distaste behind a smile.

In the middle of all this nonsense, he'd realized something.

It was really very strange.

Why doesn't Brigitte seem to care?

Abandoned by her darling Joseph, she should have been living the life of a miserable parasite at school. Yet every time he saw her, her eyes were resolutely optimistic. Her scores on the written tests awed the teachers. Even the students in his class were talking about how she raised her hand in practically every class and gave correct answers.

He knew better than anyone that supposedly stupid Brigitte was actually a brilliant student. That was why he encouraged Lisa to interfere, but Brigitte overcame it all.

When someone stole her pen, she took her test in blood and got every answer right. Before Joseph knew it, his future aide Nival was acting like Brigitte's personal attendant.

During the magic-stone hunt, Joseph gave Lisa a torch and had her throw it at Brigitte. He knew how much Brigitte feared fire. He couldn't wait to see her disgrace herself—but then Lisa was the one who was suspended.

Someone else was always by Brigitte's side now. Yuri Aurealis, whom she'd hardly even known before. Every time Joseph saw him, dark emotions roiled in his chest.

I thought she'd come crawling back in tears.

He could just see her tearstained face, her disheveled red hair. She should have begged him to take pity on her again.

He'd been the only one who stood by her. When the world was tormenting her, he was her only friend, her saint, her protector. But now her green eyes were for someone else. She followed another boy around now.

She looked so happy when she smiled. He'd never seen her so lighthearted.

...I don't like it.

Did the Red Fairy imagine she was spreading her wings now that she was free of Joseph? Every time he thought about it, his fury swelled. That was why he finally said: "Let's get engaged again. Will you make a fresh start with me, Brigitte?"

If he dangled that offer in front of her, she'd snap it up in a heartbeat.

But he was wrong again.

In the end, she turned him down unambiguously, saying she liked someone else. As he watched her walk out of the classroom with Yuri, it was clear enough who she meant.

Anger stained the world red. He shook so hard, his throat seized up, and drops of blood bloomed where his nails dug into his palms.

I thought I beat that rat.

Was he going to give up? Was he going to slink back to the days when people jeered at him and called him a dunce?

No...never!

He concocted a desperate plan.

He saw the column of light that rose from the Meidell residence during the summer, meaning Brigitte's spirit had finally awoken from its long slumber. He went to the shrine and tried to buy himself some time, but he didn't have much left. He had to do something before they realized what spirit she was contracted with.

I have to turn her back into a stupid doll.

Lisa had locked herself in her dorm and wouldn't come out even when he called her. She'd been a worthless pawn, but now that she was gone, Joseph was forced to do his own dirty work.

When he got his hands on a magic breaker with the power to sever the relationship between a person and their spirit, he gloated. He was sure Yuri must have found out about Brigitte's spirit by now. That was why he'd shown up again so shamelessly in her life. What other reason could he have?

If that was so, then if she lost her spirit, he would lose interest. The same went for everyone else. They were all making a fuss over her now, but he was certain they would drift away once they realized she had nothing to offer.

When that happened, she would be wounded. She would lose hope. And she would finally realize...

When you're all alone again, your only choice will be to come back to me, the kind prince.

What was his real aim?

What shape had his feelings for Brigitte taken?

Those feelings had been twisted from the start. Even Joseph didn't understand them anymore.

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"Well, Brigitte, what have you decided?"

He smiled faintly, as if to say there was nothing more to explain, and reached out his hand toward her. Not his right hand holding the magic breaker—his empty left hand.

"If you say yes now, I'll forgive you for resisting. Although you'll unfortunately have to part with that spirit of yours... In exchange, I will bestow on you the honor of becoming engaged to me again. An excellent offer, wouldn't you say?"

"..."

Still holding Peep in both hands, Brigitte stared at his outstretched hand.

How long ago that was...

She used to dream of facing Joseph like this, below a sparkling chandelier, amid a crowd of beautifully dressed people. In her dream, the handsome prince with the golden hair took her hand, and they smiled at each other. The crowd applauded warmly.

"...I've never danced with you, either, Prince Joseph," she muttered.

Joseph's eyebrows rose, and then he smiled. "You're right. Shall we dance?"

Brigitte took a deep breath. Then she screamed as loud as she could, hoping her voice would thunder through the whole school.

"Neverrrrrrrrrrrr!!!"

Startled, Joseph reached out a hand to hold her in place. She dodged and screamed again as she backed away.

"I'm not your doll, and neither is Lisa! Please stop speaking as if you're the only one who matters!"

"...I'm doing you the favor of choosing you, and you treat me like this...!"

"That's not love!"

"<u>|</u>"

She knew now what real love was. It was when her heart beat in her ears and she couldn't make it stop. It was when the person she loved spun round and round in her mind until she was dizzy. And still, all she could think of before she fell asleep, and even in her dreams, was that she wanted to see him one more time—and she wanted him to smile at her just one more time. She prayed for it.

It was a warm feeling, a feeling that meant more to her than anything else.

That's what it is to love someone.

What Joseph had was something else. Obsession. Desire to have her all to himself. Beneath his out-of-control emotions lay something so dark and stagnant she couldn't even imagine it.

"How dare you judge me! Shut up!" He flew at her with the magic breaker.

"Ow!"

She tried to escape, but the branch tangled in the ends of her long hair. He grinned slyly, pleased to have finally captured his prey. But instantly, she grabbed her hair with one hand and pulled hard. She could hear it snapping behind her head. He winced as she unhesitatingly tore what some would call a woman's weapon, while she took advantage of the moment to dart farther from him.

Sienna will kill me for this...!

She could imagine the look on her attendant's face when she saw the state of the hair she cared for so attentively every day. Her eyes tearing for more reasons than one, Brigitte glared at Joseph. He seemed to have lost his drive.

"...I'm sick of this," he muttered.

She didn't have time to ask what he was sick of. A ball of fire was already forming on his palm, perhaps one-tenth the size of the fireball Brigitte had manifested. He hurled it at her without a second thought. No—just to the right of her.

The dry wooden shelf burst into flames, and the flames spread in a heartbeat.

Brigitte watched in a daze, while Joseph laughed carelessly.

"Let's die together in these flames, Brigitte."

...She was reaching her boiling point. Joseph was acting like a hot-tempered child. The moment life didn't go his way, he got angry and started throwing things to vent.

"You think I would die with you?!" she shouted, sticking out her tongue.

He shrugged, still smiling. "I'll blame the fire on Yuri Aurealis. Everyone hates him already. Unlike Lisa, I can find all the witnesses I want."

