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BONUS STORY Blue Treasure





If Villainess and Villain 3 Wet and Fell in Love



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AKUYAKU REIJO TO AKUYAKU REISOKU GA, DEATTE KOI NI OCHITANARA vol.3

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

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The Founding Festival Approaches

The Otoleanna Academy of Magic was a prestigious school with a long history, accepting only the sons and daughters of noble families and renowned for having produced many magicians. However, after the day's classes were over, it was no different from any other school—filled with students happy to have free time on their hands.

The dining room was bustling with chatter and laughter, especially at a certain table for four. Everyone sitting there was a second-year student, wearing sophisticated red school uniform ties.

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"Squee! So cute!"
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"Chirp. Chirp."

"Peep! Come to me!"

"Chirp."

Two girls were cooing over a little chick.

The chick had beady black eyes and bright-yellow feathers with some red plumage on the chest.

The little creature happily parading around on the table had slightly unusual coloring, but apart from that, it resembled any other normal chick.

In truth, it was apparently a legendary spirit known as a phoenix—only "apparently" at this point, because this particular phoenix hadn't yet received an official recognition from the shrine. Still, everyone at the academy had seen it cast the phoenix's trademark pillar of light, burst into flame, and blaze across

the sky, so there wasn't really any doubt.

Such a feat had never been officially confirmed in the human world before, only written about in a single tome, so it was no surprise that scholars and reporters would flock to witness such a thing.

At the Otoleanna Academy of Magic, it was strictly forbidden to discriminate based on the species of a contracted spirit. Spirits represented miracles, and each one should be cherished equally. Humans and spirits must also work together... These were the teachings of the Levain religion, which upheld belief in the spirits.

For this reason, the teachers made sure to express to the students that causing a fuss about legendary spirits or their contractors would not be tolerated. Breaking the rules would result in severe punishment, such as suspension or expulsion. For many students, who wanted the prestige of graduating from such a respected school, this was an effective threat.

Still, the curiosity of the students wasn't completely suppressed. Even from the surrounding tables, students couldn't help peeking at the adorable spirit.

"You're in high spirits today, too, eh, Peep?" said a beautiful, smiling girl with black hair. Her name was Kira, and she was enjoying Peep's antics.

As soon as he heard her voice, Peep stopped entertaining the girls and stood still.

"What's wrong, Peep?" Kira asked. "Exercise will improve the quality of your meat. You should walk more."

"Peep!"

Trembling violently, Peep jumped into the arms of its trusted contractor.

"Peep, peep!"

But even as Peep's yellow feathers disappeared inside her blazer, the contractor in question showed no reaction...

"Brigitte... You seem down?"

When Kira tentatively spoke to her, Brigitte seemed to snap out of her reverie.

She had long flaming-red hair and emerald eyes.

With a straight nose and lustrous lips, she was a beautiful girl, although her makeup was a little heavy.

"Ah, sorry. I was just thinking about something..."

Brigitte chuckled and lifted her teacup in an attempt to deflect concern. The girls sitting opposite her all gazed at her with admiration.

Branded as the "Red Fairy," Brigitte had previously been given a wide berth by her peers. But after stopping the rampage of an ariel, a second-class spirit, and performing well in the exams, she'd gradually begun to get along well with her classmates.

Today, too, she'd been invited to have some tea with three of her classmates after school. The old Brigitte, who had never had a single friend, could have scarcely imagined it.

Actually, Nival, the class president, also wanted to come, but...

But he was brutally rebuffed and, in the end, had reluctantly retreated. "Oh well, I guess I'll just go and see Yuri," Nival said as he exited the classroom. Brigitte wondered if the two of them were reading books together right now.

Hmm, I can't imagine that at all.

The highly irritable Yuri and the argumentative Nival were hardly the type to sit and quietly read books together.

"Still, isn't it amazing? Brigitte was chosen as representative for the shrine visit?!"

"For sure. The whole class is proud of you, you know."

While Brigitte was busy daydreaming, her classmates had been getting all excited about another topic.

"Don't make it sound like such a big deal, you two." Brigitte smiled dryly. She'd heard this over and over.

The shrine visit, originally scheduled for late last month, had been postponed until the upcoming weekend. But that was to be expected.

The head priest of the Central Shrine has been arrested, and Prince Joseph...

The two of them had secretly conspired together and broken numerous laws. Removing magic crystals from the shrine (which was forbidden) and using a dangerous magical device known as the magic breaker, to start.

They'd even used the herbology teacher, Inad, to force certain students to drop out. Brigitte still hadn't been able to find out all the details, but one thing was for sure: Joseph's actions were far crueler than she'd ever imagined.

In the written exam six months ago...it was because of pressure from Prince Joseph that Mr. Inad marked me down for supposedly leaving out answers.

Brigitte herself had been locked in a storeroom by Joseph and nearly killed, and after that, she'd cooperated and sat through several interrogations, so this past month had been a very hectic one.

Having lost his contracted spirit and his right to inherit the throne, Joseph was also abandoned by his own mother, the second queen. However, after his two older brothers appealed to the king, Joseph was now under strict guard and was apparently spending his time locked up in a room in the royal palace.

Also, it seemed that Joseph had repeatedly voiced a desire to meet with Brigitte.

But Brigitte didn't want to have anything to do with him. She certainly had no desire to see him again.

Right now, she wanted to focus only on the upcoming shrine visit.

All they did in the end was postpone the date... A little surprising.

The shrine probably wanted to maintain its authority. The arrest of the head priest had been an unprecedented scandal.

Alongside Brigitte, Yuri had also been selected as a representative to visit the shrine. Brigitte hadn't been to the Central Shrine since she was five years old, and she was greatly looking forward to it.

What she was most excited about was seeing Tonari, the spiritologist, again.

Though there hadn't been much opportunity to talk the other day, Tonari would be attending the dinner party, and she was hoping to find a chance to

have a chat. As someone aiming to become a spiritologist herself, Brigitte had a ton of questions.

But no matter how hard she tried to focus her attention on other things... before she knew it, she found her thoughts wandering, as if she was sinking into a deep darkness.

"You are forgiven. Return to the main house, Brigitte."

It was only a month prior that her father by blood, Deag, had said those words to her. He was the very man who'd kicked Brigitte out of the family home. Even when he came to her at the cottage, he refused to look at her.

"What for?" Brigitte had asked weakly, and he'd looked down on her coldly. His eyes were utterly devoid of any real emotion for his daughter, even though he had not seen her in eleven years.

"It's obvious. I hear your contracted spirit is a phoenix."

Brigitte wasn't surprised that Deag had gotten ahold of that information. Her adopted brother, currently a first-year student, must have told him. If not, Deag was head of the Fire Clan—he would have had plenty of ways to find out information from within the academy.

As Brigitte sat in silence, Deag spoke in no uncertain terms.

"Provide your answer the day after the Founding Festival."

He gave Brigitte one last disinterested glance, then turned around and walked away.

Brigitte had watched silently as he'd walked away with an attendant. Sienna, her maid, had watched anxiously as Brigitte remained frozen for quite some time.

Since that day, Deag's words had echoed in her mind, no matter how hard she'd tried to shut them out.

As she saw it, she had only two options.

Return to the main house.

Or defy the wishes of the head of her family and be cast out of the villa as well.

Deag hadn't mentioned option two—probably because he believed option one was the only one worth considering. It would be unacceptable, surely, for Brigitte to spurn this olive branch from the head of her own family.

I never imagined Father would want me to move back to the main house.

She felt neither joy nor sadness. In fact, she wasn't even sure herself how she felt about what Deag had said.

She knew that when she graduated, she would be forced from the cottage. Deag saw Brigitte, who had forged a contract with a tiny spirit, as a stain on the family name.

So her plan was to leave home upon graduation and become a spiritologist. She was prepared to live independently and no longer rely on the Meidell family.

However...

My contract wasn't with a tiny spirit at all but with an actual phoenix.

Her father had no choice but to bring Brigitte back into the fold. A phoenix spirit contractor would be a valuable asset to the family of an earl.

How ridiculous...

That was how she felt. But she hadn't been able to bring herself to say no.

She had overcome the flames, but did her fear of her father still linger?

Or maybe... Maybe there was a part of her that still yearned for the love of her mother and her father?

"So, erm... Are you and Yuri Aurealis...you know, like that, Brigitte?"

Brigitte's chin jerked.

The classmate sitting opposite her was leaning forward, eyes filled with curiosity. In fact, all three of her classmates were watching her expectantly.

Not understanding the question, Brigitte tilted her head to one side.

"Errr... Like what?"

The girl blushed and rephrased. "You know...like, a romantic relationship?"

...Huh?!

Brigitte managed to keep herself from shrieking aloud. She was a lady, after all.

After tea, Brigitte walked down the hallway, her worry plain on her face.

Kira, walking beside her, looked concerned. "Brigitte, are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. I'm fine, Kira..."

She was clearly not fine.

She could tell that Kira was growing increasingly worried, but...Brigitte didn't have the time or energy to worry about her right now.

I can't believe that people think Yuri and I are...together.

Even just thinking about it made her feel anxious.

She'd strenuously tried to deny it, but her classmates had just grinned at her. They probably thought she was simply embarrassed.

After all, during that incident when Joseph had locked her in the storeroom, Brigitte and Yuri had held hands, and that... Well, a large number of their fellow students had seen it. Apparently, that had led to a lot of whispered rumors about the two being a couple.

I wonder if Yuri knows about this...

He seemed as if he'd be above such things as rumors... But he must have heard them.

When Brigitte thought about that...her heart started thumping, and she felt completely overwhelmed.

After all, it had happened only a month prior.

When they met at the gazebo, their usual spot, Yuri asked Brigitte not to go anywhere. The way he trembled, he had seemed like a small child. So she'd been unable to stop herself from hugging him.

Then, with a very slight movement of his lips, he'd whispered, almost inaudibly...

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"I—"
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"...!"

Just recalling it now made Brigitte's brain feel as if it were going to explode.

Still obviously concerned about Brigitte's odd behavior, Kira nevertheless changed the subject. "Oh, right! What are you planning to do about the Founding Festival?"

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"...What?"
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"The gifts we discussed? Over tea?"

Apparently, this kind of topic had come up over tea. But Brigitte had been so busy desperately trying to deny her relationship with Yuri that she had no recollection of it.

"Apparently, this custom started up several years ago during the National Founding Day celebrations, where people give handmade winter clothing to their boyfriend or girlfriend or crush. The thread used is supposed to be the same color as the recipient's hair or eyes."

Brigitte stared blankly at Kira, who was undeterred in her breathless explanation.

"It seems to be a popular tradition among the nobility these days."

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"Huh..."
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National Founding Day was about a month away, in the middle of November, so it might be a good time to give cold weather gear.

Brigitte was thinking of it from a practical standpoint. But Kira, practically buzzing, explained the true significance next.

"Giving a knitted item means 'Wear this gift and spend the winter with me!'

Oh, I have to buy some red or green wool right away." Kira blushed.

She kept mumbling under her breath afterward, but Brigitte had stopped listening to her.

It sounds so romantic...!

The Founding Festival was one of the biggest nationwide events. It was hosted in the royal capital, and the streets would be full of food stalls and the theaters full of plays and concerts.

The shrine would also coordinate with the city for a big parade, which included spirits. And at the end of the parade, the heads of the four noble families would summon the most powerful spirits and unleash their greatest magic, lighting up the sky with amazing colors each year.

Of course the Meidell Fire Clan family and the Aurealis Water Clan family would be participating.

Deag was no doubt already busy preparing. Which was why he'd set the day after the festival as the deadline for Brigitte's response.

"Also, on the night, there's going to be a ball at the academy."

"Oh yeah."

"Lots of kids sneak out to exchange gifts, apparently."

Maybe that was why more and more girls had started inviting boys to the ball, instead of it just being boys doing the inviting.

Brigitte couldn't help but let out a sigh of admiration.

Wow. Everyone's really going after what they want.

Last year, Brigitte had attended as Joseph's fiancée, but this year she didn't have a predetermined partner.

When she thought about that...one face did spring to mind.

Someone with blue hair and yellow eyes, with beautiful and dignified features.

Maybe I should invite Yuri.

But she discarded the idea as soon as it came to her.

After all, inviting someone of the opposite sex to a ball was basically the same as an admission of romantic feelings.

I... I just can't!

Just thinking about it made Brigitte's cheeks burn.

Brigitte turned to Kira, trying to distract herself from her pounding heart.

"K-Kira, have you decided who you'll be going to the ball with?"

"I was thinking I'd ask Nival."

Brigitte took a step back. "What?!" she yelped.

So the two of them had become boyfriend and girlfriend without Brigitte ever realizing it? But while Brigitte was clearly shocked, Kira remained nonchalant.

"I just think it's better to go with someone I know than with someone I don't."

No doubt Nival would not be thrilled to hear that rationale.

Kira seemed rather detached. But she must have been asked out by tons of boys.

After all, Kira is really pretty.

In the past, Kira hid her face behind her long bangs and always stared at the ground.

Whenever anyone spoke to her, she'd respond in a mousy little voice. But after cutting her bangs and revealing her beautiful face, she seemed much more cheerful. No wonder the boys liked her so much.

"What about you, Brigitte?"

Of course Kira would ask.

That was the expected flow of this sort of conversation. But Brigitte was tongue-tied.

"I—I... Well, I don't really have any close friends who are boys or anything, so..."

"I doubt you need to overthink it. Never mind the ball—anyone would be

happy to receive a handmade gift."

As Kira smiled, Brigitte muttered, "I...I guess so."

R-right...! Yuri has always been so kind to me!

Thinking of it that way, Brigitte felt a little calmer.

Yuri had indeed been kind to Brigitte on many occasions. He'd even gifted her an expensive hair accessory before the summer holidays.

So far, Brigitte hadn't been able to give Yuri anything in return. So what if she gave him a gift to express her gratitude on the day of the Founding Festival?

If you thought about it that way, there was nothing worrisome about it. That's what Brigitte thought anyway.

Giving a gift on the night of the festival was a custom. It would seem perfectly natural.

Right! There's no deeper meaning to it! It's merely an expression of thanks! Yes! Just a polite custom!

A custom, a custom, Brigitte repeated silently, as if she was trying to convince some part of herself.

Peep stuck its head out of her chest pocket and gave an exasperated chirp.



As soon as Brigitte returned to the cottage, she called Sienna to her room.

Apparently, Sienna was also aware of the cute handmade gift custom.

When Brigitte told her of her idea to knit something for a friend to show her gratitude, Sienna was enthusiastic.

"What kind of gift would be good? Maybe a sweater? Or gloves?"

Sienna was silent and thoughtful as Brigitte brainstormed out loud. The capable maid's mind was already working hard.

Brigitte wasn't great at detailed work like embroidery. Unfortunately, she wasn't great at knitting, either. But everyone has their strengths and

weaknesses.

Sienna thought it over. Brigitte wasn't the type to give up on something halfway, but if she bit off more than she could chew, she might lose heart. Sienna wanted to give the best advice she could.

"Since this is your first time knitting, Miss Brigitte...I think a scarf would be relatively easy to make."

"A scarf....."

Brigitte pictured Yuri wearing one she'd made for him.

He always seemed so cool and aloof, but how cute would he look in something fluffy and yellow—the same color as his eyes?

Yeah...that might work!

The more she thought about it, the more excited she got.

"Okay. I'll try knitting a scarf! Let's go shopping tomorrow!"

"Certainly," Sienna said, bowing to the enthusiastic Brigitte.

The next day...

Brigitte was walking with Sienna down the main street of the royal capital.

The sunlight was pouring in through the gaps in the clouds, and red and yellow leaves were falling to the ground. It was a mild autumnal day.

Sienna took Brigitte to a wool shop that was well-renowned in the royal capital.

"It's crowded in here."

"Indeed. Many daughters of the nobility."

They didn't even have to go inside to see that the shop was packed, and Brigitte hesitated. But Sienna, who was a regular at the store, went in without a care.

Brigitte found herself entering the shop when Sienna tugged her by the arm. She felt overwhelmed as she looked around.

"Wow... This is amazing," said Brigitte.

There were endless shelves packed with skeins of wool.

The array of bundles, each slightly different in color and thickness, was reminiscent of an expansive rainbow.

Looking at the other shelves, Brigitte found a variety of lovely items, including beautiful, lustrous silk fabrics, handkerchiefs, and hand mirrors finished with intricate embroidery.

But it was the wool shelves that were most crowded, young girls and ladies examining the wares with serious looks on their faces.

And there were also sample items, no doubt knitted by the shop's staff. Sweaters, hats, scarves, gloves, and so on.

Among them was a scarf knitted using three different types of wool, creating a beautiful multidimensional pattern.

Excited, Brigitte gave Sienna's arm a little shake.

"Hey! Sienna! I want to knit an artistic-looking scarf like that one!"

Sienna looked at the scarf Brigitte was pointing at.

"Miss, forgive me for saying so, but I think that's more for advanced knitters."

"You think so?"

"Yes. And let us also consider what Sir Aurealis would most like as well."

Brigitte pondered this.

Thinking it over...most of the personal items Yuri owned did seem to be more sophisticated, in subdued colors.

"That's right, maybe Yuri would prefer something simpler..." Brigitte suddenly realized something. "...Wait, I didn't mention anything about giving it to Yuri, did I?"

"But you are planning to, are you not?"

Well, yes, but...!

Sienna was right on the money, but it was embarrassing to admit. Brigitte

realized that whatever she said, she'd just be digging a bigger hole for herself, so she kept her mouth shut instead and simply blushed.				