It was obvious what he was referring to.

"So you were the one behind what happened at the magic-stone hunt..."

"Why deny it now? Yes, I made Lisa do it."

Joseph was contracted with two spirits—a wind spirit and a fire spirit. Either he or his spirit had lit the torch that Lisa was carrying at the magic-stone hunt.

He sat down against the wall.

Brigitte looked away from him at the rising inferno. The flames were terrifying, and each breath hurt the back of her throat. She pressed her handkerchief to her mouth, but it didn't help much.

There was only one small window in the storage room, and it was shut tight. If something didn't happen soon, she and Joseph would probably be swallowed by the flames and die. She moved as far from the flames as she could and spoke to the little spirit in her hands.

"Peep, please, run away from here."

But the only answer was its shallow breath, still ragged from Joseph's blow. Since Peep was a fire spirit, Brigitte suspected it might be able to cope with Joseph's fire, but she had no way of knowing. It made her anxious.

The chick opened its eyes slightly. Its body was hot. Was the faint heat emanating from it coming from the flames around them?

Brigitte removed both her gloves and wrapped them around the spirit's small form. They were the special fire-resistant gloves the cottage servants had given her, so she hoped they would protect Peep.

She stroked its round head softly and smiled. She had finally met her dear spirit—the only one who had chosen her.

"Thank you, Peep, for contracting with a person like me."

"...Peep..."

The chick's beak moved slightly, as if it was trying to tell her something.

Suddenly, she heard a familiar voice. "Brigitte!"

She jerked her head up.

"Are you in there, Brigitte?!"

"Sir Yuri...?!"

His voice was coming from the other side of the locked door. She ran to it and knocked to let him know she was there.

"Miss Brigitte!"

"Miss Brigitte!"

She heard Kira's tearful voice and Nival's high-pitched one. Although she was in a dire situation, relief flooded her. Kira must have come looking for her with Yuri and Nival when she didn't return.

I'm glad I screamed so loudly!

"Smoke's coming from the room! Hold on, I'll break the door down!"

Yuri sounded uncharacteristically panicked. But that was enough to soothe her.

Meanwhile, Joseph laughed from his position against the wall, although it quickly descended into coughing. He must have been having a hard time breathing.

"What perfect hero's timing. So perfect it makes me sick," he said.



Flames were crawling over the floor, beginning to encircle them. Brigitte didn't think she could last much longer. It was so hot and bright, and every breath was torture. Still, she took the handkerchief from her mouth and smiled. She could speak now without shame.

"...Yes. He's my hero."

She turned toward the wall, tracing it with her scarred left hand. Not to tell Joseph, but to tell the person she knew was on the other side.

"I love Sir Yuri."

The moment she said it, her arm began to glow. Surprised, she tried to look down, but she couldn't. The light seared the back of her eyelids and made her forget to breathe.

Then she heard it.

A beautiful, dignified sound like the call of some enormous bird.

She had never heard that voice before—still, she knew.

...*Peep...?*

As if to guide Brigitte, who still could not open her eyes, the column of light burst through the ceiling and high, high into the sky.

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A short while earlier, the spiritologist Tonari was walking alone on the school grounds. With his slightly dirty clothes and five-o'clock shadow, he was out of place at the academy of magic. Every student who passed him glanced back curiously. Some of them should have known who he was, but he felt like they were still suspicious of him. He wasn't the type to worry about trivial things, though.

As for why he was wandering around, he was simply trying to clear his head during a break in the interviews. Since the chief priest doing the inspection with him was an inflexible man, all he'd been allowed to do before today was wander around the neighborhood. At least today someone higher up was with

them, and Tonari had easily received permission to participate.

The chief priest's been pricklier than usual lately.

This was the same priest who had overseen Brigitte Meidell's contracting ceremony. He had been questioned by his superiors, the bishops, and was likely still seething. But Tonari wished he would stop taking it out on him.

The interviews with students and their contracted spirits at Otoleanna Academy of Magic were scheduled to take four days. Tonari had only been dispatched to the Central Shrine this year, and this was his first school inspection. As far as he could tell, not many spirits were strongly dissatisfied with their contracted humans. That is, most of the pairs were building decent relationships.

First-year students had been interviewed during the first two days, and today they were interviewing two second-year classes.

The boy from the Fire Clan was there...

He was the only first-year student contracted with a first-class spirit. Tonari's main goal at the inspection was to gather information about Brigitte, who was possibly contracted with the spirit that had produced the column of light, but he had decided not to ask the boy about her.

Apparently, the situation in the Meidell family was complicated. If he poked those bushes, he would be lucky if the only thing that came out were some wild spirits.

Anyway, he'd be meeting Brigitte in person later that day during her interview. He could see her contracted spirit for himself.

I wonder what incredible thing will show up.

Just thinking about it was exciting. Ever since he saw the column of light on that cool, breezy summer night, he had felt restless. Suddenly, he snapped out of his daydreams.

"Damn...where am I?"

He scratched his head. He'd wandered into an unfamiliar building with a clean white nondescript hallway and a stairway. Was this a student dorm? He

guessed no one had stopped him from entering because of the guest pass pinned to his chest.

He remembered belatedly what a bad sense of direction he had. No doubt the chief priest would give him a tongue-lashing if he caught him wandering around a place like this. Just then, he heard people arguing.

"...Lisa, you've got to come out."

"Leave me alone! It's none of your business!"

The girls' voices were coming from the end of the hallway. One sounded sad and the other quarrelsome. Quarrelsome but weak.

Tonari had no interest in the interpersonal problems of students. Pretending he hadn't heard them, he turned to leave.

"But Lisa, Brigitte is a kind, lovely person."

His ears perked up.

...What's this?

He stopped. They were talking about Brigitte, the much-discussed daughter of the Fire Clan. Maybe he would learn something helpful here, of all places. Turning on his heels, he peered down the hallway. A girl with black hair was standing in front of a closed door; he had interviewed her an hour and a half earlier. She was contracted with a brownie, a cleaning fairy. In the time it took him to remember that much, the girls' argument had moved on.

"I told her I hid her pens...and she still said I had pretty eyes."

"...Ha-ha...are you being sarcastic? I told you before that you might as well hide your face. You have no confidence, after all."

"No! I feel like your advice was right at that point in my life."

So the one with black hair is Kira, and the one in her room is Lisa.