At that moment, a group of women moved away from the shelves, and Brigitte homed in quickly on the spot where the yellow wool was stocked.

Much more choice than I'd been expecting...

Everything was yellow, but there were so many different kinds, from bright to deep shades, from greenish hues to reddish ones.

Brigitte picked up the balls of wool one by one, remembering the citrine eyes she'd gazed upon so many times. But nothing seemed quite the right shade.

It's Yuri's fault for having such beautiful eyes.

Brigitte was glad she hadn't said that out loud; no doubt Sienna would quietly roll her eyes at her. Suddenly, a vivid mental image struck Brigitte.

Dandelions blooming under the blue sky.

Yes, she'd envisioned this before... When she'd been training with Blue and Carson to try overcoming the flames.

Brigitte had pushed herself too hard and collapsed, and Yuri had rushed over and caught her. His eyes, set against the blue sky, had reminded her of blooming dandelions.

Remembering the events of that day, Brigitte picked up a ball of wool at eye level.

The thick wool felt soft against her fingers.

"This... I'll take this."

"That's a nice color. Bright yet mellow."

Brigitte was glad to have Sienna's approval.

After that, she bought a pair of knitting needles, a darning needle, and a pair of small scissors. Each one of these simple purchases brought her immense joy.

"I'll carry that for you, miss."

"No need. I'd like to carry it myself."

Brigitte declined Sienna's offer, paid for her purchases, and left the shop with her.

Brigitte felt ecstatic as she clutched her paper bag, and she realized Sienna's arms were full, too.

"Oh, did you buy some wool as well, Sienna?"

"I certainly did." Sienna nodded enthusiastically.

What colors of wool were inside Sienna's paper bag?

I kinda want to ask, but...

But it might be more fun to see the finished product for the first time, so Brigitte decided to put off asking Sienna about it for now.

Once they got home, Brigitte immediately asked Sienna to teach her how to knit.

Being the prudent type, Sienna recommended the simplest possible knitting techniques. Brigitte knew next to nothing, just what she wanted the end result to be. Nonetheless, she followed Sienna's instructions closely.

"To knit, you go like this. To purl, you go like this, then you pull the yarn back out."

"...Can you show me again?"

"Very well. First, take your knitting needles and..."

Sienna carefully instructed Brigitte, who had to practice it several times to pick up on what she was supposed to do.

Eventually, Brigitte began to get the hang of it and started knitting for real.

She'd decided not to even attempt any difficult knitting techniques. Instead, she just repeated the same simple stitches over and over again.

But if she let her concentration waver, she ended up with odd knots in the wool. She found that knitting required intense focus.

I'll work hard on this every day... Even on school days, I'll make time to knit when I get home.

There was still so much work to be done.

She couldn't neglect her studies. She would save knitting for her downtime.

...I wonder if Yuri will be pleased...?

Even though Brigitte had only just started this project, she couldn't wait to see how it turned out.



"...Miss Brigitte. Will you be my partner for the National Founding Day Ball?!"

They were in a secluded corner of the courtyard.

Feeling a sense of déjà vu as Nival held out his hand to her, Brigitte lowered her head.

"I'm sorry..."

Nival groaned with disappointment.

It was lunchtime. Brigitte had been eating with Kira when Nival had come over and asked her to accompany him to the courtyard so he could have a word.

Brigitte had been excited, wondering if this would mean that she could see his amazing wind spirit again, but the last thing she'd been expecting was that Nival would invite her to the ball.

After all, Kira said she planned to ask Nival.

Had Kira already spoken to Nival about it, or not yet?

Although, of course, that wasn't why Brigitte turned him down.

"So you're going with him after all..."

"..."

"Him" had to be Yuri.

Yes, Brigitte wanted to go to the ball with Yuri. But she hadn't spoken to him about it yet. Asking him out seemed like too high a hurdle.

Seeing Brigitte go silent, Nival scratched his head.

"Brigitte... Are you sure he's what you want?"

"...What?"

"It's just, I'm a little concerned... I mean, this is embarrassing for me to say, right after getting rejected..." Nival sighed, covering his face.

It was obvious that Nival cared about Brigitte. He was always very straightforward with his feelings.

"It's like a pet's devotion to its owner," Sienna had once commented baldly, but even Brigitte had noticed Nival's golden retriever energy. She never voiced this thought out loud, though, knowing it would be a heavy blow for him to hear.

But his earnestness seemed to have led Nival down the wrong path where Brigitte was concerned...

"...Thank you for your concern. But I'm not going to the ball with Yuri or anything."

"Excuse me!" they heard someone say. "Would you go to the ball with me?!" Brigitte and Nival both jerked with surprise.

The two exchanged a quick glance and then quickly hid behind a nearby bench.

Poking their heads out, they could see the back of a girl they didn't know standing in the shade of a nearby tree, facing...Yuri.

"...It looks like a girl's asking Yuri to the ball," Nival whispered, barely audible.

Brigitte was shocked. Her hands, gripping the underside of the bench, became slick with sweat.

Oh no...

Right.

Yuri might have been cold and sharp-tongued, but he was still hugely popular with girls. Half the reason why people avoided him was either because he'd already rejected them or they were otherwise jealous of his popularity.

It was only natural that other girls would be asking him to the ball while Brigitte sat on her hands.

To make matters worse, the girl, who looked like a first-year student, was

super cute, even in Brigitte's estimation. Blushing and asking out an older boy—she was both gutsy and adorable.

What is Yuri going to say in response...?

Brigitte bit her lip anxiously.

She knew she had no right to complain. After all, she hadn't even asked Yuri herself. She knew she was out of line being upset.

But part of her desperately wanted Yuri to say no.

"No."

"...!"

Just as Brigitte had secretly hoped, Yuri turned the girl down in his brusque way. But instead of feeling relief, Brigitte was hit with a wave of trembling dismay, as if she was the one who'd just been cruelly rejected.

The girl's first reaction was shock; the second was anger.

"Aurealis, you always say no to everyone."

"..."

"S-so who are you going to go with, then? Don't tell me it's..."

"And how is that any of your business?"

"...Sorry to bother you."

The girl turned away, tears streaming down her face.

She walked off, very slowly, as if she was hoping Yuri would come after her. But he simply looked away with visible annoyance.

"...Is someone there?"

Together, Brigitte and Nival froze.

Yuri was clearly looking toward the bench.

"Wh-what should we do, Nival?"

"You're asking me...?"

Yuri raised his cold voice to pressure the hiding pair.

"You hide one second longer, and I'll rain icicles down on your head."

"It's... It's me!"

Unable to bear the tension any longer, Brigitte jumped to her feet.

Yuri's eyes widened, as if he hadn't expected to see someone he knew.

"Brigitte? What were you doing under there by yourself?"

"I—I actually wasn't by myself. The thing is..."

Brigitte looked next to her, where her accomplice was waiting.

But there was no one there.

What?!

As she hurriedly looked around, she saw the remnants of a small cyclone swirling in the spot.

H-he ran away with his ariel!

Whether it was Nival's order or the ariel's quick thinking, the class president had fled, along with his contracted spirit.

Traitor! Brigitte cried in her mind. But she knew Yuri wouldn't let her go without an answer.

"Ah, I mean, never mind. The thing is...," Brigitte kept stammering, unable to get the words out. "I was just talking with Nival about the ball! It's not like I was eavesdropping on you or anything, Yuri!"

"..." Yuri said nothing.

Brigitte was also unsure of what to say.

I...I accidentally told the truth!

But Brigitte had already been caught eavesdropping once, on a conversation between Joseph and Yuri. If he caught her at it again, he might not forgive her this time.

As Brigitte became paler and paler, Yuri stepped forward.

They faced each other across the bench. Now Brigitte was getting dizzy and felt like she was about to faint.

Yuri suddenly put his hands on the back of the bench.

"Are you going with Nival?"

His words took Brigitte by surprise.

Huh? That's what he's asking?

"No. I mean, he asked me to the ball, but I said no."

"Because you're going with another guy?"

Deflated, Brigitte shook her head.

"...Oh."

For a moment, it seemed the corners of Yuri's mouth softened a little with something like relief. But it didn't last long, and Yuri cleared his throat.

"So it looks like you're without a date. Well, so am I."

Hold on...

His tone was pointed, and Brigitte blinked.

Thinking about it... The way he'd phrased that was odd...

Without a date?

He'd just turned that girl down. And she had said he'd been turning down invitations left and right.

"Well, Brigitte, since we're both dateless...how about if you come to the ball with me?"

Still trying to puzzle out his phrasing, it took Brigitte a few seconds to realize what Yuri had just asked her.

No doubt her jaw was on the floor just then.

After a few seconds, Yuri frowned and spoke again, his voice flat.

"If you don't want to..."

"I...I didn't say I didn't want to!"

Flustered, she reached for the back of the bench and accidentally touched Yuri's hand.

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"Ah...!"
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That simple touch made Brigitte's cheeks heat up, and Yuri placed his hand on top of hers before she could pull away.

His skin was burning hot.

"Then give me an answer."

" "

"Brigitte?"

Wasn't it obvious what her answer would be, even without his prompting? She didn't love the way he'd asked her, but it was still the very invitation she'd been dreaming of.

"...If...if you insist, I'd be happy to accompany you. You'd be lonely going on your own, after all. Wouldn't you, Yuri...?"

Instead of simply blushing and nodding, Brigitte had tried to give a spunky answer.

But Yuri didn't respond. He just sighed and slowly ran his thumb over Brigitte's hand, as if he was checking it for any small injuries. It made a delicious shiver go all the way down Brigitte's spine.

"Right. Thanks," Yuri whispered softly in her ear.

His deep voice tickled her earlobe. Brigitte felt herself coming apart.

"Guh..."

He could be alarmingly straightforward sometimes.

Brigitte looked down to hide her pink cheeks.

She'd love to see what Yuri's face looked like right now.

Were his eyes softened with pleasure? Were his cheeks relaxed with relief? Or...? Or...?

...No, stop...

If she focused any harder on Yuri, she'd go crazy.

Though she was still anxious about so many things, Yuri's invitation had still

sent her heart soaring up to heaven.

Just before he leaned away...

"...I'm such a coward."

Brigitte thought she heard a soft murmur brush against her ear—but she didn't ask him to repeat it.

Maybe that made Brigitte a coward, too.



The Day of the Shrine Visit

"Father, please! I want to see your ifrit!"

Brigitte wondered how many times she'd made this request.

Her father must have been frustrated at times by Brigitte's constant repetition of the exact same thing.

In the past, he'd brushed her off, saying he was busy. Still, she'd clung to her father's legs and begged him. She desperately wanted to see the ifrit with her own eyes.

Ifrit, undine, sylphide, gnome!

These four spirits were each the most powerful of their respective element.

It was no surprise that Brigitte, who aspired to become a spiritologist, was beside herself with excitement to discover that her own father was contracted to one of the spirits she had seen so many times in picture books and heard about in stories.

"An ifrit is very dangerous, Brigitte."

That day her father stopped, turned around, put his hand on little Brigitte's shoulder, and delivered his lecture.

"On the day of the National Founding Festival, you will be able to see the ifrit's magic. Look forward to it."

"...I want to see it up even closer." Brigitte puffed out her cheeks.

The parade held at the Founding Festival usually concluded with the contracted spirits of the four great noble families casting giant spells into the

sky. Of course, Brigitte knew that each year her father would summon his ifrit in the mansion's garden and fulfill his part in this.

But Mother wants to go to town because she says it's too dangerous to stay nearby...

In the end, Brigitte always had to watch the sky glow with magic from somewhere in town.

Brigitte was always proud to see her father's spirit make the crowd roar with amazement, but she wished she could be right there to see it actually happening. She was sure the sight of her father standing alongside the ifrit would be just as impressive as the spirit's magic show.

Her father chuckled wryly, no doubt realizing that his little daughter wasn't satisfied.

"Very well. Then when you get a little bigger, I'll show you up close."

"Okay. Make a promise, Father."

"Yes. I promise, Brigitte."

And the two sealed it with a pinky swear.

They looked at each other and smiled. Like they'd be smiling together happily like this forever.

... Then finally, Brigitte realized that this was a dream.

"Chirp."

The anxious sound came from a small bird.

Brigitte opened her eyes to see a small yellow blur right before her eyes—her own contracted spirit, the phoenix Peep. Now that she was awake, Peep hopped closer on its little legs.



Peep rubbed its feathers against Brigitte's cheek. They were warm and soft, and the edge of one went into her mouth.

"Good morning, Peep." Brigitte giggled, and a tear slid loose from one eye.

She must have been crying in her sleep, and Peep had awoken her out of concern.

"I'm okay, Peep. Thank you for being concerned about me, though."

She tickled Peep's back, and its beady eyes squinted in a little smile.

After playing with her contracted spirit for a while, Brigitte finally got out of bed.

She recalled knitting last night, then nothing. She must have fallen asleep somewhere in the middle of it.

The half-finished scarf sat neatly on the side table. Sienna must have moved it there after Brigitte fell asleep.

Her father never did make good on his promise.

And that special day never arrived.

I have to do my best with what's in front of me!

School was closed for the weekend, but she had something important to do that day.

Yes, the long-awaited day of the shrine visit had arrived.



The carriage arrived to pick Brigitte up around the time she'd usually leave for school.

Where a noble family's crest would be, the carriage instead bore an image of a phoenix, the symbol of the Revan Shrine.

The driver was so polite to her that Brigitte felt strangely nervous.

Maybe it's because my contracted spirit is a phoenix...?

That must have something to do with it.

As Brigitte clambered into the carriage, she noticed there was another following behind it, just in time to see a boy with light-pink hair climbing inside.

Brigitte held her breath, but the next person to emerge was Marjory. Marjory was accompanying the group as their teacher and seemed to be riding in the same carriage as the first-year students.

"Good morning, Brigitte. Roze and Sana are already here, so now we just have to go pick up Yuri."

"R-right. Okay."

Brigitte managed a nod and finished climbing into the carriage alone.

After about ten minutes, they arrived in front of the Aurealis mansion. Yuri and his attendant, Clifford, said their customary good-byes, and then Yuri got into Brigitte's carriage.

"G-good morning, Yuri."

"...Good morning."

Brigitte exchanged a brief greeting with him as he took the seat opposite her, but she was unable to look him in the eye.

...Only two days had passed since Yuri had invited her to the ball.

How many times had she rolled back and forth on her bed, reliving that moment?

If I don't calm down, he'll think I'm weird. I need to take deep breaths... Deep breaths, Brigitte!

Breathing slowly in and out, Brigitte was able to calm her rapid heartbeat.

Yuri glanced sideways at Brigitte, who had regained her composure.

"You look a little pale."

"…!"

She'd hoped her makeup would hide that.

Brigitte was so surprised that she glanced up at Yuri.

When their eyes met, Yuri was expressionless as usual, but she noticed he

was frowning slightly.

He's that concerned about me?

That single thought filled Brigitte with joy, and before she knew it, she was talking to him.

"...I had a dream about something that happened a long time ago," she confessed.

Yuri's eyes sharpened slightly. "A bad dream?"

"No. In fact, it was about a very happy memory."

Brigitte briefly outlined her dream for Yuri, who listened without speaking.

Once she was done, Yuri looked out the window. "It's not too late, though, is it?" he muttered.

"Um. for what?"

"To contract with one of the four highest-ranking spirits."

Finally figuring out what he was saying, Brigitte let her jaw drop.

He...he means capture one of the four highest-ranking spirits by myself?

"Yuri... You know, sometimes you say the most amazing things with such overconfidence...!"

"It's not overconfidence. I'd actually say I'm understating." The utter lack of irony in his expression caught Brigitte off guard. "Hmph," Yuri snorted. "If that would have been enough to satisfy your dreams as a child, then I don't see any reason against you pursuing it."

"But..."

Brigitte couldn't find any other words. All she could do was clear her throat loudly.

She wished he wouldn't say such kind things about her in such an offhand way. It set her heart pounding so hard that she couldn't even speak properly.

All this strain on my heart... I'll need a dozen new ones at this rate!

The carriage carrying the restless Brigitte and her companion slowly came to a

halt.

It seemed they'd finally reached the shrine. To Brigitte, this came as a relief.

...The Central Shrine.

The shrine, otherwise known as the Revan Sect Headquarters, was a towering stone structure close to the outer wall of the royal capital.

Brigitte got off the carriage and gazed up at the enormous building.

"I'm...I'm so nervous."

"Really?"

Yuri, standing beside her, didn't seem to share her sentiments. After all, he'd already been invited to the shrine last year as an academy representative.

"Brigitte, Yuri."

Marjory had gotten out of her own carriage and called out to them.

Brigitte looked over at the two students trailing behind her.

The students faced each other, separated by grade, and Marjory clasped her hands together.

"Let's all introduce ourselves. We should at least make sure we all know one another's names."

After being prompted, Yuri was the first to speak. "...Yuri Aurealis. Second-year student."

His introduction was brusque and utterly devoid of friendliness.

Brigitte went next. "Brigitte Meidell. I'm a second-year, too."

"I'm Sana Rozin. I'm a first-year."

"Roze Meidell, first-year."

Once the brief introductions were over, silence fell. Only Marjory was smiling.

Brigitte examined the first-year students.

Sana was a petite girl with brown bobbed hair and eyes that were tight with nerves behind her glasses.

But it was the boy beside her who Brigitte was more concerned with.

Roze Meidell...

This was Brigitte's first time seeing him up close. He was staring fixedly at Marjory with a tight smile, as if he was avoiding eye contact with Brigitte.

His hair was light pink and curly, and he had pale-gray eyes. He didn't look much like either Brigitte or her parents. Maybe because they were only distantly related.

He'd been adopted into the Meidell family around the time that Brigitte was banished to the cottage. Like her father, he had also made a contract with an ifrit. So it made sense that Roze would be chosen as a representative for the shrine visit.

Roze was technically something like a stepbrother to Brigitte, but the two lived in completely different worlds—he in the main family house, her in the cottage. They'd never even spoken to each other before.

Secretly, Brigitte did want to talk to him a little. They might have only been distantly related, but he was still her brother.

Still, I wonder if he was cautioned not to speak to me.

She worried that approaching him might inconvenience him. And it was hard to tell, but it was possible that Roze himself harbored some animosity toward Brigitte.

In the end, she decided against speaking to him.

"Well then, shall we enter the shrine?"

Marjory was unfazed by the unpleasant atmosphere and smoothly took charge.

Brigitte didn't have pleasant memories of the contracting ceremony she had experienced here, but the actual ceremony itself had taken place in a sub-shrine on the grounds, not in the main shrine. Brigitte could see it in the distance, but she managed not to be too intimidated.

As they walked, Yuri spoke to her in a low tone. "Are you still nervous?"

"Um, well..."

"You want to hold my hand?"

"Well, uh... Wait, what?!" Brigitte gasped, breaking her pattern of noncommittal responses.

Yuri gently brushed her fingertips with his.

All of a sudden, her cheeks were burning. "W-wait, Yuri! The first-years will see!"

"Who cares? Let them watch."

You may not care, but I certainly do!

Brigitte gulped. There were already rumors circulating about her and Yuri. They didn't need to go making things any worse.

But she also realized that Yuri wasn't just joking around.

Maybe he's worried about me because I shared that dream about Father with him.

Yuri was always concerned with Brigitte's well-being.

Roze was watching the two of them from behind...but Brigitte didn't notice.

The group entered the shrine through the open front doors and were greeted by dozens of priests lined up on each side.

"We have been waiting for you, students of Otoleanna Academy."

Whoa...

Brigitte shrank back as the robed men smiled at them.

One man's robes were particularly ornate, and he stepped out from the group.

"I am Liam, the new high priest of the Central Shrine. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Liam looked to be in his forties, and he was a charismatic man with a soft smile.

He bowed, and Brigitte and the others followed suit.

The previous high priest had been working with the third prince, Joseph, and was a total pawn of his.

While the old high priest was being interrogated at the royal palace, Liam had been installed as high priest in his place. Apparently, he was originally the high priest of the Western Shrine, but he had been suddenly transferred to the Central Shrine due to the current situation.

"Allow me to apologize for the inconvenience caused to you all at Otoleanna. Especially to you, Lady Brigitte. I know amends can never be made, but..."

All attention was now focused on Brigitte.

Brigitte frantically waved her hands in front of her face. "Oh, please don't apologize! We've already received a formal apology letter from the shrine, after all..."

Brigitte had her own feelings about this place, but she couldn't bring herself to blame Liam or any of the other priests present.

"...I see. We are grateful for your magnanimity." Liam's brows drew together. "Ah yes," he said, as if a thought had just occurred to him. "We have some time before the banquet. I can show you around the shrine until the archbishop arrives. Many rare magical devices and relics are kept in the Central Shrine. I would be happy to explain as much to you as I can."

At his suggestion, the two first-years looked at each other and nodded.

When all eyes turned to her, Brigitte hesitated, then cleared her throat.

"I, um... I mean, if possible, I'd like to look around the inside of the shrine freely..."

The surrounding priests seemed disappointed, but Liam nodded cheerfully. "Of course. I will call for you when the time comes. Until then, feel free to wander around."

Accompanied by Liam, the first-years and Marjory disappeared down the hallway.

Brigitte thought she was finally alone, but then she realized someone was standing beside her, arms crossed.

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"Huh? Yuri?"

"I'll accompany you."

Brigitte's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"You'll just get lost by yourself."

How rude!

Brigitte wasn't a kid.
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Still, she was a little worried about wandering around an unfamiliar building by herself. She'd feel safer having Yuri with her, since he knew the place a little better than she did.

"You want to see the spiritologist, right?"

"...Mm-hmm. You're perceptive."

It seemed that Yuri knew what Brigitte was thinking.

Brigitte had fallen in love with the world of spiritology by reading *The Wind Laughs*. The book was written by a spiritologist named Lien Baluanuki. He had met his close friend's contracted spirit, a sylphide, and written a story about the spirit world she described.

Apparently, Lien's friend was in poor health and wasn't able to go out.

Whenever Lien visited his friend, he would tell the sylphide stories of the human world, and the sylphide would tell him stories of the spirit world. Over time, Lien and the sylphide became drawn to each other.

The two split a magic stone between them and promised that one day they would travel to each other's worlds together.

Although I don't know if they ever made good on that promise...

Approximately twenty years ago, Lien's friend had died of illness, and Lien, now an old man, had disappeared. No one knew where he went, but the prevailing theory was that he was taken away to the spirit world by the sylphide, who had lost her contractor.

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"Peep, peep."
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"Oh, Peep?"

Peep suddenly popped out of its hiding place in Brigitte's hair.

Perhaps the wayward spirit had decided to show itself now that there were fewer people around. Peep flapped its wings and landed on the floor, then took off running on unsteady legs.

"Peep, where are you going?"

"Chirp, chirp," it replied, but Brigitte didn't know what that meant.

"Guess we should follow?" Yuri suggested.

"...Yeah."

Brigitte nodded.

At any rate, she had no idea where Tonari could be. It might be quicker just to start wandering around, looking.

Following the energetic little chick, Brigitte and Yuri searched for Tonari.

"Wow, this place is so beautiful. Are the paintings on the ceilings here like murals depicting the life cycles of humans and spirits?"

"Could well be. They seem a bit idealized, though. Like in the textbooks."

"These were painted by spirits! Gosh, they're so artistic!"

"It just looks like a child's scribbling to me..."

"But isn't that even more adorable?!"

Although they couldn't seem to find who she was looking for, it was still fun looking around the unfamiliar shrine, and Brigitte even began to forget why she'd come here in the first place.

Peep hopped down a flight of stairs and headed outside. Brigitte followed, then gasped in admiration at the sight that greeted her.

"Goodness..."

It was a small garden lit up with sunlight.

The cobblestone paths were lined with trees. A gentle breeze blew through the branches, and the crimson leaves rustled like they were whispering. Squinting through the dappled light, Brigitte saw a small stream dividing the cobblestone path. She smiled softly as the babbling of the water reached her ears.

I've been so ill at ease with everything going on, but here...

Joseph's hatred for her. Her father ordering her back to the family home.

Being in this lovely place didn't solve those things, but it did soothe Brigitte's heart a bit. And maybe the company had something to do with it, too.

"It's gorgeous here."

"...Yes, it is."

She wasn't sure if Yuri truly shared her sentiments, but he nodded agreeably.

The two of them continued walking side by side along the cobblestone path for a while. Peep hopped along ahead, seemingly unconcerned about anything.

"Peep?"

The chick spirit suddenly stopped in its tracks.

Wondering what Peep had seen, Brigitte went closer and found a beautiful fountain at the end of the garden.

Someone was lying down, precariously balanced, on the lip of it.

Brigitte recognized the person, though his face was covered with an old hat. It was the very person she'd been looking for. "Oh!" she cried.

"...Asleep, though."

"Definitely asleep. And surrounded by little fairies!"

Yuri was right. The spiritologist Tonari was covered with adorable little fairies.

They crawled into his sleeves, tugged on his ears, and so on. While they were doing whatever they wanted to him, Tonari was mumbling in his sleep, although he looked to be having a good time.

It seemed that Tonari was used to such treatment and that the disturbance wasn't likely to wake him.

Of course, spiritologists are adored by fairies...

Brigitte watched, deeply impressed.

The Meidell family house and property were imbued with strong fire power, so physically weak fairies tended to avoid it. The gardener, Hans, had planted an ash tree in the garden of the cottage, though, and sometimes fairies gathered around it. Still, Brigitte had never seen so many of them at once.

Suddenly noticing Brigitte's envious gaze, the fairies scattered and vanished like a swarm of baby spiders.

Oh...

Brigitte felt a little disappointed to see them go. Then Tonari all of a sudden sat up.

"Yawn... Ah, that was a good nap."

The hat slid down Tonari's chin as his mouth opened wide. He placed it back where it belonged, then finally turned his head to the pair.

"Ah, Brigitte. It's been a while, has it not?"

Tonari rubbed his unruly stubble, which seemed to be the same length as it had been the last time Brigitte had encountered him.

"Hello, Mr. Tonari," she said.

"Oh, yes, today's the day the students are coming for the dinner, isn't it?" Tonari said, apparently remembering. He bent down and scooped Peep up in his cupped palm. "Your phoenix seems to be doing well. Good."

"Peep, peep," Peep replied happily.

But then...

"Pee-erk!"

...the little bird suddenly jerked and flew over to Brigitte, nestling into her hair as a small ball of feathers.

"What's wrong?"

The reason for this became clear a second later. A shadow crawled out from within Tonari's loose clothing.

It was a small black cat with gold eyes that glowed mysteriously. It was shaped like any ordinary cat, but Brigitte could clearly sense the magical power emanating from the creature.

It's a cait-sith!

A second-class dark spirit.

Cait-siths could mimic human speech and blend into people's lives without revealing their true identities. The legends said that in the past, pet cats would suddenly start talking fluently before fleeing through open windows.

Apparently, this cait-sith was Tonari's contracted spirit.

The cat spirit looked up at Brigitte, its black tail swishing back and forth. She could see sharp teeth glittering inside its wide-open mouth.

"Yes, the young lady's got something."

"What?"

"I can sense the little bird's presence. A cait-sith can tell, even without seeing."

A lock of Brigitte's red hair began to tremble violently.

The cait-sith narrowed its eyes. "There's something there, I know it..."

"Ah, all right, all right. That's enough, cait-sith." Tonari grabbed the cat spirit by the scruff of its neck. "If you eat that phoenix and word gets out, we'll both be hunted down."

"Phoenix? That's a phoenix?"

"It is indeed. So you'd better not eat it, right?"

"What nonsense. Any cait-sith who eats a phoenix will earn itself a place in the history books."

The cait-sith looked delighted at the thought.

Tonari scratched his head and looked at Yuri. "Well, this isn't good. You, boy from the Water Clan. Do us a favor and bring out your fenrir, hmm?"

"A fenrir?! Hiss!"

The cait-sith flew into a sudden panic.

Apparently, the cait-sith did not like the ice wolf. The cat spirit immediately melted away into the air and disappeared.

It must have returned to the spirit world. Inside Brigitte's pocket, Peep rubbed its beak with relief.

Now perhaps they could actually have a proper conversation. Timidly, Brigitte cleared her throat.

"Umm, Mr. Tonari. The thing is, I'm hoping to become a spiritologist, and..."

Maybe she should have waited until dinner to ask, but the thought of doing so in front of Marjory and the others, not to mention her brother...

I shouldn't talk about wanting to leave home and make an independent living in front of him...

If Brigitte were in Roze's position, she'd probably take it as a shot across the bow.

"Oh, is that so? Well, do your best" was all Tonari said.

It wasn't an enthusiastic response, but he wasn't trying to dissuade her, either.

Encouraged by this at any rate, Brigitte cut right to the chase.

"I was wondering if you could give me any helpful advice today."

"Hmm, helpful advice, eh...?"

Tonari sat cross-legged on the lip of the fountain. Eventually, he shook his head.

"Honestly, I'm not good at that sort of thing. I'm not really the kind of person you want giving advice."

Yuri muttered something like, "So I would have assumed," and Brigitte felt a rising wave of panic.

But luckily, Tonari didn't seem to catch what Yuri had said. He kept talking.

"Quite a few individuals call themselves spiritologists, but there are only four

people in the country who are officially recognized, including me. Since approval from the royal family is required, it's a high hurdle for ordinary people. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I say approval from the royal family, but that's just paperwork. You don't get to meet with the king and discuss it or anything. Basically, you just need to get a referral from an official at the royal palace and a stamp of approval from an already established spiritologist."

Tonari paused for a moment.

"But in your case, you might face pushback."

"What do you mean?"

The shrewd eyes peering out from below the brim of the hat were fixed intently on Brigitte.

"Brigitte. Any priest who manages to bring you into the fold of the shrine will be a shoo-in to become the next archbishop."

Brigitte frowned. That wasn't something she'd expected to hear.

"Is that because...I'm a contractor of a phoenix?"

"That's right. Your contracted spirit, a phoenix, is highly valued within the Revan sect. Worshipped as a god, in fact. With a phoenix's power in their hands, the shrine's influence and sway will immediately undergo a dramatic transformation."

"But..."

"The current archbishop is a decent man, so perhaps you don't need to worry...but this isn't just limited to shrine politics. It wouldn't be surprising if someone tried to use that phoenix to take over the entire world."

Th-the entire world?!

Brigitte's jaw dropped.

The Revan sect believed in spirits and had many followers in other countries, apparently. The spirit they worshipped the most highly, as the zenith of their

faith, was the phoenix, a being said to be immortal.

For several hundred years now, believers had cropped up, claiming to have caught glimpses of this divine being, and rumors of its existence had spread far and wide across the world.

The detailed description in *The Wind Laughs* also did much to raise the profile of the phoenix.

Peep's existence alone is proof that the legendary phoenix exists...

Brigitte understood the logic behind it all. Now it made sense why the priests seemed to be smiling especially warmly at her just before.

But the implications were too immense for her to process.

A vague feeling of unease began to spread through her once more.

Why are they so selfish? Father, the shrine...

Brigitte's father, who had neglected her for so long, had completely changed his tune the instant he'd found out the identity of Brigitte's contracted spirit.

Tonari intensely watched Brigitte as her face shifted through various emotions.

Then Yuri suddenly spoke. "Well, there's no need for concern either way."

Surprised, Brigitte looked at him.

Yuri did not return her gaze and continued decisively. "Because I intend to protect Brigitte myself."

...*Huh?*

Brigitte stiffened with shock.

His handsome face showed no hint of doubt. Yuri stood calmly with his arms crossed. Brigitte had no idea what to say.

But while Brigitte simply stood there, Tonari sighed with exasperation.

"You say you'll protect her... But can you keep that up your whole life? You and she are both nobles. No doubt, you'll both end up marrying at some point —ah." He looked as if he'd just had a thought. "Oh, is that how it is? The two of

you would marry each—?"

"Yeek?!!!"

Brigitte shrieked, shocked out of her mind by this insinuation. She couldn't have stopped the sound if she'd tried.

Yuri frowned at the noise as Brigitte grabbed his arm.

If she was in her right mind, she wouldn't have grabbed him. But she wasn't.

She was too scattered to even notice Yuri's own expression.

"Yuri! Yuri! Let's go and take a look around somewhere else now, okay?"

"What? What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"There's still so much I want to see!" Brigitte pleaded, tugging on his arm.

Yuri said nothing, and he had no choice but to allow Brigitte to drag him. "Excuse us, then, Mr. Tonari..."

But Tonari had already gone back to sleep. He was lying once more on the edge of the fountain, snoring loudly.

What a free spirit he is...

Honestly, Brigitte would have loved to ask more about the work of a spiritologist—but at this rate, that looked like a tall order.

"Well then, let's go, Yuri."

Tugging Yuri along by the arm, Brigitte led the way back through the garden and into the shrine again.

"Anything you're curious to see, Yuri?"

"..."

There was no answer. Suspicious, Brigitte came to a stop, and Yuri stopped a step later.

Then Brigitte realized what she'd been doing.

Their shadows on the short-pile carpet overlapped, their forms pressed tightly together.

"...Oh..."

Finally, Brigitte realized that she'd overstepped into Yuri's personal space.

Their bodies were pressed so closely together, no one could have come between them. And Brigitte was clinging to his muscular arm with both hands.

She looked like a starry-eyed young girl hanging off her boyfriend and being flirty.

"Ex...excuse me!!! Ah-ha-ha! Sorry, I got a bit flustered for some reason!"

Making her excuses, Brigitte dropped Yuri's arm.

She felt so embarrassed and awkward, she couldn't bring herself to lift her head.

Oh no! This is terrible! I just practically forced myself on him... What if he's totally creeped out...?

But as Brigitte was about to take a quick step away from him, stewing in self-loathing...

Suddenly, Yuri reached out and grabbed Brigitte's hand.

"Huh?"

Brigitte jerked in surprise, which Yuri must have noticed, but he didn't let go.

"You told me to hold your hand, didn't you?"

"Ack...!" Brigitte hiccuped with shock. He had said it so brazenly...

Yes... I did say that!

When Yuri was about to punch Joseph...she'd said something like, "Instead of hitting him, I wish you'd hold my hand forever!"

Did Yuri plan to keep bringing that moment up? It was so embarrassing. Brigitte couldn't stand the thought.

"As I said before... In the heat of the moment, I just..."

But despite her protests, Yuri linked his long fingers with hers.

Her heart was thumping to an odd rhythm. Yuri's touch, his grasp, was firmer than it had ever been...

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"Yuri..."
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"Brigitte..."

Yuri's voice matched hers...husky and intense.

His free arm snaked smoothly around Brigitte's waist.

This was almost an embrace. Brigitte found she could hardly breathe.

What? Why's he doing this all of a sudden...?

She felt as if she should say something, but the way he squeezed her fingers had her mesmerized...