He had a hard time remembering names, so he repeated them silently several times. Kira, who didn't notice she was being watched, clasped her hands as she continued. "But I'm telling you, no matter how hard things are for Miss Brigitte, she always stays positive. She's so—so amazing. You'll see if you talk to her,

Lisa."

"It's a bit late for that..."

"We were going to come together to see you today. She had to help a teacher, and that's why she's not here yet."

Lisa was silent for a moment.

"...Help a teacher? Where is she now?"

"Mr. Inad, the medicinal herbology teacher, asked her to help him. I don't know where they went."

"Mr. Inad..."

"Pardon me, but what are you doing here?"

Tonari blinked and glanced in the direction of the voice. A frighteningly handsome boy with blue-black hair was standing next to him. Beside him was a stern-looking boy with his arms crossed.

Tonari reflexively pointed at him. "You're the one who sent your ariel on a rampage!"

"Yes. Nival Weir."

"Right, that's your name. How are you?"

"You asked me that already today...," he replied irritably.

Tonari had forgotten his name since the interview.

The blue-haired boy, noticing he was being ignored, repeated his question.

"Anyway, what are you doing here?"

"Me? Why, listening in on the conversation between those two girls, water boy," he answered nonchalantly.

The blue-haired boy pressed his lips together. Now, what was this one's name?

He remembered that he was the Duke of Aurealis's son and was contracted with two first-class spirits, but unsurprisingly, the name wasn't coming back to him.

Nival strode past him and walked up to Kira.

"Hey, Kira, where's Miss Brigitte? She's not with you? I came looking for her because you were taking so long."

"Oh...Mr. Inad asked her to help him with something."

"Kira!"

They all stared at the door. It did not open, but a weak voice came through it.

"I think...you ought to go look for Brigitte right away."

"Lisa?" Kira said.

"What do you mean?" the blue-haired boy interrupted.

Lisa seemed to be trembling behind the door. "...That day, when Sir Joseph... gave me the burning torch, he said something."

"You mean during the magic-stone hunt?"

"...Yes."

All of them listened in silence. Nervous tension filled the hall. Tonari picked some wax from his ear and listened, too. Interesting place to hear the prince's name.

Never thought they'd start talking about Joseph!

"He said, 'You're just another stupid girl. Go find Brigitte and play best friends with her...' But I think he said it on purpose to make me mad."

"What's that got to do with this?" the blue-haired boy asked, ignoring her tearful voice. She sniffled a few times before answering.

"I heard that Mr. Inad's father...works at the palace. I think maybe Sir Joseph..."

"...Is using Mr. Inad to hurt Brigitte?" the blue-haired boy muttered, his expression grim.

By that point, Tonari had a general grasp of the situation.

I see I've stumbled into a hornet's nest.

He was in too deep to back out now, so he decided to make a suggestion.

"I'll search for them," he said.

Three pairs of eyes turned toward him. The blue-haired boy looked suspicious, but there wasn't time to explain.

"What's this Brigitte girl look like?" he asked, adding, "Tell me anything you can think of."

Kira and Nival raised their hands like they were in some sort of competition.

"She's very beautiful!"

"And elegant, graceful, and merciful!"

They sure are eager to tell me useless things...

Then the boy with blue hair, who was leaning against the door, began reeling off information.

"She has red hair and green eyes. Tall for a girl. She wears white gloves and has an irritating, conceited way of talking. Her feelings show on her face, and she blushes when she's excited. Also, she hates to lose more than anyone you've ever met."

"Sir Aurealis, Miss Brigitte would be angry if she heard you...," Kira said.

"It's all true," the blue-haired boy said, snorting grumpily. But the description was clear. Tonari nodded.

"My spirit is summoning wild spirits to search for Brigitte as we speak. They should find her in a matter of minutes," he said.

Kira and Nival looked surprised. Yuri, however, was unmoved.

"You two help in the search," he told his undine and fenrir, who had burst through the air to his right and left. No sooner had the beautiful spirits manifested than they prepared to depart by air and ground, respectively.

"Yes, master. Wherever could that Red Fairy have gone off to?"

"Let's just get going, undine!"

"Oh my—are you worried about her, fenrir?"

"Now's not the time to talk about who's worried about who!"

Tonari whistled without meaning to. He'd finally remembered Yuri Aurealis's name. The one-and-only child genius contracted with two first-class spirits. But the most striking thing was his ability to concentrate—and the enormity of the vessel he must possess in order to summon two first-class spirits at once.

As Kira and Nival summoned their own contracted spirits, Tonari glanced at them and smiled.

This is getting interesting.

He didn't mean to disrespect these students who were genuinely worried about their classmate, but he was excited. Purely by chance, the situation was developing into something much more intriguing than interviews. Plus, his main objective was to learn about Brigitte. Pulling the other priests into it could be amusing, too.

I wonder how this will turn out.

He never imagined that a few minutes later, he would be witnessing the Legendary Spirit spread its wings.

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From within the blinding light, Brigitte heard wood and plaster splitting apart overhead. The column of light seemed to be shooting upward straight through the roof and walls of the room.

This could be b-bad...!

She envisioned herself being crushed under the collapsing ceiling.

"Brigitte!"

Still unable to open her eyes, she heard his voice.

"Sir Yuri..."

Turning toward the sound, she reached her hand out—her scarred left hand. She was in too much of a panic to think.

Ah!

Before she could withdraw it, he pulled her powerfully toward him and

wrapped his arms around her. She stiffened, her eyes still closed.

But the impact did not come. Very timidly, she opened her eyes.

Two eyes were gazing at her from very close. The beauty of those citrine eyes never failed to astound her.

"You're safe," he said.

Pressed to his chest, she let out the breath she had been holding in. She didn't want him to know that the sudden release of tension almost made her cry.

"A skin of water...," Kira whispered. Just as Yuri was shielding Brigitte, Nival was protecting Kira's head. Brigitte was relieved that neither of them appeared to be hurt.

She followed Kira's gaze and saw a clear membrane stretched over their heads, protecting them.

It must be the second-class Sphere spell...

Yuri's magic was preventing the debris from raining down on them. When he released it, a sky appeared, too blue to be real. The sparkling sunlight left Brigitte half-dazed.

The column of light had vanished—but the traces of its path piercing the sky remained. The clouds had a peculiar, coiled shape, as if a little hole had been punched into the sky.

"Can you stand?"

"Y-yes."

Even in a situation like this, Yuri was exceedingly rational. She took his hand and managed to stand. Dust and pieces of wood were scattered where the storage room had been, and the surroundings were in shambles. She could hear footsteps and excited voices approaching. No wonder—an entire room had been blown away.