Her brain wasn't getting enough oxygen, so Yuri's voice sounded hazy.

"Quiet."

Huh?

Brigitte blinked rapidly, but a second later...

"You must have been shocked, too, eh, Roze?"

They could hear a voice coming from beyond the nearby door. A familiar, feminine, mocking voice, one they'd heard only an hour ago.

"Who would have thought that the hated Red Fairy would be chosen as the representative of the second-years?"

Roze and Sana were talking on the other side of the door.

They couldn't hear Roze, however, just Sana talking away.

"I understand about Aurealis. He's talented, even if he's a little unapproachable. But it's odd how the Red Fairy made a contract with a phoenix, of all things, when everyone said it was a no-name spirit. Maybe she used some underhanded trick to get that to happen."

A trick?

When Brigitte heard that, she couldn't help but smile ironically.

"...She's not like that."

A dissenting voice quieted Sana's gossiping. The same voice Brigitte had heard

earlier, when they'd all been introducing themselves.

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Is Roze...sticking up for me?
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But...they'd never even had a single conversation, despite being family on paper.

They'd never even lived in the same house, so why would Roze take Brigitte's side?

She inched a little closer to the door in hopes of hearing a little better.

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"...Hey." Yuri raised his voice a little.
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Oh, right... He still had his arm around her waist, holding her close...but by the time she remembered, she'd already taken a big step forward.

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"Wait."
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"Huh?"

...SPLAT!

Brigitte and Yuri tripped over each other's feet and fell to the floor.

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"I-I'm sor—!"
```

But Brigitte didn't get to finish the apology.

She'd fallen on top of Yuri and pushed him down to the ground. That was why she hadn't gotten hurt.

Brigitte could see that Yuri had cushioned her fall. She should probably thank him.

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Except... Except...
```

He's way too close...!

Yuri's blue hair was disheveled, and his brow was furrowed.



His slender lips formed a small "Ow," and his breath tickled Brigitte's lips. She felt a chill go down her spine.

Yuri had his eyes closed, and he didn't seem to realize their lips were close enough to almost be touching.

"...Is...? Is someone there?"

They heard a raised voice and footsteps from the other room. *This is* not *good*, Brigitte thought, going completely pale.

If she was caught lying on top of a boy from her class in the halls of a sacred shrine, how would she ever explain herself?

She could tell the truth all she liked—that they'd tripped and Yuri had broken her fall—but that didn't mean that Roze and Sana would believe her.

"Blue."

However, unlike Brigitte, Yuri remained calm. He called out curtly into the void, summoning his contracted spirit.

The ice wolf descended into the human world and grabbed the back of Brigitte's collar in their mouth, lifting her up.

Yikes!

Blue dragged Brigitte around a bend in the hallway, before she had time to protest.

At around the same time, the door swung open.

"Huh? Aurealis...?"

The first thing Brigitte heard was Sana's surprised voice.

Brigitte finally managed to sit up and found herself eye to eye with Blue sitting beside her. The beautiful wolf, with fur the color of a frozen lake, was snuffling at her with its wet nose.

"Tch, always causing trouble..."

"I-I'm sorry..."

Blue could admonish her all they liked today. She had nothing to say in her

defense.

Just imagining what would have happened if the door had opened while she was still on top of Yuri... She had to give Yuri credit for his quick thinking.

Oh...where is Yuri anyway?

Yuri was probably still lying on the floor as well.

While Blue watched haughtily over her, Brigitte stuck her head around the corner to check. From this angle, Roze was almost completely obscured behind Sana, but she could see Yuri.

"Are you all right, Aurealis? We heard a loud noise..."

"So did I... I came to check, myself."

Yuri's amazing... He doesn't look shaken at all... And he's lying so brazenly!

He was standing there casually, arms crossed.

He must have gotten up right after Brigitte left, smoothed his hair, and brushed the dust off of his clothes.

Sana seemed flustered by the supercilious gaze of the pristine young man before her.

"By the way," Yuri added, "I don't approve of people who gossip about other Otoleanna students."

"! ...Sorry."

Brigitte heard Roze apologizing, and Sana hung her head.

Even from a distance, she could see the color drain from Sana's face. She probably never expected Yuri to say something like that to her.

"Sorry... The priest wanted to see me...," she mumbled, then cut in front of Yuri and fled at a fast jog.

Brigitte stiffened, but luckily, Sana was running off in the opposite direction.

Brigitte had thought that would be the end of the matter, but then she realized that Roze was still there, facing Yuri.

Roze cleared his throat, as if the silence was too much to bear.

"Aurealis, a-are you on good terms with the Re...uh...with Brigitte?" Roze stammered.

Brigitte blinked, surprised that Roze would be interested in that.

Yuri seemed to share her sentiments and raised an eyebrow at Roze.

Roze continued, somewhat awkwardly. "I saw you holding hands earlier, so..."

He was watching us...!

Brigitte wondered why she felt so embarrassed. She blushed and cringed in her hiding spot as Blue gave her a somewhat disgusted look.

"Oh? Are you jealous?"

"What?!"

Yuri! What are you saying?!

Roze seemed taken aback by Yuri's offhanded reply—and so was Brigitte, for that matter.

Roze scratched his wavy hair distractedly.

"...That's not why... It's just, I was wondering if you knew her well or not."

"From the way you keep talking about her, it sounds like you're the one who knows so much about her."

Yuri said this smoothly, eyebrow still raised.

Roze's expression changed. "It's just that I'm not exactly in a position to speak to her myself," he snapped in a sudden flare of anger. But a second later, he covered his mouth and gasped. "Sorry. You have nothing to do with it, Aurealis... I shouldn't be lashing out at you."

"...Excuse me?"

Now Yuri was the one to undergo a dramatic change.

The look in his eyes darkened, and tension crackled in the air.

For the first time in a long time, Brigitte remembered that Yuri was feared by those around him and was known as the Frozen Blade.

Roze must have noticed the change, too; his shoulders stiffened, and his face

tensed.

But what was it about Roze's words that had so angered Yuri? Before Brigitte had a chance to think about it, Yuri spoke in tones of contempt and disgust.

"In that case, you should really talk to Brigitte yourself."

Um, Yuri?!

He was really running his mouth today!

"Huh?"

Roze was clearly confused, and Brigitte was right there with him.

"I can't. I'm certain she hates me..."

"You should ask her that, too. It's not like I'd know."

"It's easy to just keep saying, 'talk to her, talk to her,' but this is a family issue."

"If it's a family issue, then don't bother me about it. And you *are* bothering me, you know."

"...How much longer must we endure this tedium?"

While Brigitte crouched there in a state of high anxiety, Blue started idly grooming their fur.



"Welcome home, Miss Brigitte," said Sienna. "Are you all right?"

Brigitte returned to the cottage, feeling a little unsteady.

She must have looked haggard. Sienna seemed worried, but Brigitte shook her head to reassure her.

"I'm just a little tired. I'm going to go to bed early tonight."

"But you're planning on continuing your knitting, yes?"

"Oh, uh..."

Brigitte flinched.

Sienna sighed softly and took the coat and bag from her mistress's arms.

"Well, just a little, all right? After your bath."

"Okay... Thank you!"

Brigitte beamed, while Sienna shrugged and smiled wryly.

"So, how was the dinner at the shrine?"

"Er..."

Brigitte thought back.

It was just a few hours before.

The archbishop, having finished his business, returned to the Central Shrine, and then the meal was served in the reception room on the first floor.

For a dinner party, it wasn't really all that formal. The food was simple, with a lot of home cooking—style dishes, like herby pumpkin stew and fried white fish. The fish was probably because the shrine was situated near a large river.

Apparently, the shrine had its own chef, and although the food was maybe a little bland, it was all tasty enough.

The dinner basically went off without a hitch.

Mostly their teacher, Marjory, and the high priest, Liam, did the talking.

Those two would come up with conversation topics; Tonari, Yuri, and Brigitte would reply; and Roze and Sana would occasionally chime in. The elderly archbishop didn't say much, just listened with a smile on his face.

Because of Tonari's warning, Brigitte was on high alert, but the archbishop didn't even mention Peep.

Peep usually only emerged in public on its various whims, but that day the little phoenix had been wandering about freely beneath the table.

The archbishop had watched with a warm look in his eyes as Brigitte fed Peep bits of bread.

Seeing his reaction, Brigitte was reminded of what had transpired the

previous month.

When the archbishop had beheld Peep after its awakening as a phoenix at the academy, he had only cried without a word. As Tonari had said, he didn't strike Brigitte as the kind of person who'd want to use Peep in some nefarious plans for world domination.

Then, when they were eating the walnut cookies served as dessert...

The archbishop suddenly said, "How about this? We could have the four of them march in the National Founding Day parade."

The Founding Festival was mostly organized in coordination with the royal palace and the shrine. The parade was the highlight, with the contracted spirits of the priests going on a grand march through the capital.

But Brigitte had never heard of any magic academy students participating.

Tonari, crunching away at the cookies, spoke up.

"Archbishop, are you suggesting this because of the phoenix?"

"That wasn't my intention, however..."

Brigitte was surprised at how frankly Tonari spoke to the archbishop, the shrine's highest authority figure.

Liam shot Tonari a worried look, but Brigitte thought she saw the already small archbishop visibly shrink in his seat.

"I apologize. I must decline."

Roze spoke up hesitantly.

Sana added that she wanted to decline, too. After that awkward moment earlier with Yuri, she certainly wouldn't want to participate in anything without her fellow student Roze present as a buffer.

But Brigitte had said... "Please allow me some time to consider it."

I wonder why I said that...

Brigitte was surprised with herself.

Tonari had made it very clear that, as she was contracted with a phoenix, she should do her best not to attract too much attention.

Maybe she'd only said it because of the lingering emotions from that dream she'd had that morning.

Though it was doubtful that Yuri understood why Brigitte had responded the way she did—she didn't even understand why herself—he still gave the same response.

And there's going to be some research done into Peep, too...

Brigitte had been told that a new investigation would be conducted into Peep's characteristics and abilities at a later date, but it was all but confirmed already that Peep was a phoenix. Even the archbishop himself had witnessed Peep healing the wound on Brigitte's hand. Any investigation would surely only be a formality.

Liam and Tonari would be coming to the academy to serve as the examiners. This seemed to be out of consideration for Brigitte. The archbishop appeared to be disappointed that he couldn't come himself... But then, he was a very busy man.

If the investigation could prove that Peep was definitively a phoenix, then there would be mention of Brigitte's spirit in all the spirit tomes and encyclopedias.

As one who wanted to become a spiritologist, Brigitte thought this was a good thing. And if Peep became part of spirit lore, then that would lead to a better understanding of the spirit world for everyone.

"Well then, miss... I'll be back to check on you in an hour."

"Okay."

After taking a bath and changing into her pajamas, Brigitte nodded and saw Sienna off.

After Sienna left Brigitte's room, she took out the scarf she'd been working on.

Clutching her knitting needles, she tried to summon her energy for the work

ahead.

Brigitte was never going to be good at fiddly crafts, but this time spent before bed had become precious to her.

Naturally, she hoped to please Yuri with the gift of the scarf.

But also...

When she became fully absorbed in her work...that was the only time she could clear her head completely of her complicated thoughts.



The next day, Brigitte and Yuri were sitting across from each other at their usual gazebo near the library.

Near the stream at the bottom of the steps, Blue, in human form, and Peep were chasing each other around.

"Peep, you're too slow!"

"Peep? Peep!!!"

"What? You're getting mad now? Ah-ha-ha!"

"Peeeeep!!!"

The ice wolf and the fire bird—one wouldn't think those two spirits would get along well, but they seemed to enjoy playing together.

With the two mismatched animals in the corner of her eye, Brigitte decided to confirm something with Yuri.

"So we have a written exam next week... It's our fourth time going head-to-head."

"Right."

So far, Brigitte and Yuri had competed three times. They had a simple rivalry going on between them, with only one condition: The loser had to do anything the winner said.

So far, the results were one draw, one victory for Yuri, and the third time, too,

was a draw. Brigitte hadn't managed to win against Yuri even once.

Yuri was a genius with immense talent, often avoided by his peers, but Brigitte had come to know and understand him.

He might have been a genius, but that wasn't why his name was always top of the exam scoreboard. It was because he put in the work.

Yuri was always cool and aloof, and some people took that the wrong way. But Yuri was, in truth, a hard worker.

I have no hope of beating Yuri in a written test alone...

Brigitte was about to give up when she suddenly realized something.

I can't go getting despondent before I've even tried.

If she'd already lost in her mind, she'd have no hope. Brigitte clenched her fists beneath the table, where Yuri wouldn't see.

The subjects for the upcoming written exam were already set. There were only three that had a lot to do with spirits: foundation of magic, applied magic, and spiritual studies. In the class schedule as of late, classes in anthropology and history had been significantly cut, and those time slots had been allocated to these three subjects.

Every time she thought about it, Brigitte was reminded that they would be graduating next spring.



"Graduation is coming up fast...," she muttered under her breath, and Yuri raised an eyebrow at her.

"There's still almost six months left."

That was true. Only six months...

After graduating from the academy...

Brigitte would leave the cottage and become a spiritologist.

That was her goal, at least. And in that case, she had no time to lose.

Deag had ordered her back to the family home. If she didn't give the answer he wanted, he would kick her out of the cottage at that point. This meant that she would be homeless even before she graduated.

If that happens, I'll just have to continue attending school as usual somehow...

The thought of it made Brigitte feel completely despondent.

In her own room, she could focus on knitting her scarf, but she couldn't do that at the academy. Especially not when the intended recipient of her scarf was sitting directly in front of her right now.

"Did something happen with your father?" Yuri asked suddenly.

Her eyes went wide.

"How did you...?"

"You were telling me about your father on the carriage ride to the shrine."

Brigitte had mentioned dreaming about the past, and clearly it still was on Yuri's mind.

Brigitte felt her breath catch with happiness to know Yuri cared.

She cleared her throat several times, then spoke in a weak voice. "Actually... my father told me to come back to the family home."

Yuri's eyes widened.

Honestly, she wasn't planning to tell him about it. She'd often discussed her life circumstances with Yuri up until now, but this seemed to be a private, Meidell-family-only matter.

Still, it was true that Yuri was really the only person Brigitte could open up to.

Yuri would listen patiently to all her worries... Even the ones that made her feel weak and pathetic, ones she couldn't express openly...

"I...I don't know what I want to do. I don't even know if the family home is a place I even want to return to, now or ever..."

"..."

"When I met with Father, I was terrified. Just hearing his voice made me shake... I was so scared."

Brigitte clasped her hands on her lap.

Peep had used its powers to heal the burn scars her father had inflicted on her left hand. But the pain inflicted on her that rainy day eleven years ago still tormented Brigitte, and it seemed that would continue.

"And yet... Hee-hee. It's odd, isn't it? There was a part of me that was actually...pleased." Brigitte lifted her head and smiled.

Well, it was weak facsimile of a smile... Perhaps you couldn't accurately call it a smile after all.

"When I was five, I dreamed that Father would say that to me. I wanted him to come and pick me up. I wanted my mother to hug me. I wished it had all just been a bad dream..."

She had been banished to the small cottage and suffered from the pain of the burn every day...

Though she knew the cottage was her new home, her punishment, she still had hope deep in her heart. She kept waiting and hoping for her parents to forgive her, to come get her.

But they never did. One day, Brigitte heard a servant say that her father had adopted a promising boy to be his official heir and successor.

The salvation she'd hoped for did not come.

Her family had abandoned Brigitte a long time ago.

"I know, it's ridiculous. Even now, my father sees me only as Peep's

contractor, nothing more."

Yuri stood abruptly from his seat.

Brigitte gulped, looking up. She was sure she had the expression of an abandoned child.

Yuri narrowed his eyes in frustration and came around the table, sitting next to her and clasping his fine-boned hands over hers.

He held her hands carefully, as if they were something fragile and precious.

"...Just because you're still trembling," Yuri muttered, as if he was making a faint excuse for this sudden, gallant gesture.

Brigitte's hands loosened.

She must have been digging her nails into her palms. They felt sore and hot. But the feel of Yuri's skin on hers made the slight pain insignificant.

As her hands unclenched, Yuri's fingers slid between hers.

Nng!

Somehow, Brigitte managed to stay silent.

Lately, Yuri seemed to be touching her hands a lot, in an unusual sort of way.

There might not be any deeper meaning to it, though!

Every time he did it, Brigitte felt like her heart was going to pound out of her chest—but of course he didn't know that.

"Yuri!"

"What?"

It was hard to complain when he seemed so oblivious.

Brigitte gulped inwardly but remained quiet. Yuri stayed silent, too.

The only sound floating on the wind was the noise of Blue and Peep playing.

Then Brigitte felt something click into place in her heart.

The feeling of this hand...

Yes, she remembered.

It had been some time since her realization that these were the same hands that had grabbed hers when she was five years old and Deag had shoved them into the fireplace.

For some reason, she'd never found the opportunity to bring that up.

But she was changing that now. She just wanted to convey to him that she knew about those gentle hands.

"Hey, Yuri."

Their eyes met.

Swallowing nervously, Brigitte continued in a tremulous voice.

"Eleven years ago, you..."

"Whoa!"

There was a loud splash and a scream, and then Peep started chirping loudly. Apparently, Blue had fallen into the river.

Yuri dropped Brigitte's hand, dashed out of the gazebo, and leaped down the stairs.

Brigitte watched him leave, stunned. There was nothing else she could do.

"What are you doing, you fool?"

"Oh, Master! What's wrong? Want to take a bath with me?"

Brigitte could hear Yuri and Blue talking down at the stream.

She let her mind wander as she absently listened.

She'd had this vague impression for a while now.

Does Yuri not...?

Perhaps Yuri didn't want to discuss what had happened eleven years ago.



After school that day...

"Is the study room free, I wonder?"

"It rarely gets all that crowded, so it should be fine."

Brigitte was on her way to the library, walking in between Nival and Kira, who were chatting amicably.

In preparation for the written exam starting next week, they'd all decided to have a study session in the library's study room.

"This module is about the evil fairies of the Unseelie Court... Difficult stuff."

"I can master any subject if you're the tutor, Brigitte!"

"I'd rather you just try to learn in class... You'll make the teacher cry."

But there were only three of them. For whatever reason, Brigitte hadn't invited Yuri.

I know it's rather mean of me, but I just feel a bit awkward...

At lunchtime, when they had parted ways in front of the gazebo, Yuri wouldn't even look Brigitte in the eye.

...Brigitte didn't remember much about that day eleven years ago. On her fifth birthday, she had gone to the Central Shrine for the contract ceremony and was told that her contracted spirit was a tiny spirit...

But what would Yuri have been doing in the reception room of the Meidell mansion?

Brigitte wanted to know, but...Yuri's face said, Don't ask.

Is there anyone else who might know...?

Sienna was still a maid-in-training at the time. She wouldn't have known if Yuri was visiting or not.

Maybe her parents or one of the servants who's been employed by the family for a long time...

But I want to hear it from Yuri himself...

Right. Brigitte wanted to hear it from Yuri in his own words, not from a third party.

Although my first attempt at bringing it up was pretty much a disaster...

"By the way, Kira, are you going to the ball with the class president?"

At this rate, she was only going to ruin her own mood, so Brigitte switched it up and whispered to Kira beside her.

Kira nodded vigorously. All right, then.

"Brigitte, you're going with Aurealis, right?"

"Um, yeah."

Brigitte hadn't really discussed it, but Kira seemed to have figured it out anyway. "Good, good," Kira said, smiling. "Maybe you should go ahead and announce it, then."

"Announce it?!"

This embarrassing suggestion caught Brigitte off guard, but Kira seemed totally serious.

"You may not have noticed, Brigitte, but you've gained a lot of popularity lately. Still, ninety percent of the guys interested in you will back off if they find out you're with Aurealis. After all, they can't compete with him."

"Oh, Kira. It's Yuri who's the popular one, not me." Brigitte laughed behind her hand.

But Kira started looking around, then fixed her eyes on one spot.

Wondering what she was looking at, Brigitte followed her gaze and saw three boys suddenly scatter from different positions in the flower beds.

"See? They were all watching you!"

For some reason, Kira looked proud.

"They were looking at you, Kira. You're very pretty."

Brigitte was just being honest, but for some reason Kira blushed and fell silent.

Her lip was curled in a sulky manner. She looked half-pleased, half-annoyed.

"What's wrong, Kira? Your face is all red."

"...Class Prez. Brigitte called me pretty again."

"Don't go getting carried away! One of these days, Brigitte is gonna tell me I'm cute, too."

As the two of them continued this silly argument on either side of her, Brigitte walked into the library.

Then, at the entrance, they bumped into some familiar-looking junior classmen.

"...Oh."

Brigitte and Roze both made a noise of surprise at the same time. He and Sana were just leaving the library as Brigitte and her friends were entering.

"Hello, Brigitte."

"Hello."

They exchanged awkward smiles. Next to Roze, Sana snorted.

"Wow, you two don't seem too comfortable around each other."

Brigitte was silent. Sana had hit a nerve without realizing it, and she soldiered on obliviously.

"Well, I guess it makes sense. Roze is a star pupil, and Brigitte is just a nobody contracted to a no-name..."

"You shut your mouth."

Brigitte blinked with surprise. It wasn't feisty Nival who'd spoken up in her defense, but Kira.

"How dare you—did you forget we're your seniors? You didn't even greet us."

Oh, Kira...

Sana seemed taken aback, especially when Kira seemed so outwardly docile. She stiffened as Roze scowled at her as well.

"Sana," he said. "I think you should apologize to the Re...uh, to Brigitte."

Sana wrinkled her nose and walked off without saying a word.

Roze bowed his head with genuine contrition.

"I'm sorry. She doesn't mean any harm. That's just how she talks."

"It sure sounds like she meant harm."

Nival raised an eyebrow, and Roze seemed to shrink.

But Brigitte didn't want to bully a younger student, so she tried to change the subject, keeping her voice soft.

"What were you two doing, anyway?"

"I was planning to use the study room, but it was crowded, so I decided to go home instead. I just happened to run into Sana in the library."

"I see. Then we should probably find another place to study, too."

"...Yes, I think that would be a good idea."

Roze smiled and bowed again before walking away.

Brigitte watched him go, and Nival's scowl deepened.

"What's wrong, Nival? You've got a strange look on your face."

"You know, I could have sworn that pink-haired boy was just about to call you Red Fairy, before he corrected himself."

Come to think of it...Brigitte had that impression, too.

"Aurealis, a-are you on good terms with the Re...uh...with Brigitte?"

She recalled how Roze had stumbled over his words at the shrine.

Well, even if Nival was right, so what? Brigitte couldn't do anything about it. Anyway, why should Roze look up to her as a big sister at all? Even Sana was rude to her.

In fact, there was a good chance Roze didn't see Brigitte as a sibling at all.

Anyway, I don't even really feel that way, either.

"That pink-haired dweeb gets on my nerves. I'll school him next time."

"Nival, come on. That's my adopted brother you're talking about."

"Huh? Wait, what?"

Nival gaped at her in shock.



The Missing Mother

It's finally over!

Brigitte allowed herself a small stretch as the exam papers were gathered up.

The final written tests for the three subjects, foundation of magic, applied magic, and spiritual studies, had just finished.

The exam period had been tough—she had spent it studying hard every night, trying not to think about Yuri, knitting away furiously during breaks... But Brigitte felt that she'd been able to buckle down greater than she ever had before.

I'm feeling pretty confident this time!

Maybe she could finally beat Yuri?

Right! This time, I will win, Yuri!

She hated the thought of another defeat.

"Brigitte... I messed up...again..."

Kira, looking oddly listless, came staggering over to Brigitte.

Judging from her tone and expression, Brigitte was guessing this exam hadn't gone well, either.

"Peep! Peep, peep!"

At that moment, Peep popped out of Brigitte's chest pocket as if to tease "Here she goes!"

"Oh, stop it, Peep."

Brigitte poked Peep in warning, but Peep continued to chirp cheerfully.

Kira gave Peep a resentful frown, but today, she seemed to have no leg to stand on.

"Kira, there's no need to be so depressed."

"Oh, but after all the effort you put into tutoring me and everything...!"

Kira put her hands over her face.

Nival walked up to her from behind and spoke over her shoulder. "Hey, I tutored you some, too."

"But Brigitte took me through every practice question step by step!"

"Not listening, huh? Never mind. Hey, Brigitte. You have a visitor."

"What?"

Is Yuri here?

Surprised, Brigitte turned and looked toward the back door of the classroom, where Nival was pointing.

But she wasn't expecting to see...

"Roze?"

When their eyes met, Roze's brow softened, and he smiled.

"Hello, Re... I mean, Brigitte."

"What is it? Why are you here? This is the second-years' classroom, you know...?"

Unlike the second-year students, the first-year students had exams in all six subjects as usual. They were probably on their lunch break just then.

The east wing was quite a distance from the west wing, where the first-year classrooms were located. He must have had a specific reason for coming all the way here.

But why come and see me...?

"There's something I'd like to ask you..."

Ah, he had a reason. Then Brigitte would say no more.

After a moment of hesitation, Brigitte stepped out of the classroom.

"It's a bit crowded around here. Let's go somewhere more quiet. That'll be better, right?"

"Th-thank you."

Roze looked...relieved.

Brigitte led the way, heading toward the bench in the back garden of the east wing. It was the spot where, exactly two weeks ago, Nival and Yuri had both invited Brigitte to the ball.

Brigitte sat down first. Apparently nervous, Roze took a seat a little distance apart.

"So, what is it that you wanted to ask me?" Brigitte asked.

Roze replied in a breathless rush. "Do you know where my mother's gone?"

"...Say what?"

Noticing her shocked expression, Roze waved his hands in front of his face.

"S-sorry to bring this up out of the blue! It's just that I haven't heard from my mother for three days. She disappeared from the mansion, and I can't find her anywhere."

Upon closer inspection, Roze had bags under his eyes. He'd been losing sleep over this.

Now it was clear why he'd come to find Brigitte on his lunch break.

Roze had been waiting for Brigitte's exams to be over before talking to her about this—to avoid potentially distracting her from her important schoolwork.

Roze really is quite kind...

Brigitte would have liked to help. But she shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I have no idea."

"Oh..." Roze's shoulders slumped.

"Why ask me, though?"

Brigitte's question was a hesitant one. She hadn't seen her mother in eleven years. Why would Roze come to Brigitte, of all people, to ask where her mother had gone? But then a thought came to her.

"Oh... Did you...? Did you think I'd done something harmful to my mother...?"

"Huh? ...What? N-no!" Roze got to his feet, so upset that Brigitte instantly regretted her question.

"I... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that..."

But when she apologized, Roze simply shook his head harder. He sat down on the bench again in a heap, and the breeze blew in the silence between them.

"I don't really understand my mother," Roze finally said in a small voice. "When I was taken in by the Meidell family, my mother, she—she was always sleeping. Or wandering around the mansion. She didn't seem to get much sleep at night...and the maids would often say they could hear voices coming from her bedroom, like she was talking to someone, and it made them uneasy. My father couldn't let her go wandering around outside, so he kept her confined to the house..."

This was the first news Brigitte had learned about her family since leaving home.

She was surprised. She'd assumed her parents were living blissful lives ever since they'd gotten rid of her.

"But sometimes she seemed well... And that's when she'd talk about you, Re... I mean, Brigitte."

"She'd talk...about me?"

"Yeah," Roze said, smiling.

Brigitte was rendered speechless. Roze's shy smile was warm—and that warmth was directed at Brigitte.

Mother was...talking about me? But she...

"Now, Brigitte, why weren't you able to try harder?"

Brigitte could still hear the ghost of her quietly accusing voice.

Her mother's eyes, cold and empty, like glass beads. Her pained sighs.

When her mother did hug her, she was so cold that Brigitte felt her own warmth bleeding out of her.

"Why are you the only one who couldn't do it? Did I do something wrong? Is this my fault?"

As her mother had continued to repeat the same things over and over, young Brigitte could only cry and apologize.

These people were supposed to be her family.

But now Brigitte knew nothing about them. She had no idea what they were up to. And the thought of that was both frustrating and frightening.

If Yuri had been there, maybe she would have been able to voice those unexpressed feelings.

Except it was Roze with her instead...and he was worried about her mother's whereabouts. Brigitte couldn't go showing her weak side now.

"...What does Father say? About Mother, I mean?" she asked, and Roze's face darkened.

"Father says to stop asking about her. He said he's too busy to deal with it, preparing for National Founding Day."

"...!"

Though Brigitte knew her father didn't care much for his family, what Roze had to say still shocked her.

Roze was all alone...filled with anxiety, searching for his mother...

After some hesitation, Brigitte made a decision. "I understand. Let's search for her together."

Roze lifted his head, his gray eyes shining expectantly. "You mean you'll help me?"

"I can't turn down my— I can't just turn down someone who looks so worried."

She'd been about to say "little brother" but stopped herself just in time. That

would only put Roze on the spot.

"Thank you...!" Roze bowed deeply, making Brigitte feel embarrassed.

"Well, let's investigate the mansion first. There might be some clues as to where she is."

"But how will you ...?"

No wonder Roze was confused. Brigitte had been kicked out of the mansion, so she couldn't just stroll in and start wandering around.

"Roze, just make sure you get through this afternoon's exam. Then let's meet in front of the back entrance of the main house after school."

Brigitte forced herself to give him a reassuring smile.

"In the meantime, I'll make some necessary preparations."



"Uh... Brigitte, what are you wearing?!"

Roze sounded startled.

Dressed to the nines, Brigitte puffed out her chest with pride.

"I've come in disguise!"

That's right—Brigitte was disguised as a maid.

At first, she'd been planning to borrow a maid dress from Sienna, but since Sienna and Brigitte had such different builds, she'd ended up borrowing the outfit from one of the other maids.

She had on a frilly cap, her red hair neatly braided and tied up, and just to be extra cautious, she also wore fake glasses.

That way, even if someone were to notice her, they wouldn't recognize her as Brigitte. At least not at a glance.

It's a bit odd to have to disguise yourself to go to your own parents' house, though...

If her father caught her, she would be lucky if a scolding was her only

punishment.

But she couldn't just abandon her mother. What if she'd had an accident? Or something else bad was happening? Brigitte didn't want to have regrets later, when it was too late. She'd rather risk sticking her neck out than risk that.

"Do I look odd?"

She did a quick twirl.

She hadn't meant to show off, but Roze clasped his hands together awkwardly, blushing hard. He had slightly girly mannerisms...and Brigitte found herself thinking of Kira, though there was no physical resemblance.

"It—it looks great. Oh! I just mean, you know, as a disguise, not like..."

"I know. Thank you."

Brigitte smiled, finding Roze's panicked demeanor kind of amusing.

They looked at each other, and there was a moment of silence before Brigitte clapped her hands together in a businesslike way.

"Well, shall we head off? In the house, I'll be acting the part of a maid. Play along, please, Roze."

"Huh? But..."

"Just go with it. Also, I'd like to see my mother's personal chamber... But what about the key?"

"Ah, I already borrowed it from the butler's room."

Roze showed Brigitte a ring of keys in his uniform pocket.

"Oh, good job."

"Hee-hee...Thanks."

Brigitte accidentally dropped her formal manner with Roze for a second, but he responded by blushing happily.

So cute...

Brigitte's heart skipped a beat as she took in his adorable, childlike smile... It was hard to believe he was only a year younger than Yuri and Nival.

The two entered the Meidell family mansion through the back door.

This was the house Brigitte had lived in until eleven years ago. She couldn't help taking it all in...the wallpaper, the furnishings...

As she compared everything to her vague memories, she realized that the interior of the house was almost unchanged. It was odd, almost exactly as it was in her memory.

This...this really takes me back.

She'd lived here every day until she was five, in this big, beautiful manor, with her parents.

Brigitte felt an odd, deep, complex emotion. It wasn't quite sadness welling up inside her. Roze seemed alarmed, and Brigitte quickly shook her head.

"Let's go."

They couldn't stand around in the hall all day. It was almost dinnertime, and this close to the dining room on the first floor, they'd attract attention.

Brigitte let Roze take the lead as they climbed the stairs, maintaining a safe distance between them. When they emerged onto the spacious landing, there was luckily no one in sight.

The setting sun streamed in through the large windows, turning the grapecolored carpets a darker hue.

"Re... Brigitte, since my father hasn't returned yet, there's probably no one on the second floor."

Roze explained over his shoulder as they walked. Brigitte nodded breezily.

"Listen, Roze... You can call me whatever you want, you know."

Roze's shoulders jerked. "A-are you sure?"

"Yes, of course."

And Brigitte meant it. It was fine with her if Roze wanted to call her Red Fairy.

She didn't dislike that nickname the way she'd used to. She'd changed.

I'm not alone anymore... I have Yuri, Peep, Sienna, Class Prez, Kira...

So it didn't matter what anyone called her.

After a brief silence, Roze carefully muttered, "Okay, then," before taking a breath.

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"Re... Ruh... Ruhhh..."

"Y-you all right, there?"

"I—I... I'm fine. I'm just nervous."
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Roze was gasping, clutching his chest. Brigitte was getting a bit alarmed herself. Did he need to force himself to this extent...?!

"Ruh... Ruh... Ruhhh!!!" Roze, sweating profusely, finally crumpled to his knees.

"Are you sure you're okay?!"

"Yes! I'm fine, really! Sorry!"

Roze's response was emphatic, but he still looked terrible.

Brigitte crouched and touched his shoulder.

Then she realized that the spot where Roze had collapsed was...right in front of her old room.

Oh...

Maybe it was being used as a storeroom now or something. Or just left locked up and abandoned.

To try to distract from the situation, Brigitte decided to ask Roze.

"Hey, Roze. This room..."

"Ah, uh, ah..." Roze was trying to speak, his voice raised.

Then the door in front of them slowly opened outward.

What?!

Brigitte jerked on the spot as a gray-haired man emerged from the room. Making eye contact with the elderly butler, Brigitte froze completely.

She held her breath, but in her mind, she cried out:

Gramps!

Brigitte stood there in a daze, facing the butler—or Gramps as she'd always called him. He looked exactly the same as she remembered.

No, he'd aged a little, maybe become a bit skinnier. But that was only natural. Eleven years had passed since the butler had served little Brigitte.

... Yikes, this isn't good!

This wasn't the time for standing around slack-jawed.

Brigitte whirled around and feigned nonchalance, pretending to fluff up some flowers in a nearby vase.

The vase was filled with red, white, pink, and other colorful roses, likely selected from the beautiful rose garden outside.

"G-good work today!"

Roze scrambled to his feet, trying to block Brigitte from view, while she broke into a cold sweat.

Brigitte felt a shrewd gaze upon her, from over Roze's shoulder.

He definitely knew.

But I can't let him kick me out now!