Suddenly, Brigitte realized something.

The gloves she had wrapped around Peep were gone—leaving her left hand

completely exposed.

He saw it...!

The hideously scarred back of her left hand was bare. Flustered, she tried to shake Yuri's hand away.

"Sir Yuri, it's dirty—"

"What's dirty?"

But he just squeezed her hand like nothing was wrong, as if to assure her that nothing she said could make him let go. All she could do was puzzle over this unexpected response.

"Ugh, I must have inhaled some dust..."

"Are you all right, Nival? Your nose is running."

When Brigitte looked away awkwardly from Yuri, she saw that Kira and Nival were getting to their feet, apparently recovered from the impact. Joseph was the only one sitting completely still.

And who's he...?

A man wearing slightly dirty clothes was standing next to Nival. His face was covered by a mop of hair, so she couldn't really see it. Not noticing Brigitte's gaze, he was staring up at the sky and muttering something.

"I can't believe this..."

Just then, a bird cawed overhead; it was the same cry she'd heard a few minutes earlier. She looked up to see a large red bird soaring in the sky, clearly enjoying itself. Brigitte wasn't the only one who whispered to herself when she saw it.

"A phoenix..."

It's the Legendary Spirit in The Wind Laughs...

The Wind Laughs recounted stories that the spiritologist Lien Baluanuki claimed to have heard from a sylphide, a wind spirit. Because the entire book was written in the enigmatic language of the spirits, scholars varied widely in their interpretations...but there was a single illustration in the original edition.

It depicted a creature with sharp claws and a long tail trailing on the ground. Its crest appeared to glimmer in a rainbow of ever-changing colors, its beak was pink, and its body was covered with fiery red plumage.

The magnificent creature was called a phoenix. Next to the illustration, written in Lien's distinctive version of the continental lingua franca, were notes explaining that the bird presided over rebirth and belonged to the orders of both fire and light. Famously, these notes about the phoenix were used as a key to translate the rest of the text.

I always thought "fiery plumage" was a metaphor...

As the phoenix soared across the sky, scattering sparks, Brigitte realized that the bird's body was swathed in literal flames. It wheeled and streaked overhead, and left a brilliant trail behind it.

It's gorgeous...

When she looked closely, she noticed the phoenix had something in its beak. Just as she realized this, the bird swooped low across the sky, clearly focused on her.

"Uh-oh, it's coming over here...," Nival said nervously, backing up.

The phoenix alighted gracefully on a half-collapsed bookshelf. Although it was close enough to touch, it was not hot. Its fire must not be the kind that burned.

Ah...

Finally, Brigitte noticed what it held in its beak—a pair of white gloves.

Its beady eyes stared meaningfully at Brigitte, and she called its name.

"Peep."

The phoenix answered with a gurgling cry deep in its throat. It was bobbing its neck up and down, as if to say, *Hurry, take them*. She reached out her empty right hand, but for some reason, Peep cooed grumpily. What could this mean? What was it unhappy about? Brigitte cocked her head. Yuri, still holding her left hand, lifted it in the air.

"I think it wants this one."

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"You do?"
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Brigitte thought this was a ridiculous idea, but Peep's eyes seemed to narrow in a semblance of a smile. Apparently, Yuri was right. She wriggled her left hand.

"Should I keep holding your hand?" she asked.

"What, you don't want to?"

"..."

She was at a loss for words. Yuri was always unfair at times like this. He probably knew that if she really didn't want to hold his hand, she would have withdrawn it already.

She wanted to run away or melt into the floor, but she stayed strong and raised her left hand, still entwined with Yuri's right, toward the phoenix's face.

It felt like they were making a vow.

As that thought crossed her mind, Peep spread one flaming wing wide and enclosed their hands in it.

Sparks swirled around them. Brigitte could hear someone gasp, but neither she nor Yuri pulled their hands back.



Soft feathers brushed the back of her hand, and a wave of sensation washed over her and Yuri. For some reason, her throat was convulsing.

It's so warm, like something I remember from long ago. It makes me want to cry...

She felt so peaceful, she wanted to stay there forever. But Peep let out a long breath and tucked its wing back by its side.

At first, she didn't understand what had happened. She blinked and blinked, but the vision before her eyes did not change.

"...My scars...," she whispered hoarsely.

Even the high priest had not been able to heal the burns her father had inflicted. Now they were gone without a trace. The pale back of her left hand was as smooth as her right. Still, she stared, unable to believe her eyes.

"So this is the skill of the phoenix."

The man with the unruly curls approached curiously, speaking for the first time. He looked back and forth between Brigitte and Peep, nodding. She felt like his sharp gaze was piercing her.

"Brigitte Meidell, is this your—?"

A scream cut off his words.

"Aaaaah!"

Brigitte looked around in surprise. Joseph had gotten to his feet and was standing behind her, screaming in anguish. The magic breaker had broken the skin of his left arm.

"Ngh...guuuuuh!"

He doubled over, pressing the slightly bleeding wound. Brigitte stared, wideeyed. A wind spirit and a fire spirit floated near him. The wind spirit, a fairy, was flapping her transparent wings as she observed Joseph sternly.

Unbelievable... Did she use wind magic to pierce Prince Joseph with the magic breaker?

Magic breakers were created so that humans could reject their spirits if they

so chose. But humans weren't the only ones with the right to choose their partners in magic. Spirits were known to occasionally tire of their contracted human and return to the spirit world. She had heard that in some cases, the spirits never returned, no matter how many times they were called.

But that must not have been good enough for Prince Joseph's spirits...

As long as a person had a contracted spirit, their magic would be replenished for use. That must have been why the wind spirit pierced Joseph with the magic breaker.

"Why are you doing this to me?! I'm your contracted human! Hey! Do you hear me, you worthless excuse for a spirit?!"

As he cursed them, he writhed and grasped at the air. But no matter how frantically he waved his arms, he could not reach the spirits floating above him.

Considering everything he'd done, Brigitte felt this was well deserved. Still, it was hard to watch him scream as a growing crowd of students watched like he was some strange animal.

"Spirits have a right to be free, you see," the man with the curly hair noted, nodding. He seemed quite satisfied with this outcome. "People should be more aware of just how much spirits love them."

"I certainly should be," Brigitte mumbled, without meaning to. What he said was right. He smiled.

She turned toward Peep. The phoenix cocked its head and returned her gaze.

You chose me.

At the same time...

I chose you.

She wanted to keep that realization inside her forever. If she didn't, she feared she would succumb to the human tendency toward arrogance.

Aah...

As if to apologize for the cowardice of their contracted human, Joseph's spirits turned toward Brigitte and bowed their heads. Then they vanished like

phantoms, returning to the spirit world. They had severed their cursed tie to Joseph and regained their freedom.

They were wild spirits now, and they probably would never involve themselves with humans again. Or perhaps, if they found a human they liked, they would lend their power. As a future spiritologist, Brigitte could only hope the latter would be true.

No sooner were the spirits gone than Joseph said to her, "B-Brigitte, you won't abandon me, will you?"

...What?

She stared at him as he swayed on his feet. He smiled, even now playing the role he had inhabited for so long. But his face was horribly distorted—whether from anger or loathing she could not tell. It was bizarre to see him smiling, too. He walked toward her, muttering in a voice that grated on her ears.

"Poor little Red Fairy. I'm your savior. You'll never..."

Abruptly, Yuri dropped her hand. The next instant, he strode up to Joseph—and punched him in the face.

"Sir Yuri!" Brigitte screamed.

Other students cried out, too. Joseph was thrown backward and tumbled over the rubble. She squinted through the dust at him. His handsome cheek was a swollen and bruised maroon, and blood was seeping from the corner of his mouth. Being a royal, he had most likely never been hit before. He didn't appear to understand what had happened.

"How much do you have to hurt Brigitte before you're satisfied?" Yuri hissed in a voice filled with violent anger, tightening his fist again.

"You're the one who hurt her!" Joseph cried pitifully.

Yuri froze for a second.

Joseph took the opportunity to sneer. "You're the one who abandoned her, O brilliant genius. I think you know what you did. Who do you think rescued her after you left her in tears with nowhere to turn? It wasn't you—it was me!"

"...Shut up."

Brigitte sensed his anger swelling. Before he could lunge toward Joseph, she grabbed his arms from behind. She barely understood what Joseph was saying. Still, it would be wrong for Yuri to hit him.

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"Sir Yuri, stop!"

"Why are you holding me back? He—!"

"I don't want you to hurt yourself!"
```

Yuri stopped moving for a second, while she lunged ahead.

"What would you gain ruining your beautiful hands over him?"

But he didn't stop for long. Brigitte clung to his arms and dug in her heels, but he simply dragged her along as he stepped toward Joseph. As if he had to.

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"Sir Yuri..."
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She clenched her teeth. She knew he was furious for her sake. But that was exactly why she could not stand by and watch.

"Instead of hitting him, I wish you'd hold my hand forever!"

She screamed the words in a haze. She was desperate, but then she noticed that everyone was gaping at her...and a few seconds later, she realized what she'd said.

Yuri had frozen again, and she looked fearfully up at him. She thought he would be angry, but he was staring at her rather vacantly.

She was mortified, stiff as a statue. Still, thanks to her words, Yuri seemed to have regained his cool.

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"...Fine."

"..."

"Now let me go."

"....."

"Brigitte?" he asked, his voice suddenly gentle.
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".....Yes?" she answered, awkwardly releasing him. She didn't realize that as she stood, Yuri was staring at her hands.

...What did I say? ...Well, it's not a lie! But why—why, why, why?!"

Still flustered, she heard several people approaching from behind. She turned around and saw the man with the curly mop of hair leading a man in his thirties or forties and an old man with a beard toward her.

Judging from their robes, they must be priests. But the hunched older man, who shuffled unsteadily forward, was grasping a scepter and wore a splendid robe embroidered with golden thread. He clearly was no ordinary priest. Brigitte shifted her gaze to the costly stole around his neck, which had a phoenix embroidered in gold and vermilion thread on the end.

Could he be the archbishop?

She'd never heard of the highest clergyman, who oversaw all the shrines, taking part in a school inspection. As she stared, dumbfounded, the younger man began crossly reprimanding the one with curly hair.

"What do you mean you didn't protect His Highness the Prince? What else could you have been doing?"

"You mean something happened to the prince? But I didn't see anything...," the curly-haired man answered evasively.

In other words, he planned to overlook the fact that Yuri had punched Joseph. Surprisingly, he seemed to be on their side.

Finally, Brigitte realized that he must be the spiritologist.

"Or did you, most excellent Chief Priest entrusted with the oversight of magic breakers, see something I didn't?" he went on suggestively.

The chief priest sucked in his breath. Even Brigitte could see he was shaken. His hands trembled as he grabbed the spiritologist by the lapels.

"You're wrong! Prince Joseph took the magic breaker without asking! I didn't... I don't know anything..."

"You didn't, did you?"

"...Aah..."

The chief priest sank to the ground. He must be another of Joseph's

accomplices. He looked vaguely familiar—but Brigitte was more interested in the archbishop.

"You didn't see anything, either, did you, Archbishop? ... Archbishop?"

"He can't hear me," the spiritologist muttered.

The archbishop's sunken eyes were wet with tears as he gazed unblinkingly at Peep. Behind him, teachers were running toward them.



The Words She Never Heard

The green ivy twining over the roof of the gazebo was blooming with white flowers. Beneath it, Yuri and Brigitte sat across from each other at the table, like they always did. Yuri was reading a book, but Brigitte was looking at the garden. Considering everything that had happened recently, there was no way she could concentrate on a book.

Two full days had passed since the incident with Joseph.

Naturally, word about the chain of events that the prince set off spread past the school to the palace. He had been third in line for the throne, after his two older brothers, but his succession rights would likely be stripped. This was partly the consequence of the disturbance he'd caused, and partly because he'd lost his contracted spirits.

Joseph had taken the magic breaker off shrine grounds, and worse, his own spirit had used it to sever his contracts.

The Kingdom of Field has prospered only through the assistance of spirits...

He would not likely be forgiven for denying that fundamental truth. As he was carried away on a stretcher, he had never taken his eyes off Brigitte. Longing, hatred, desperation— Brigitte could not tear her gaze from the strange glitter in his eyes, but Yuri took her hand and shielded her back protectively so that she did not have to see any more.

Joseph would probably not return to study at the academy.

Investigations of his accomplices, the chief priest and Mr. Inad, were underway. They had already revealed that the chief priest had been currying

favor with the prince for several years in exchange for preferential treatment, allowing him to borrow not only the shrine's magic breaker but the magic crystal as well. As for Mr. Inad, it turned out he had previously failed the palace civil service exam. He was gloomily working as a teacher when Joseph discovered him and sweet-talked him into taking part in his scheme, with promises of a higher government position than his father held, according to Mr. Inad's confession.

So Joseph discovered Peep when he used the magic crystal...

Peep had been dormant until very recently. Joseph had realized the spirit's real identity earlier than anyone. That was why he had plotted to sever Brigitte's contract with it.

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"Peep..."
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Brigitte heard a soft chirp coming from the top of the table. Peep was curled up, sleeping. It must have been dreaming because it was moving its beak in an extremely cute way.

"Looks like Peep's back to normal."

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"...Yes."
```

Brigitte smiled wryly. She hadn't realized Yuri was looking at her. Peep had temporarily transformed into a beautiful phoenix, but now the spirit was a little chick again. The cause had been a cheerful comment by Kira after Joseph was carried away.