She'd been caught, and she hadn't been able to find out anything about her mother. Brigitte fidgeted clumsily with the de-thorned roses.

At least I found out that Gramps seems to be doing well.

Sienna had told Brigitte secretly that Gramps, after serving the Meidell family for two generations, had been promoted to head butler a few years ago.

One of his duties was to remove suspicious individuals—Brigitte, in this case—from the manor. And Brigitte knew he couldn't be swayed with words... Gramps was very, very loyal to the family.

Breaking the tense atmosphere, the butler finally spoke.

"...Young master. Is something the matter?"

"I... I'm stumped on today's homework. I thought a stroll around the manor

might provide some inspiration."

Brigitte was impressed by Roze's quick thinking. He seemed to be better at talking himself out of corners than Brigitte was.

Listening hard, Brigitte fiddled with the vase. What else could she do? If only she'd brought a dustcloth!

But it was the butler who responded with utter cool. After nodding for a second, he smoothed his neatly trimmed beard and raised a brow.

"Really? I was about to assume you were heading to a secluded area with your favorite maid."

"What?!" Roze shrieked.

He'd probably never imagined the butler would accuse him of planning a secret rendezvous. Immediately, Roze's stiff face went red.

Brigitte could see everything reflected in the shiny surface of the vase. Even the head butler, who smiled slightly as he observed Roze's panic.

He's just messing with you, Roze!

Brigitte wished she could help him and point out that he was being teased by someone older and wiser. But she couldn't interfere now. It would completely blow what shreds of her cover still remained.

After a panicked groan, Roze scratched his cheek.

"Um... If you could keep this a secret from my father and everyone..."

Roze had opted out of denying the accusation. He was willing to go to such lengths for his mother... It was sort of heartbreaking.

"Indeed, my dear boy. I have neither heard nor seen anything."

Roze sighed in relief.

"Oh, and it would be much appreciated if you could return the key as soon as possible."

Then Roze ruined it a bit by spluttering and gasping. Oh dear.

Gramps! You're so unkind!

But perhaps this was the price of his discretion.

Brigitte turned and glared at Gramps, and as their eyes met, the elderly head butler's brows lowered shrewdly.

His wry smile indicated an impish glee that Brigitte probably wasn't imagining...right?

"You're still as tomboyish as ever, my lady."

Brigitte chewed her lip.

It seemed her facade was gone now. Brigitte felt a little bad for Roze but decided to drop the pretense.

"...I'm glad to see you're well, Gramps."

And Brigitte really was happy to see him after so long.

"Yes. A bit creaky about the joints, though."

Roze glanced at the butler, who was rotating his shoulder, then at Brigitte, who was annoyed over being found out.

"I heard that the master went to visit you at your cottage the other day. Is that why you're here today?"

Roze remained silent but didn't seem shocked at all. He must have known about this.

Brigitte thought for a moment about how to respond, and eventually she shook her head.

"No. I came to check on Mother."

"Indeed? The mistress..."

"Gramps, do you have any idea where my mother is?"

"...No, I don't. I'm sorry I couldn't be of much help."

"Oh," Brigitte said, nodding. As she'd thought, the quickest way to find out seemed to be checking her mother's room.

The head butler placed his hand on his chest, bowed his head, and left.

Once his upright back was gone from sight, Brigitte turned to Roze.

"Was that your room that Gramps came out of?"

"No. My room is next door."

Roze seemed a little tired but responded promptly.

So whose room was it that the busy head butler was cleaning?

Brigitte's curiosity must have been evident, because Roze smiled a little.

"Even now, this is still your room, Brigitte. The old butler cleans it and takes care of its upkeep every day."

" ..."

Brigitte felt her breath catch in her throat.

On the day her father shoved her left hand into the blazing fireplace, many of the servants had come to her rescue, including old Gramps.

A priest had completely healed the wound to his face he'd received when he'd tried to stop Deag, but...

I wouldn't have blamed him for resenting me...

And yet Gramps continued to care for Brigitte's room, believing she might one day return there.

The thought moved Brigitte almost to tears.

And a realization came to her, too.

Gramps might know about...back then.

Brigitte's own memories were fuzzy. Not just because she'd been a young child at the time but because of the trauma she'd been through. It had colored her memories with intense fear and obscured certain details.

However, since Gramps had been in Deag's employ then, there was a good chance he'd remember Yuri.

Why was Yuri in the reception room that day?

As Brigitte sobbed, Roze took her hand.

"Would you like to see the room?" he timidly suggested.

Brigitte hesitated for a moment, but in the end, she shook her head.

"No. Right now, we need to focus on Mother."

Yuri, my own whims... They'll have to wait for later.

She needed to focus, or she wouldn't be able to do anything at all. She wouldn't be able to find her mother. She wanted to avoid that at all costs.

"Okay." Roze said nothing more than that.

The two of them walked down the hallway. Luckily, they managed to arrive at Brigitte's mother's room at the other end without encountering anyone else.

This was the room of Brigitte's mother, Asha Meidell.

Roze slowly slid the key into the lock.

The room was decorated with an elegant and tasteful style appropriate for a countess. The room was mostly beige, decorated with only the bare necessities when it came to furnishings.

Brigitte looked around.

Asha had disappeared at least three days ago.

It hadn't been that long. But the room felt very old—fossilized, even.

...Because there seems to be no signs of life in here...

The rumors said Asha was kept inside the mansion by Deag, so she must have spent most of her time in this room. But there was nothing of her reflected in the space at all.

"My mother hasn't been feeling well lately... Mostly, she spends her time in the inner bedchamber. I last saw her five days ago."

In that case, the desolate feel of this room made a bit more sense.

"Well, let's start by checking the bedchamber."

Another servant could walk in on them at any time. And they might not be as willing as Gramps to look the other way.

The pair didn't have time to do a full search, so they needed to focus on the most likely areas first. Roze nodded in response to Brigitte's suggestion.

There was another door at the back of the room, leading to the inner bedchamber.

Brigitte's parents slept separately, so there was only a single bed in the room. This was not unusual for aristocratic married couples. Still, come to think of it... Brigitte's mother and father never had seemed particularly close.

The bedroom was dimly lit, and there was a coldness to it.

"I left the room untouched, just as I found it three days ago. I thought there might be some clues left behind."

"Right."

Brigitte stepped into the bedchamber, nodding in response to Roze.

That was when her right pocket started vibrating—specifically, the pocket where Brigitte's contracted spirit was snuggled up.

"Peep?" Brigitte called, but there was no response. Her pocket went still.

Huh?

The nonresponse struck her as odd, but she didn't have time to fuss over her spirit just then.

She patted his pocket soothingly and surveyed the bedchamber.

"Fire."

Roze quickly chanted a basic spell and lit the two candlesticks on the wall.

"Thanks."

"Ah, it's nothing."

Roze brushed off her gratitude, but to Brigitte, who still wasn't used to conjuring even the tiniest of flames, it was a big help.

Just as Brigitte was about to start exploring, something struck her.

"The candles both look new."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, they do." Roze blinked. "Actually, the maids always complained that Mother would get irritable when they lit the candles. So they weren't really used much."

"Why would she feel that way?"

Roze put his head to one side, apparently trying to remember exactly what the maids had said. "She said something like, 'Don't, or we shan't be able to meet'..."

Shan't be able to meet? Did that mean...?

A suspicion was building in Brigitte's mind.

She ran to the window.

First, she checked the window frame and the glass. Roze seemed puzzled, but he gave a similar check of the bedside table and lamp.

Slipping past him, Brigitte next examined the bed.

She stared at the bedsheets.

"Ah..."

With her fingertips, she pinched up a clump of fur from the pillow.

It was long white fur.

"Is it dog hair?" Roze muttered suspiciously, craning his neck to get a better look.

That had been Brigitte's first thought, too. But then she remembered the time she'd played with some sheepdogs on a visit to the farm run by Nival's parents.

The fur she'd stroked on that occasion was quite different.

"No. I think it's thinner than dog fur."

Recently, when she visited the shrine, Brigitte had seen Tonari's contracted spirit, a catlike spirit called a cait-sith.

"This is cat hair," Brigitte said confidently, while Roze raised an eyebrow.

He might have been thinking *So a cat found its way into Asha's bedchamber. So what?* But if Brigitte's prediction was correct, this was no ordinary cat.

"I think an alp was responsible for my mother's disappearance."

"...An alp?"

Roze frowned, apparently not having heard the name before.

"Alps are a type of evil spirit belonging to the Unseelie Court. They don't have much power, but they sneak into people's dreams and slowly cause psychological damage. Apparently, they take on the appearance of various animals to get close to people. The most known examples are birds and cats."

"Cats...!" Roze stiffened and gasped.

"If an alp snuck into the mansion, that would explain Mother's strange behavior. She wasn't talking to herself; she was talking to the alp. She might have been wandering around the mansion, seeing visions shown to her by the alp. And alps don't like fire, so she kept the candles unlit to avoid driving it away...or something to that effect."

Alps had a special sort of hat, people said.

An alp needed its hat in order to use its powers, such as hiding from sight and winning people over psychologically. As long as it had that, the alp in question would have been able to remain invisible to everyone except Asha.

"Wow..." Roze seemed extremely impressed by Brigitte's theory. "You were able to analyze all that from such limited information. You're incredibly insightful, Red... I mean, Brigitte."

"W-wait. I think you're going a bit too far, Roze."

"No. I'm not. Not at all."

Is he mocking me?

Roze's eyes shone earnestly, but Brigitte found herself having unkind thoughts. Still, she kept her mouth shut. She didn't want to risk wounding such an innocent boy.

Anyway, Roze was right that Brigitte knew an awful lot about spirits.

There were many varieties of evil spirits, with their own individual characteristics, and they had myriad ways to deceive and consume people. Figuring out what particular evil spirit was in the offing based on only a few cues —that was no easy feat.

Brigitte wasn't one to brag about her own knowledge or powers of insight.

She didn't think they were anything special. Just basic tools she'd need to become a spiritologist.

But just knowing the name of the spirit involved would put them on the path to solving this.

It was exactly the methodology employed by Tonari and other spiritologists when they dealt with issues that arose between humans and spirits.

"It's odd, though. How did an alp sneak into the mansion? That's a big problem."

A little embarrassed in the face of Roze's admiration, Brigitte awkwardly tried to change the subject.

Roze listened intently. Brigitte was right. This was an important point to consider.

"When I was little, I heard something interesting about this house. The Meidell residence has a barrier all around it to prevent anything bad from entering. And you know, there are two people in this house contracted to an ifrit. That's you, Roze, and my father."

How could an evil spirit so easily infiltrate a renowned Fire Clan household?

Strong flames kept stray spirits from entering Brigitte's cottage, too.

"Oh, but more importantly... What about the salamander, Mother's contracted spirit? Why did it not protect its contractor?"

A salamander, a second-class fire spirit, ought to have been able to drive an alp away before it could get its hooks into Mother...

Brigitte was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn't notice Roze's face twitch as she was speaking.

"...So then, where did Mother go?" he asked, and his voice had suddenly risen a few decibels.

Brigitte looked at him, eyes widening in surprise, and he hurriedly shook his head.

[&]quot;S-sorry..."

"It's all right. And yes, that's the key question here."

Right. Now wasn't the time to quibble over what might or might not have happened.

Still...if an alp was involved, it would have erased any traces of where Asha might have gone.

Mother was roaming around the mansion all that time...

The alp had shown Asha a vision. Asha had gone somewhere away from the mansion, and she was probably still there now.

Maybe someplace Mother has fond memories of...

But where would that be?

Brigitte didn't know much about her mother, just that she was from a family with close ties to the Meidell family. She had married Brigitte's father in an arranged marriage, and everyone expected she would go on to contract with a salamander.

When Brigitte was young, her mother was her whole world. Maybe she had asked her mother innocent questions about her past, her family, where she came from. But the things her mother actually told her, and Brigitte's memories of them, were limited.

Brigitte rubbed her cheek with frustration, and then she remembered something.

Right...

During summer vacation, Brigitte had been invited by Nival to visit the ranch on the Weir family's property.

The time she'd spent there with Nival and Kira (and with Yuri, who'd decided to join at the last minute) was short but very enjoyable.

At that moment, something seemed to float into Brigitte's mind.

When she was little, she often went to spend time at the more remote parts of the Meidell family property...

"The holiday villa, maybe?"

"Huh?"

"It's a villa on the Meidell property. It's located south from here... My parents used to take me there a lot."

It was warmer there throughout the year compared to the capital, maybe because of the terrain.

There were loads of orchards there, and Brigitte was given colorful fruits to eat by the locals. On trips to the holiday villa, her mother was always smiling, and they spent a lot of time together. There were a lot of fond memories attached to the place.

Brigitte was expecting Roze to follow her lead, but what he said in response surprised her.

"Right, Father took me there to tour the land. Mother's family home was close by, wasn't it?"

Brigitte was speechless.

This boy...

Brigitte had thought that her brother had lived a happy life after being adopted by the Meidells. And yet there was no warmth in his gray eyes as he spoke about his memories with the family.

Brigitte knew she had no right to try to discuss it. She knew that, but she had a heavy feeling in her chest, like she'd swallowed a lump of lead.

"...Roze. Did Mother take the family carriage three days ago?"

By carriage, it would take a half day to arrive at the holiday villa, but Roze shook his head.

"No, there's no signs she used our carriage. That's why I thought she might still be nearby."

Then Asha might have taken rental carriages, perhaps even several. If she set off secretly three days ago, she must have arrived by now.

But I don't have time to go to the carriage station and ask around...

"Let's go to the holiday villa. If Mother really was spirited away by an alp, we

need to get her back quickly, before something really bad happens."

Alps were evil spirits that sucked out people's life forces.

Brigitte didn't know how long her mother had been hoodwinked by the spirit, but from the moment she left the mansion, she had been in danger.

Quickly, they exited the bedchamber. With luck on their side, they were able to make it to the back entrance without encountering any more of the servants.

"I have to return the key before we leave."

"Okay, I'll leave it to you and...oof!"

Brigitte crashed into the back of Roze when he stopped in his tracks.

Rubbing her nose, Brigitte turned her head to look where Roze was staring.

"Sienna? And Clifford...?"

The maid and the chamberlain, side by side, bowed at them.

Then they stepped back, and...Yuri stepped forward.

"..."

What was Yuri doing here?

As Brigitte stood frozen, Yuri fixed her with his citrine eyes.

Brigitte reflexively stepped behind Roze, both intimidated by Yuri's gaze and embarrassed about what had happened the other day.

"Yerk!"

Roze let out an odd shriek of surprise. Brigitte felt a little guilty, but she really needed him as a human shield.

As she clutched the back of Roze's uniform, she realized Yuri was staring at her hands.

Wh-what's going on? His expression is getting more and more thunderous by the second!

"Sienna told me what's been going on. So, did you find anything out?"

As Brigitte stood there trembling, Yuri cleared his throat and spoke. She felt

like she was being interrogated.

"Uh, well, the thing is..."

Brigitte couldn't leave it to Roze to explain. Nervously, she tried to convey what they'd found.

An evil alp spirit might be involved in her mother's disappearance.

And her mother might have gone to the holiday villa belonging to the Meidell family.

After listening, Yuri nodded and said, "I see."

Just as Brigitte wondered what, exactly, Yuri saw, the space in his immediate vicinity began to warp and distort.

From the distorted space leaped the ice wolf, and Blue landed on their four sturdy legs.

As Yuri climbed astride his fenrir, Brigitte was so entranced by their sudden appearance that for a moment, she forgot all about the current situation.

"Brigitte. Let's go."

"...What?"

Brigitte stared at him. Yuri jerked his chin irritably.

"Listen. You're going to look for your mother, right? It'd take a half day by carriage. I'll lend you my Blue."

He spoke as brusquely as ever, but Brigitte slowly realized that he was offering her his assistance.

Fenrir spirits were made for sprinting fast across ice in packs. They were known for their ferocious temperaments, yes, but no other spirit can match them in terms of raw speed.

As soon as she realized the significance of what Yuri was saying, Brigitte's eyes sparkled.

"So you're saying I can ride on Blue with you?!"

"That is indeed what I'm saying."

"Wait a minute. No one consulted me about this," Blue complained.

Amazing! Brigitte was on cloud nine. She ripped off her fake glasses and hurried over to the wolf.

She was so excited that Blue's grumbling barely registered with her.

"Sis... I mean, Brigitte?!" Roze yelped, sounding betrayed, but Brigitte was beyond caring just then.

She would never give up such a golden opportunity. And any awkwardness around Yuri seemed to have evaporated in an instant.

I mean...! I mean...! Being able to actually ride a first-class spirit!

"Hmph," Yuri snorted in triumph, the corners of his mouth lifting.

As Roze stared, Clifford bowed low, as if to apologize for his master's immaturity.

Brigitte hopped aboard Blue, who lowered their haunches to aid her. She was enthralled. Their long fur was so soft to the touch, providing a plushy seat.

Sienna dashed over and helped her into a thick overcoat.

"My lady. It will be cold on the journey, so please wear this. I've put pocket warmers into the inner and outer pockets. If they become too hot, please discard them."

"Thank you, Sienna!"

"Well, then...please be sure to hold on tight to Sir Aurealis's waist."

"Yes, thank you!"

Brigitte followed the advice and put her arms around Yuri.

Then she finally realized what exactly it was that she was doing.

Th-this... This is essentially me hugging Yuri from behind?!

But before she could let go, Yuri grabbed her hands.

"Blue might shake you off. Hold on tighter."

"...O-okay..."