"Lucky us, Miss Brigitte! Now there will be so much more delicious meat!"

She had probably only meant to lighten the mood... Probably. But the phoenix had begun shaking and hid itself with its outstretched wings. The next instant, it had shrunk to a feebly shivering little chick. Kira had been disappointed, but Brigitte had felt a little happy. The chick version of Peep didn't look very powerful, but Brigitte was enchanted.

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"Peep, peep..."
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Brigitte giggled and pet Peep's head. Her hand was no longer encased in a glove. The scars that had tormented her for so long had been healed by Peep.

Sienna had cried with joy when Brigitte told her, and the other servants teared up, too. Brigitte still treasured the gloves they had given her, and she displayed them on a shelf in her room. She planned to keep them for the rest of her life.

And then there's Lisa...

Surprisingly, she had come with Kira to apologize to Brigitte. Kira had admitted before that she was the one who stole Brigitte's pen during the written exams, but Lisa had told her to do it. Although Lisa had disliked Brigitte to start with, Brigitte had no doubt Joseph was the one who nurtured that dislike into loathing.

As Lisa had stood before her, frowning but with head bowed, Brigitte had felt like she was looking at the girl she had once been when she had miserably obeyed Joseph's bidding. That was why she couldn't bear to be overly harsh toward Lisa. Slowly, Lisa was starting to leave the dorm with Kira. Many things were still happening, but Brigitte felt that in general, life had settled down.

"... Anyway, about the competition," Yuri said, shutting his book noisily.

Brigitte stiffened. This was her third competition with Yuri. The challenge was simple: Whoever was invited to the shrine banquet following the school inspection was the winner.

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"It's a tie, I guess," he said.
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"...Yes..."

She nodded, dejected. The official notice had arrived that day at the end of classes. Both Brigitte and Yuri were invited to the shrine.

I can't believe we tied again!

She bit her lip.

I still haven't managed to beat him!

Their first competition ended in a draw, and Yuri won their second. In their third they had tied yet again—although this time it wasn't really about their respective skills. Brigitte hadn't even been interviewed. Considering she was at the center of the current uproar, however, the priests probably believed they had to invite her.

Is that a little unfair...?

Yuri couldn't possibly have read her mind, but he rested his chin in his hand and said, "Ultimately, it's up to the priests. They chose me two years in a row because I'm the Duke of Aurealis's son, and I'm contracted with two first-class spirits."

"But..."

"Your younger brother was chosen this year, too, right? He's an earl's son contracted with an ifrit."

His view of the situation left no room for dreams or hopes. Still, Brigitte had to admit he had a point. Brigitte hardly even knew what her adopted brother looked like, but he was contracted with a first-class spirit. The other first-year representative was from an unremarkable family and was contracted with a second-class spirit. It was unusual for there to be even one student in each year contracted with a first-class spirit.

I wonder if Peep is a first-class spirit...

The phoenix was a fire and light spirit. Many students had seen the column of light it manifested. But thanks to Ms. Naha and other teachers who warned them not to make too much of a fuss over it, Brigitte got some looks but no cross-examination. According to Ms. Naha, the fact that the spiritologist and archbishop put in a good word for her was key. Brigitte hadn't seen either of them since the day of the incident, but of course she would meet them again at the shrine.

Also...

Something else was bothering her.

Whenever she remembered Joseph's cruel words and brutality that day, the terror came surging back.

...But her mind was focused on something else.

"Sir Yuri?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you...hear what I said through the wall that day?"

He was silent for a few seconds. She couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"No."

There was no agitation in his voice. At least, none that she could hear.

Good.

She let out a heavy breath.

When she thought she might be about to die, she had said she loved him. Joseph, crouching nearby, probably heard her, but Yuri, on the other side of the wall, had not.

She was relieved.

But why was her heart throbbing so painfully? She felt like she might start crying.

Why am I disappointed...?

Deep in her heart, had she wanted him to hear?

She didn't know the answer, and she had no idea what expression to put on her face.

"I was a little scared," Yuri said.

Brigitte blinked. At first, she thought she had misheard him. He had never spoken of fear before. She raised her head. He was looking down, like she had been a few seconds earlier. His bangs hid his face, so she couldn't guess what he might be thinking.

"...Of what?" she asked anxiously.

"When you went off with Mr. Inad and didn't come back."

Her breath caught in her throat. She had heard the essence of what had happened from Kira. Yuri and the others had worked with the spiritologist to find her. Kira had said Yuri's levelheadedness had saved them.

But still...

Yuri was more shaken than she had ever seen him, as far as she could tell. She stood and walked around the table to his side.

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"Sir Yuri, it's all right. I'm— Huh?!"
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She had been about to say *I'm here*, but before she could, Yuri grabbed her arm so hard her uniform wrinkled. When he finally looked up, his eyes were shining with earnestness.

"I'll keep you safe from now on."

His words were like a vow, but his whole body was sweaty, and his face was contorted.

"I won't take my eyes off you. So...please don't go off like that again."

She didn't know why, but he reminded her of a little child.

Agah...

She remembered the person who held her hand while she screamed and cried as her father burned her. In her hazy memory, that little hand, the same size as hers, had been trembling. Still, it had saved her.

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"...I'm not strong, far from it."
```

Yuri's words came back to her. He had been unable to save the little girl from her torment.

Without thinking, she wrapped her arms around him. His cold body was trembling. She stroked his broad back, wanting to reassure him, until his shaking subsided.

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"You protected me this time, didn't you?" she asked.
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"..."
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"Anyway, I'm not going to disappear."

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"..."
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"After all, you could see my red hair from miles away."

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"...True."
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He nodded slightly at her joke. She was relieved, but for some reason, he brought his handsome face close to hers. For a second, she panicked.

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What? Whaaat??
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But his lips slipped past without touching hers, and instead he reached out, taking her long hair in his hand and bringing it to his face. Like he was taking in the smell, like he wanted his fingers to remember how it felt. He stroked it again and again. His soft breath grazed her cheek.

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"Um, Sir Yuri...?"
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She squirmed in embarrassment. He softly took a lock of her hair in his hand—and kissed it.

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"...!"
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Instantly blushing, she stared at him. His citrine eyes were searching her face.

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"I—"
```

...What?

She saw him swallow. His eyes were open wide in astonishment.

"...I'm sorry," he said quietly, as if returning to his senses.

He dropped her hand, turned on his heels, and started to walk away. After a pause of a few seconds, she ran after him. Something told her she didn't want to part like this.

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"Sir Yuri! Please—"
```

But the distance between them only widened as he strode on, ignoring her calls. She ran after him, desperate to stop him. "But you—you said you wouldn't take your eyes off me!"

Her voice turned accusatory.

"You just said that a minute ago!"

The effect was immediate. He took another step or two, then stopped. "I know."

It was so like him to announce that with a straight face.

"Exactly!" she snapped, standing next to him. She'd forgotten that he was much better at rude comebacks than she was.

"And you said you wanted me to hold your hand forever," he said.

"Oh..."

So he remembered that. Before the surprise could register, he took her left hand in his. She jumped and made a noise, and he smiled with amusement.

"That was just... I was frantic..."

"Weren't there other things you could have said?"

"That was all I could th-th-think of!"

He seemed to be enjoying her flustered reaction. "Shall we?"

"...You mean...hold hands?"

His lack of an answer apparently meant yes. Brigitte knew he was teasing her, but his mood had improved, so she decided not to pull her hand away.

As they chatted aimlessly on their way to the carriage stop, she thought back to their conversation at the gazebo. He had started to say something and stopped, but his lips had kept moving. The movement was simple, and she had been watching, so she knew what he was mouthing.

But no, it couldn't be.

No way.

"I love you." ...Really?!

There was no way he would say that. She shook her head to chase away her fantasies and asked him about something else.

"Sir Yuri, did you understand what Joseph was saying to you that day?"

"Your Highness, are you fully aware of what you did to her?"

"I could say the same to you, Yuri Aurealis."

Brigitte simply could not make sense of Joseph's words. After all, Yuri had always protected her.

Even eleven years ago, when my father burned my hand!

She was sure Yuri was the one who held her right hand that day. Which made Joseph's words especially strange. She could think of no legitimate reason anyone could criticize him. But his face clouded over.

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"I understood perfectly," he said.

"Sir Yuri?"

She heard him mumble above her head.

"...I always knew I didn't have the right..."

The right...?
```

He was practically talking to himself, so she couldn't very well voice her question. His hand in hers was so cold. She didn't know if the chill was coming from him or her.

When she got back to the cottage, everyone was acting strange. Before the carriage even stopped, she could see people gathered in front of the entryway. Normally, Sienna always greeted Brigitte with a half smile, but today she came running up the second Brigitte stepped down from the carriage. The other servants followed. Brigitte saw confusion, panic—and something verging on terror on their faces.

"Miss...Miss Brigitte," Sienna said, gazing at her anxiously, her face pale.

"...What's the matter, Sienna?"

Something must have happened while Brigitte was away.

Just then, the front door swung slowly open.

"Brigitte."

She froze.

That voice...

For an instant, all the sounds around her faded away, as if she had been dropped into ice.

She hadn't heard that voice in eleven years. But in her nightmares, she heard it constantly, and it always brought terror with it. Only her own sheer stubbornness kept her from running away. She stood completely still, desperately driving her heels into the ground.

Holding in her ragged breath, she looked up.

Brigitte's father, Earl Deag Meidell, was standing before her.

He looked down at his daughter with a dull expression.

He spoke with such authority it almost sounded cruel.

"You are forgiven. Return to the main house, Brigitte."



A Day in the Life of Peep

"Peep!"

Peep opened its eyes and wriggled its body. It must have been sleeping in an odd position because its tail feathers were where its head should have been, and it wasn't easy to get out.

"Pegya."

"Peep, are you awake?"

"Peep, peep, peeeeep..."

Brigitte must have sensed something was wrong because she whispered to Peep from above. When it chirped for help, her long, slender fingers reached up and pushed its back end. Now Peep was facing the right way inside her hair, and it poked its head out.

She seemed to be in the middle of a class. Peep could hear what sounded like the teacher's voice giving a lesson. During the afternoon lectures, when its belly was full, it usually dozed in Brigitte's hair.

Peep hopped lightly down onto her desk. Since it was awake, it figured it might as well take a walk. "Peep!"

"Going for a walk?"

Peep nodded, then flapped down to the floor below her desk.

"Don't go anywhere dangerous!"

"Peep!"

"...Well, Miss Chatty, do you know the answer to this problem?" the teacher asked her.

Uh-oh! But Brigitte stood calmly and recited the answer without pause.

"Yes, Ms. Naha. It's the fairy Puck in a different form. Puck is quite mischievous and often changes into a child or horse to trick people. It isn't specified in the text, but I believe it's Puck in the form of a kelpie from the Unseelie Court who saves the main character at the end of chapter six."

Several students gasped, and everyone applauded.

Brigitte was the top female student in her class. As her contracted spirit, Peep puffed out its chest feathers proudly.

"Excellent. You may sit down. But please do not chitchat in class."

Blushing as Ms. Naha winked at her, Brigitte sat down.

Meanwhile, Peep started walking. As the long bell rang, signaling the end of classes, Peep wondered where to explore.



Where did I come from? What am I?

Peep did not know the answers to such questions. Spirits didn't have families. Some spirits apparently created pseudo-familial relationships, but as far as Peep knew, no one had ever been by its side.

It was always flying somewhere high, all alone. It remembered cawing often in its isolation—that feeling was all that remained in its heart.

When Peep was with Brigitte and her friends, it tended to forget all that, but when it was walking alone, the past came rushing back.

Suddenly, after some time lost in thought, it realized it had wandered quite far from the classroom.

"Peep? Peep, peep?"

It tried asking where it was, but no one answered, so it drifted forward with a group of little fairies flying in front of it. Dodging student feet, it skittered over

the marble floor.

"Oh, hello, Peep!"

At the sound of that voice, Peep's downy feathers stood on end.

"Peep!"

Nervously, it glanced over its shoulder and began to shake. It had guessed right.

"What are you doing here?"