What could she do but obey? And so she clung tight to Yuri.

Brigitte had often envied how slender Yuri was, but holding tightly to him brought her to a different realization.

His physique is completely different from mine...

Well, he was male. It made sense.

The realization made Brigitte's cheeks flame, and she started feeling hot and feverish. The thought that Yuri might feel her body heat when they were this close only added to her discomfort.

Brigitte flushed, and her nose twitched as she inhaled the scent of Yuri's cologne. She rubbed her itchy nose against his back, and for some reason, Yuri laughed. He seemed to be in a good mood.

"All right. Let's go."

But someone spoke up in protest to that—Roze, to be precise.

"H-hold on! What about me?!"

"Sorry. Only room for two."

"Hmm? Master, I could handle three..."

"No, Blue. Don't strain your back."

Brigitte was shocked. Yuri was rarely so compassionate.

D-did I hear that right? Or did my ears deceive me...?

Blue's big body shook, as if they was overwhelmed with emotion.

"Very well, Master! Indeed, I can only really carry two!"

"Hey! That's not what the fenrir just said..."

"Nonsense. As a contractor, I have a duty to prioritize the comfort of my spirit," said Yuri, denying Roze's complaints.

Blue nodded along, then raised their voice slightly. "Yes, the ugly girl is extremely heavy! With her on board, it's already like carrying three people!"



"Well... Wait, what?! B-B-Blue! I'm not just going to ignore that, you know!"

Brigitte flushed—what an outrageous thing to say. How could Blue say something like that in front of male company?!

Roze was silent and awkward.

"We will prepare the Aurealis family carriage," said Clifford. "Roze, you can ride with us."

Roze nodded with some reserve.

"Well then, let's go!" Yuri called breezily, and Blue kicked up their hind legs and took off at a sprint.

Startled by the sudden acceleration, Brigitte screamed.



"...Hey. Brigitte. You all right?"

...Ah.

Feeling a light slap on her cheek, Brigitte awoke all of a sudden.

Opening her eyes, she saw a dark landscape whooshing past her at speed.

As the breeze buffeted her, Brigitte remembered where she was.

She was riding on the back of a fenrir, heading to the far Meidell territory.

Based on the unfamiliar surroundings, they'd traveled pretty far already. How come Brigitte only remembered the first few minutes of the journey, though?

Brigitte tried to laugh, even as cold sweat slid down her spine.

"Goodness, what was I doing? Did I fall asleep? The speed..."

"I think 'losing consciousness' is the technical term."

Oh, I wish the ground would swallow me right now...!

How embarrassing to pass out on the back of a fenrir, when she was always talking about how much she wanted to be a spiritologist!

Yuri glanced over his shoulder at Brigitte, who was writhing with shame.

"But you didn't let go. That was surprising."

"...Huh?"

"I tried to switch our positions, since that would have been dangerous for you, but you held on so tight, I couldn't unlatch you."

Yuri was explaining impassively, but Brigitte felt another wave of embarrassment wash over her.

Unable to bear hearing any more details, she quickly cleared her throat.

"Um, er...n-next time!"

"Next time what...?"

"Next time, I...I won't pass out!"

Brigitte clenched her fists in determination.

Yuri simply blinked back at her. "You're planning to ride Blue again? Like, on the way back...?"

"On the way back... Right. Yes! I won't pass out on the way back!" Brigitte nodded vigorously, and Yuri's eyes softened a little.

He reached out and patted her head—or at least the hat she was wearing.

"You don't need to force yourself. Just take the carriage home."

In other words, It's beyond you, so don't bother.

But Yuri's eyes were filled with compassion, not derision.

The soft tone of his voice made Brigitte's heart race, although it was almost faint enough to be swallowed by the rushing wind.

"...Achoo." Yuri let out a small sneeze.

Brigitte blinked in alarm. Even though the rushing wind was mild, Yuri had been exposed to the brunt of it for the full ride. He had probably lost a lot of body heat.

"Yuri, are you cold?"

"Yeah. A little bit."

He didn't even try to deny it. He really must have been freezing.

Brigitte timidly removed one hand from Yuri's waist and withdrew the pocket warmer Sienna had given her.

It was a fire magic stone wrapped in thin cloth. She handed it to Yuri.

"Please, take this. It might help a little."

""

But then something unbelievable happened.

Yuri wrapped Brigitte's hand, still holding the pocket warmer, in his own hands.

"Huh?"

Brigitte yelped at his unexpected response, but Yuri remained stoic.

"It's warmer like this."

"W-well, true, but—!"

"Kids run hotter than grown adults, after all."

Kids?!

Brigitte lifted her head to protest, wondering if he was making fun of her, but he was smiling with amusement.

Then she found she couldn't voice any complaint. She just had to sit there, heart pounding.

A glimpse of a smile from Yuri was a rare thing, and it warmed her to the core.

"Master. We're almost there."

A nonchalant voice announced that their arrival was imminent, and Brigitte pulled herself together.

Blue gradually slowed down and eventually came to a gentle stop.

Brigitte swung herself down from Blue's back after Yuri. As before, Blue obligingly crouched down to make it easier for her.

"The Meidell family territory is around here, isn't it?" Yuri asked.

"...Yes."

Brigitte nodded, looking around. Yuri must have guided Blue here while she was unconscious.

The far-off mountain ridge almost seemed to blend into the navy-blue sky. Judging from the position of the moon, less than two hours had gone by since they'd set off.

The air was sweet with the scent of fruit.

They walked through the fruit orchards, and eventually the holiday villa came into view on the crest of a hill.

There weren't any buildings close to this lordly manor. The houses of the nearby residents were all scattered around close to the forest edge.

There was no sign of anyone, and only the sound of fall insects could be heard.

"We got here so fast. Fenrirs really are speedy, aren't they?"

"Hmph, of course. You know, if you were a little less heavy, Ugly Girl, we would have gotten here faster..."

Brigitte took hold of Blue's cheeks and pulled them wide.

Now they looked dumb! Brigitte was just smirking in victory when...

"Whaddaya think you're doing?!"

"Argh!"

...Blue counterattacked ruthlessly, kicking sand in Brigitte's face.

As the two of them wrestled, Yuri snarled at them. "Pipe down! Do you think the countess is here, at this villa?"

Brigitte looked at Yuri, then looked up at the house. "...No lights on. Maybe not. It seems Mother forbade the use of candles at the main house, too."

If her mother wasn't in the house, there were few other places where she could feasibly be.

"She might be in the forest. When I was little, I often went for walks in the

woods around here with my mother."

Brigitte's voice grew quieter as she added, "I did get lost once... I was scolded so harshly for that."

"You've always been a wild child, huh?"

It was true, but Brigitte was too vexed to admit it.

"Do you have any of Countess Meidell's personal belongings?"

"Personal...belongings?"

"Blue can track her scent."

Brigitte could have kicked herself. She should have brought something of Asha's.

But she still had the clump of alp hair, which she'd wrapped in her handkerchief just in case.

"How about this?" Blue came over and sniffed the handkerchief. "Eurgh. Awful."

Blue frowned and curled their lip, as if they'd picked up on the scent of an evil spirit right away.

"Well, deal with it."

"All right, Master."

After they were finished sniffing, Blue slowly started walking toward the forest.

Yuri and Brigitte looked at each other and nodded.

"For now, let's just follow along."

"All right."

Blue continued, snuffling along the ground.

Illuminated only by starlight, the forest was dark and ominous.

It was very different from how it appeared in the daytime. But Brigitte had seen it like this once before, when she was a child.

When I heard that tiny spirits were having a party by the spring, I wanted to join in...

At nightfall, she'd snuck out of the villa and gone into the forest alone.

She'd gotten lost and failed to find the spring, and she'd been sobbing by the time Asha found her. Despite a harsh scolding, Asha had hugged Brigitte and held her hand as they returned home together.

Still...Asha had to despise Brigitte now for contracting with a no-name spirit.

She hadn't come to the villa with Roze, not even once. And Asha didn't seem to have any particular attachment to this forest...

And yet...

Something told Brigitte that Asha was here, somewhere up ahead.

With the fenrir, Brigitte and Yuri walked through the forest.

It wasn't such a deep forest. But after walking for a while, they stopped hearing the clicking of insects and the voices of chattering spirits.

Spirits loved to hang out in lush green areas, like forests, and near streams.

Maybe they've stayed away because of the presence of the alp?

Maybe the spirits were hiding from the evil spirit.

As Brigitte followed cautiously behind Blue, she heard a shaking in the bushes behind her.

"Yeek!"

Shocked, Brigitte leaped sideways.

She caught a glimpse of some sort of creature with a curled-over tail, dashing through the undergrowth. Maybe a squirrel?

That almost gave me a heart attack!

Brigitte let out a sigh and tried to pull herself together.

Yuri had put his hands on Brigitte's shoulder and waist when she'd jumped in

shock.

"S-sorry!"

"You're always so jittery."

Ugh.

It was frustrating, but she couldn't exactly deny it.

As Brigitte stood there blushing, Yuri casually took her hand. "Watch your step."

"...All right."

At least he didn't really seem that frustrated.

Yuri led Brigitte down the dirt path. Not long after that, Blue turned back ahead.

"Master! There are humanlike footprints here."

They dashed over to inspect the muddy ground that Blue was nosing.

It was squelchy here, and footprints showed clearly in the mud. The tracks led deep into the forest.

"The smell is still strong," said Blue. "The target may still be nearby."

If they were right, then...these footprints must be Asha's.

Blue leaped over the muddy part and pressed on.

Brigitte made to follow them. She couldn't get her borrowed maid outfit filthy, of course, so she took a little run-up in order to jump over the muddy patch.

Then:

"Yeek!" Brigitte let out a high-pitched shriek.

But you can hardly blame her. Because just as she was about to leap, someone grabbed her in midair and held her in their arms.

"Let's jump together, Brigitte."

Brigitte clung to his neck, too frazzled to respond.

Yuri leaped the muddy patch easily, holding her in his arms.

Yeeeek?!!!

She didn't even have time to scream. If she'd actually opened her mouth, she might have ended up biting off her own tongue.

Yuri landed lightly and gracefully and continued chasing after Blue like it was nothing.

...With Brigitte still in his arms.

M-my heart feels like it's about to burst out of my chest!

His strong arms around her back, supporting her legs, made her swoon.

Of course, Yuri was only holding her so tight to prevent clumsy Brigitte from falling... She knew that, but she couldn't help blushing bright red anyway.

She mashed her lips together, trying to suppress a sappy embarrassed grin.

"I—I must be heavy, right?"

"Not particularly."

Yuri's response was deadpan.

Brigitte felt her cheeks begin to burn.

Perhaps she'd let Blue's snarky comments about her weight get the best of her.

Should she eat less at meals? Cut down on sweets? Those thoughts had been swirling in her mind. But if Yuri didn't think there was an issue...then did it matter?

"Yuri... Are you trying to give me a heart attack today?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

Brigitte had attempted a light joke, but Yuri just sighed.

His voice was composed, but Brigitte noticed something—a sensation in her left hand, which she'd found herself resting against his chest.

An intense pulsating feeling beneath her palm...

Is Yuri feeling it, too...?

She focused on her palm where it rested against his chest.

Then she was sure of it.

Yes, Yuri's heart was racing rapidly.

Faster than mine?

She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against Yuri's neck, wanting to hear his pulse more deeply.

In her fascination, Brigitte didn't even realize how intimate and flirtatious her actions were.

"...Brigitte."

The sound of his husky voice startled her.

Yuri put his lips close to her ear and spoke softly. "It looks like Blue's found something. I'm putting you down now."

"Oh, okay. Thank you...," she rasped.

Carefully, Yuri lowered Brigitte to the ground.

Blue had stopped up ahead. They were crouched in the bushes, head low to the ground, staring intently ahead.

Brigitte and Yuri crept closer to him, hid in the bushes, and poked their heads out.

Blue was staring at a small spring.

This is where I tried to go a long time ago...

Brigitte looked around, thinking about her childhood.

Then she spotted a person, collapsed on the ground near the spring.

It was a woman with auburn hair. She was faceup, and Brigitte's eyes went wide as she recognized her.

Mother!

Yuri couldn't stop Brigitte from leaping out of the bushes.

She ran over to Asha and knelt beside her. Asha seemed unconscious, but her chest was rising and falling slightly.

Brigitte was relieved to have found her, but then she realized how thin her mother looked.

Her face was white as a sheet, and the limbs poking out of her drab dress were like sticks. She looked much older than Brigitte remembered her.

"WHo aRe yOu?"

An eerie voice resounded, blending in with the sound of rushing water.

Brigitte quickly looked up and saw it sitting on the edge of the spring, staring straight at her.

A ghostly white cat, its body glowing pale blue.

The evil alp spirit, in its cat form.

The shining eyes stared intently at Brigitte, and the bell on its collar tinkled.

Though she felt a chill run down her spine, Brigitte bravely stared back at the alp.

Tapping the pocket of her maid uniform, she said, "You're an alp, aren't you? What have you done to this woman?"

"...I aTe hEr dReamS. ATe mY flLL."

The alp responded in human speech, though it sounded slightly strange.

"I showed her Whatever she wanted to see in her Dreams. Humans...Are Nothing but their Desires..."

The alp bared its sharp teeth and chuckled deep in its throat.

On closer inspection, Brigitte could see that the alp was sucking down a white mist-like substance leaking from Asha's mouth as she slept.

It was still feeding off her...which was why she wouldn't wake.

What do I do?

Blue could help her to fight the alp, but spirits fighting spirits rarely worked. Spirits weren't like humans. They didn't use their strength to harm their fellow

beings.

And of course, Brigitte didn't want to make Blue do that.

Yuri and I could attack the alp, but...

People said there was no way to kill a spirit—not by magic, not by sword.

They might be able to drive the alp away for a time, but it would return and continue to drain Asha of her life force.

In other words, they needed to persuade the alp to let Asha go.

They needed to negotiate here. Once a spirit made a promise, it would never break it—not even an evil spirit.

It's okay. I can do this. I'm aiming to become a spiritologist...

Cursing her trembling knees, Brigitte forced herself to her feet.

Asha's hatred for Brigitte meant nothing now.

A spiritologist had a duty to help all those who were tormented by spirits. Reminding herself of that, Brigitte pointed at the alp and began the negotiation with her request.

"Alp, please release this woman!"

"No. If yOu wAnT hEr, bRinG mE a rePlaCeMeNt."

The alp sucked up a thread of drool that was dripping out of the corner of its mouth. Its sharp eyes were fixed on Brigitte.

"A wOmAn. A yOunG hUmAn wOmAn."

The alp laughed loudly, and its expression was truly terrifying.

Blue gazed at it, their lip curled in disgust. "Ugly Girl. Why not offer yourself?" Hold on!

Brigitte glared at Blue. Surely Blue knew how dangerous it was to bend to the will of an evil spirit.

But Yuri was focused on something else. "Blue. Stop calling her that."

"Ah! I—I apologize, Master..."

Blue seemed taken aback at their beloved master's scolding and hung their head. Even their proud, bushy tail hung between their legs.

I actually feel kind of sorry for Blue...

Blue just looked so sad. But then they lifted their head and gazed at Brigitte.

"Very well, then...Bri."

"Bri?!"

Brigitte repeated the bizarre nickname. Well, it beat Ugly Girl—perhaps. By a very thin margin.

"So? hAvE yOu dEcIDeD on a sUbsTitUte?" the alp urged impatiently.

Then Brigitte had an idea.

...Right.

It was just a thought, but it was definitely worth a try.

Brigitte adopted a serious expression and nodded at the alp. "Okay. I'll take her place."

"Huh?! Are you serious?" Blue sounded flustered. They probably hadn't expected her to just go with their suggestion.

But Brigitte nodded solemnly. "Yes. I'm serious."

She put her hand on her chest and lifted her chin.

"I will be the replacement... Bri Meidell herself!"

Gack! How embarrassing!

Brigitte hoped she could pass off the bizarre nickname as her real one without cringing. She couldn't afford to let the truth slip here.

Her passionate performance seemed to work. The alp was convinced.

"VeRy well. CoMe hErE, gIrl."

"Okay."

Brigitte nervously started approaching the alp.

She went around the spring toward it. The alp licked its lips, waiting for her to

reach it.

Blue frowned, glanced at Brigitte, then at the alp.

"Master! Bri has gone mad... Glurp!"

Grabbing Blue by his large jaw, Yuri silenced them.

Yuri seemed to have picked up on what Brigitte was doing.

But Blue shook free of their master's hand and kept yelping.

"Alp! Stop at once! Don't take Bri away! You fool!" Blue dashed over to Brigitte and grabbed her clothes in their teeth.

Brigitte looked down at him, startled. "Blue..."

They couldn't have been acting if they were this desperate. Brigitte had no choice but to pause.

But the deal had been made. Not even a fenrir, a first-class ice spirit, could get Brigitte back from the claws of the alp.

In a panic, Blue ran back to Yuri and grabbed hold of their uniform sleeve.

Yuri did not budge as Blue pleaded.

"Master, it's going to steal Bri! Master! Awoo! No, no, no!"

"Blue, do you...?"

Brigitte gasped.

He really does like me, after all!

There was so much she wanted to say, but she refrained.

Brigitte kept walking toward the alp, and Blue continued to whine. The alp was the only one grinning in glee.

Then, when she was almost close enough to touch the alp, Brigitte called out the name of her contracted spirit in a sharp voice.

"Now, Peep!"

Her spirit jumped out of her pocket, answering Brigitte's call. "Peep!" it chirped and bravely leaped on top of the alp.