It was Kira Anik—a friend of Brigitte's but a mortal enemy of Peep's. She was a terrifying girl who was always scheming ways to cook and eat Peep whenever they met. Peep had warned Brigitte over and over how dangerous she was, pleading with her to roast Kira before Kira could roast Peep, but she just wouldn't listen.

Kira squatted down in the hallway and slowly grinned.

"Listen to this, Peep! There's a project going on at the dorm right now to put in some new facilities."

"Peep?"

"I hear my proposal for a big wood oven in the garden will be approved...hehheh. If it is, we can bake pizza and have barbecues every weekend!"

The conversation was moving in a suspicious direction.

"Which do you prefer, wings or drumsticks?"

"Peeeeep!!"

Peep was trembling like a leaf. Kira's gaze fell on its wings. Was this the end?

"Hey, Kira, leave Sir Peep alone."

Thankfully, Nival happened to be passing by. He was one of Brigitte's followers. He wasn't particularly useful, but he was a fairly effective counterbalance to Kira.

Peep ducked behind Nival's leg. He smiled triumphantly.

"Where did you come from? Peep and I were just having a friendly

conversation," Kira said.

"A friendly conversation? You've cornered a spirit in the hallway to bully it. What if Sir Peep pees all over its pants? Then what would you do?"

"Peep!"

Peep was indignant. It didn't even have pants to pee in!

"See?! Sir Peep just said it peed its pants!"

"I think it's furious with your lack of discretion."

"How ridiculous."

As Nival pressed his legs and twisted around, Peep made a run for it. It burst outside into the weak sunlight. Evening was approaching, and Peep hoped to meet up with Brigitte soon. But because Peep always relied on her to carry it around, it didn't know how to get anywhere.

As it walked timidly forward, the library eventually came into view, so it decided to go to the gazebo. Brigitte often talked or read there with her friend Yuri. Peep hoped that perhaps she had headed there after class, but the gazebo was empty. Peep did hear a voice, however, and hopped down the stairs to find Yuri and his undine near the stream.

When Yuri noticed Peep, he gave the chick a puzzled look and started turning his head this way and that. Yuri was the one who had given Peep its name. He must have been searching for Brigitte.

"Peep, peep, peep?" Where's Brigitte?

Yuri turned silently to his undine.

"What did Peep just say?"

"How would I know?" The undine tilted her head.

Yuri frowned. "You're both spirits, aren't you? I thought you'd understand each other."

"We may both be spirits, but we're entirely different species." The undine stuck out her tongue. The gesture was girlish, but there was still something a bit sexy about it. To humans, at least—the charms of the spirit were lost on Peep.

"Peep, peep?" it asked Yuri again.

"...?"

Yuri sank into thought, creasing his brow. The undine was splashing playfully in the creek. Little fish jumped into the air, confused by the sudden change of direction in the water's flow. Yuri walked over to Peep and crouched down. "I'm sorry, Peep," he said sincerely. "I don't understand your language."

"Peep..."

"But if you're looking for Brigitte, she hasn't been here today. I think yesterday she said she would have class duty. She might still be in her classroom."

"Peep!"

Aha! He'd understood well enough after all. No wonder—he had named Peep, after all. Peep blushed, its heart pounding.

Yuri looked mystified, but Peep hopped back up the stairs with relief. Halfway up, remembering something important, it turned back and said, "Peep. Peepeepeep."

If you love Brigitte, keep trying.

Having said what it wanted, Peep fluttered off cheerfully. From behind, it heard the undine's amused voice say, "I think I caught the gist of that myself!"

When Peep finally made it back to the classroom, Brigitte was filling in the daily record. No one else was in the room. Brigitte, ever the serious student, was writing down the day's activities in detail, even though other students usually just jotted down a few words.

"...Oh, Peep, you're back!"

"Peep."

In response to the brief greeting, Brigitte kneeled on the floor. Peep jumped into her skirt. Placing its feet on her outstretched arms, it peered into her beautiful emerald eyes.

She giggled. "You've got dirt on your feathers! Where did you go on your

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walk?"
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"Peep. Peep, pepeep."
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Peep enthusiastically explained the day's adventure. I walked all over the school today! Kira almost ate me, but Nival saved me, although he's so rude. And I had a word with Yuri about you...

Brigitte probably didn't understand a word of it. Still, she nodded with great interest.

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"Sounds like you had quite an adventure!"

"Peep!"

I did!
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Peep had known those sparkling eyes for a long time. It had glimpsed them in the crystals that lay all around the spirit world. They shone like new jewels glowing with hope. The moment Peep saw them, it was enchanted. Peep had longed to be close to that powerful light...and had always wanted to meet the girl they belonged to. It wanted to meet her and tell her that everything would be all right. It wasn't a frightening spirit, so she didn't need to be afraid.

Brigitte blinked curiously. She cocked her head, as if she was hearing things. Finally, though, she smiled.

"I wanted to meet you, too, Peep!"

As she stroked Peep's cheek softly, it closed its eyes.

Her warm fingers were more soothing than the touch of any other hand in the world.



Hello! I'm Harunadon. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 2 of *If the Villainess and Villain Met and Fell in Love*.

In this volume, Brigitte's contracted spirit, Peep, finally takes the stage. I spent a long time deciding what Brigitte's contracted spirit should be like. Now I can't imagine it being anyone other than Peep.

As for the exclusive short story, I told my editor in advance that I planned to write the story from Peep's perspective, but after reading it, my editor noted that "It's even more Peep than I expected." This story is the only chance you'll have to experience 100 percent pure Peep. Adorable, isn't it?

I feel like little by little, Brigitte and Yuri are growing closer. Considering how stubborn and contrary they both are, don't you agree that they've really made impressive progress?

But Brigitte is always so nervous, I sometimes worry whether her heart can take all those palpitations, ha-ha.

When Volume 1 was published, a reader-comment tweet campaign was held, and I had the pleasure of reading wonderful comments from many of you. Every time I saw a tweet saying "Great illustrations!" I nodded enthusiastically at my screen.

If you liked Volume 2, your author would be very happy if you would post your comments on social media. Fan letters are also most welcome. Your author would be very happy to receive some!

Finally, my acknowledgments.

To F-sama, my editor, I am full of gratitude that you constantly give my books

your all. I look forward to working with you again next time.

To Yomi Sarachi-sensei, my illustrator, I am so excited to see how you illustrate various scenes in this volume.

To everyone who buys this book, please accept my heartfelt thanks.

I hope to see you again in the next volume!

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