The alp was taken aback. It wasn't expecting a spirit to be hiding in someone's pocket. Flames swirled around the chick spirit as it transformed into a phoenix and snatched the alp's collar with its beak.

The white cat snarled. "GiVe tHaT bAcK!" the alp screeched, but it couldn't reach Peep, who was airborne.

Peep circled low through the forest and landed on a nearby branch.

Brigitte ran over, and Peep dropped the cat collar into her open hands.

"Thanks! Great job, Peep!"

When Brigitte praised him, powerful flames erupted from all over Peep's body.

Alps don't like fire! That's why Mother never wanted candles lit at home!

But the alp wasn't paying any attention to Peep. It was staring at Brigitte, who was holding its collar.

Huh?!

Brigitte wasn't the only one who'd been mistaken.

Peep trembled, instantly shrinking and weakening.

"Peep..."

Peep transformed back into a chick and quietly fled to its usual pocket.

The alp bared its teeth and snarled at Brigitte.

"RiGhT. yOu aRe BrlgiTtE MeldELL...AShA's dAuGhTeR!"

It's found me out!

Brigitte was startled—but it didn't matter that the alp had discovered her ploy.

After all, "Brigitte" Meidell had made no contract with the alp.

"That's correct. But you can only take 'Bri' Meidell as a replacement for Asha, can't you?"

"..."

The alp was silent with regret and rage.

Taking advantage of this, Brigitte flashed the collar she was holding.

"The 'hat' you alps wear, which allows you to harness your powers... I think it transformed into this collar. Without this collar, you're powerless!"

An alp always carried its hat with it in order to cast its magic.

But in cat form, a hat would slide off—so the alp must have changed it to a collar. Realizing this, Brigitte had tasked Peep with taking it away.

The alp's anger swelled, rolling off it like waves, but it was no longer an object of fear.

"I'll give you your hat back. In return, you'll never go near Asha Meidell again. Do we have a deal?"

"...AlL rIGhT."

The alp could not afford to lose its hat. It was as important to it as life itself.

When Brigitte held out the collar, the alp ran over and snatched it up in a paw.

It muttered in fury, then sighed. "ThE cOnTrAcT iS fUlFiLLeD."

It disappeared soundlessly into the mist.

Spirits never broke their promises. The alp would haunt Asha no more.

"That was brilliant, Brigitte."

Brigitte turned to see Yuri standing close behind her. He'd been on guard in case the alp had lashed out.

Brigitte shook her head. "Oh, not at all. It was all thanks to you, Yuri."

He was the one who'd inspired her plan.

He scolded Blue about my nickname of Ugly Girl.

Yuri had no doubt foreseen that Blue would come up with another nickname for her.

Thanks to that, Brigitte had been able to use a fake name with the alp without arousing its suspicion. She was impressed by Yuri's ingenuity.

But Yuri shrugged.

"I didn't do anything. You were the one who succeeded in negotiating with the alp and saving your mother."

Brigitte knew he meant it, too. That was what prompted her next question.

"So are you saying I was a little bit like a real spiritologist just then?"

"Yeah. Just a little." Yuri chuckled.

Yuri probably had no idea how much a compliment like that meant to her, even if it was delivered sarcastically.

Brigitte blushed. "Thank you, Yuri."

"...Hello? I have a few issues with what just happened here," Blue grumbled, crouching nearby with a sullen expression.

It seemed they'd finally realized that they'd been used. Remembering how panicked they'd been earlier, Brigitte felt it would be rude to tease them now, so she bowed her head in contrition.

"I'm sorry, Blue. But I'm so pleased to know that you actually secretly really like me..."

"Ah, Master? It seems the human is waking up!"

Obviously, Blue had tried to dodge the subject. But just as obviously, Asha really was indeed blinking awake.

She seemed weak and dazed after having her life force sucked from her. But her eyes met Brigitte's.

Her cracked lips moved slightly. "...Brigitte..."

Mother...

Brigitte tried to speak, but no sound came from her. She rubbed her throat reflexively.

Perhaps sensing Brigitte's hesitation, Asha smiled sadly. "Did you come to see me?"

Brigitte said nothing, and Asha spoke with a pained smile. "I was hoping to

see you, Brigitte. That's why I haven't used any fire in...a long time..."

...Huh?

"I'm sorry I was such a terrible mother."

Before Brigitte could ask what she meant, Asha closed her eyes.

Finally, Brigitte managed to speak.

"M-Mother...?"

"It's all right. She's probably just passed out from exhaustion."

Yuri quickly reassured Brigitte, even as her voice cracked with emotion.

And just as Yuri said, after a few seconds, the only sound that could be heard was Asha's peaceful breathing.



Older Sister and Younger Brother

By the time they left the forest with a sleeping Asha, the sky was beginning to lighten.

Shrouded in white mist, the forest felt closer to the spirit world than to the human world, subject to its own laws and flow of time.

"Ah... Brigitte!"

Brigitte heard someone call her name, and she turned. Roze was just getting down from the carriage and running over. Clifford was in the driver's seat with Sienna beside him.

When he spotted Brigitte on Yuri's back, Roze's face softened, and he thanked Yuri over and over again.

Brigitte and the rest got the keys to the holiday villa from the caretaker, who lived nearby, and decided to stay there for a little while. Asha needed to rest, and everyone else was exhausted, too.

They sent a messenger to the Meidell household to inform them that Asha had been found. Clifford and Sienna would take care of everything during their time at the holiday villa.

The next morning...

Leaving Asha asleep, Brigitte, Yuri, and Roze returned to the royal capital. They had school the next day and couldn't afford to be absent.

Also, tomorrow was the day Liam and Tonari were to come and visit from the shrine to investigate Peep's abilities.

Sienna and Clifford would stay behind to look after Asha.

Clifford wasn't originally household staff, so Brigitte had some reservations about troubling him. But Yuri, Clifford's master, had said it was all right. And so Brigitte had decided to take them up on their kind offer of help.

I really wanted to have a chat with Mother, though...

Brigitte wanted to know how Asha truly felt about her.

In every memory she had of eleven years ago, Asha was always complaining about Brigitte.

But yesterday, before passing out, Asha said something about not using fire so that she could see Brigitte again.

Because Father burned me the way he did...?

Maybe—just maybe—Asha didn't hate Brigitte at all.

Brigitte would need to talk to Asha to find out. She never would have felt this way in the past. Now, though? Yes, she was scared, but she wanted to face that fear.

On top of everything, I still have a scarf to knit once I get home.

National Founding Day was coming up the very next weekend.

She really needed to finish up Yuri's scarf. She would miss Sienna, but she'd have to do her best alone somehow.

One other thing—the deadline for Brigitte to answer her father's order to return to the family household—was coming up fast.

"You can't handle a horse? Aren't you supposed to belong to an earl's family?"

"Nope, can't do it! Anyway, this time I want to see your skills, Aurealis!"

"Why not act like a decent junior classman and lend a hand to your upperclassman, hmm?"

"But if you show me how it's done, I'll have something to live up to!"

Erm...

Brigitte was torn from her ruminations by a noisy argument going on nearby.

It was always like this every time these two got together...

Yuri and Roze were apparently arguing about who was going to drive the carriage home. Since Sienna and Clifford were staying behind at the holiday villa, it was going to have to be one of the three of them.

Brigitte approached Yuri and Roze, who were fighting in front of the entrance.

"Listen, if neither of you wants to drive, then I'll drive the carriage."

"No need."

"No need for you to strain yourself."

Brigitte had only offered out of consideration, but they both rebuffed her instantly. Actually, at times like this, she supposed the two of them were oddly in sync.

I'm actually really good with horses, though...

Was she really considered so unreliable? The thought was depressing.

Frowning, Brigitte caught hold of Yuri's sleeve.

"Yuri, Yuri."

"...What?"

She tugged on him, putting some distance between them and Roze.

Brigitte stood on tiptoe and whispered in Yuri's ear as he frowned.



"Yuri, don't you think you're being a bit mean to Roze?"

"The boy can't even express himself verbally. Why should I coddle him?" Yuri said loudly, ignoring Brigitte's attempts at discretion.

She glanced anxiously over at Roze, who seemed to have heard. He was frowning.

"I—I want to express myself verbally. It's just..."

"...Roze? Are you referring to—what you keep almost saying, only to stop yourself?"

Brigitte realized what they meant. Roze nodded hesitantly.

She didn't know why, but it seemed Roze was incapable of calling Brigitte "Red Fairy," though he seemed to want to.

"I told you two days ago," she said. "It's fine. You may call me what you like."

"R-right." Roze nodded slowly, convinced by Brigitte's gentle urging.

His face tensed, and he breathed rapidly in and out.

Then, screwing up his courage, he spoke.

"Ruh, ruh, ruh..."

He's having a fit just like before!

Roze was panting, sweat running down his face.

At the Meidell mansion, Roze had squirmed in agony like this. He seemed so distressed that Brigitte wanted to make him stop.

"...Ruh, relative! My relative! Sister!"

...What?

Brigitte could scarcely believe her ears.

"We're r-relatives! You and me! I want to know if I can call you Sister!" Roze was gasping for breath. He collapsed to the ground, red-faced and exhausted. "Finally! I finally managed to ask you..."

"Roze. You...want to call me Sister?"

Brigitte looked down at him curiously, and he staggered to his feet. Then he stood there, immobile.

"Y-yes! But I was worried you'd be offended... I couldn't ask..."

Roze grew even redder as he revealed the truth.

He couldn't meet Brigitte's eyes. He just stared at the ground. Now and then he'd try to raise his head, but then he would sense Brigitte's gaze and shrivel up in embarrassment again.

Brigitte's heart twinged.

"Roze!" Impulsively, she hugged him.

"Huh?!"

Roze tensed up all over, then Brigitte realized what she was doing.

"Oh, sorry! Nobody likes to be hugged all of a sudden like this, do they?"

Brigitte apologized and moved away, but Roze mumbled something behind his hand.

"No... I mean... Well...I'm pleased and all, but...I'm sorry, Sister. Can you not look at me? I feel so pathetic..."

He was embarrassed.

How cute is my little brother?!

His blushes made Brigitte's heart twinge once more.

Brigitte had often wondered and thought about Roze.

As an only child, she'd longed for siblings. She would have loved to have a close relationship with Roze. But family stuff got in the way, and...she could never get to know him.

Brigitte was delighted that they might be able to strengthen their relationship, but then they were interrupted.

"Brigitte."

Someone grabbed her hand and tugged her away.

She turned her head to see Yuri, his eyes dark with anger. "He might be your

brother or whatever, but he's also a boy. Don't go letting your guard down."

"Goodness, Yuri. You almost sound like you're jealous! Oh-ho-ho!"

Brigitte was cackling. She hadn't laughed like that in a while. This whole thing had really tickled her.

But Yuri ignored her teasing. He slid his arm smoothly around her waist, then rotated her so that she was nose to nose with him.

Huh? Huh? As she mentally flailed, he whispered peevishly into her ear.

"... What if I am jealous? What will you do about it?"

...Is...? Is he really jealous?

Now it was Brigitte's turn to go as red as an apple.

After a lot of back and forth, it was decided that Yuri would drive the carriage on the way back.

Yuri looked embarrassed after what he'd said; it was wholly unlike him.

On the way home, Roze seemed happy enough sitting across from Brigitte. He even talked more than he ever had. It was as if they were making up for lost time...

As they talked, Brigitte realized that Roze seemed to be quite popular with girls.

"Actually, eight girls asked me to go to the ball with them."

"Eight?! You mean, the girls in your class?"

"Erm, and someone from your class, too, actually..."

"Wow..."

Brigitte covered her mouth in surprise. Roze had been asked by older students, too. He really was popular with the girls.

Still, Brigitte knew now that Roze was not only a boy from good stock and handsome looks but kindhearted, too. And on top of all that, he was charming enough to catch the eye of older girls as well.

All eight of them have good taste. I have to hand it to them.

Brigitte felt a sense of sisterly pride.

But who was Roze going to the ball with? Curious, she was about to ask, but Roze beat her to the punch.

"S-Sister, are you going with anyone?"

The canopied carriage was well-built, and there was no way that Yuri in the cab could hear what they were saying, but Brigitte kept her voice pitched low, just in case.

It didn't really matter if Yuri heard, of course, but Brigitte was embarrassed anyway.

"Yes. Actually, I'm going with Yuri."

Roze's face darkened at her reply. "I... I see..."

H-huh? Why does he look...despondent?

For some reason, the wind completely went out of Roze's sails after that, and the conversation basically dried up.

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"Thanks, Yuri. You did all the driving in the end..."

"It's fine."

After being dropped off in front of the Meidell family mansion, Brigitte bowed to Yuri, in the driver's cab.

Beside her, Roze followed suit. Yuri shrugged, then looked at Roze.

"I said some arrogant stuff to you this morning, pink boy, but..." Yuri shifted his gaze from a confused Roze to Brigitte. "Brigitte. Wasn't there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"|"

Brigitte blinked.

Something she wanted to talk about? Well, yeah. That day eleven years ago.

"Next time we speak, I'll hear you out. So...can you give me a little more time?" He gazed right at Brigitte.

She nodded.

"Okay. Well... I'll see you later, then."

"Yeah. See you tomorrow."

The carriage set off, and the sound of the wheels gradually grew distant.

As Brigitte watched the carriage get smaller and smaller, Roze spoke.

"...Will you be able to return to the family home after all, Sister?"

So Roze must have known from the beginning.

"Did Father tell you about that?" she asked.

Roze nodded slowly, his gray eyes fixed expectantly on Brigitte.

"It would be so nice if we could live in the same house. I'm sorry... That was a selfish thing to say..."

"No, not at all. Thank you."

Roze genuinely wanted Brigitte to return. The sentiment warmed her heart.

Waving good-bye to Roze, Brigitte headed for the back gate. She didn't live here. She couldn't leave through the front.

Usually, she would have asked Yuri to stop the carriage by the back gate. But it seemed unkind to Roze to make him enter through the back, so she'd asked Yuri to park the carriage in front of the main gate on this occasion.

She looked back over her shoulder to see Roze dragging his feet as he entered the mansion.

She wondered if Deag was watching her from one of the many windows.

Maybe he was out; he was a busy man, after all. Or maybe he was at home, worried about Asha and Roze.

As Brigitte entered her own front door, she found Carson messing about with a vase. He turned toward her, and his face lit up like a lantern.

"Oh, my lady! You've finally returned!"

Brigitte had told Carson she'd be home today... He must have been waiting in the front hall for her. Smiling, he rushed over to her.

"I wanted to discuss the dessert with the evening meal— Uh...are you all right?"

Having spent eleven years with her, he immediately noticed that something was wrong.

Tears welled up in her eyes as Carson looked at her with confusion, then alarm.

"Wh-what's wrong? Hey, miss?"

Seeing Carson's face seemed to unlock something in Brigitte, and her voice was weak and wavering.

"...Carson... What...what should I do?"

Brigitte quickly covered her face with her hands.

A lot had happened in the past three days. Really—so much had happened.

Deag, Asha, Roze—they were supposed to be her family, but she could not openly call them family.

She'd managed to get a little closer to Roze. Now she wanted to talk to Asha. But Deag...

Carson folded his arms worriedly. Usually, Sienna would comfort Brigitte at times like this, but she wasn't here.

"Is this...about what the master said the other day?"

"…"

Brigitte sniffled and nodded. "I don't know what the right thing to do is. I don't know!"

Brigitte had been certain she'd be kicked out of the cottage once she graduated from the academy. That's why she decided to become a spiritologist and make her own living. All this time, she'd been studying hard, putting in the effort, and trying to gain the knowledge needed to achieve that goal.

But there was something she'd ignored. Something she'd been trying not to

consider until now.

If I'm gone...what will happen to all the servants?

Spiritologist was a national qualification, but even with a doctorate, Brigitte wouldn't be able to employ all the servants on her starting salary. She'd probably struggle quite a bit to get herself established at first.

They'd have nowhere to go. Deag probably wouldn't reemploy them at the main residence.

Brigitte could do nothing to stop Deag from kicking her out of the cottage. But was it right to abandon the people who'd supported her all this time, just to chase her own goals?

Her own feelings. Her feelings for her parents. Her feelings for Roze. Her feelings for Sienna and the others.

Her head was a mess, and she couldn't come up with the right answer.

"My lady, come here for a second."

Carson picked up the bag containing Brigitte's belongings and took her hand, leading her along.

Brigitte followed him, wondering where they were going. It turned out to be Brigitte's room.

Carson put her bag down on the carpet and went to the window.

"Look, my lady."

He pointed to a small dish on the windowsill.

Brigitte always put some milk or biscuits into this dish before she went to bed. A casual offering to the tiny spirits.

The plate had been picked clean, as always.

"...What about it?" she asked, looking tearfully at Carson. He let go of her hand and went to the bedside table, pointing to a vase.

The clear glass was filled with flowers.

"Huh...?"

"The spirits were worried when you disappeared from the house suddenly. My magic is weak, so I couldn't see them, but..."

The vase held an assortment of fall flowers and plants, including cosmos, dahlias, and sage.

The stems weren't all the same length, and the bouquet was a bit uneven. Some of the flowers still had soil all over their roots.

Carson must have stuffed the flower offerings that had been left on the windowsill into the vase.

The sight of them warmed Brigitte's heart so much. She couldn't look away.

"You've always loved spirits and fairies, haven't you?" said Carson.

"...Yes, I have."

"You even ask after my own tiny spirit sometimes. I've never met any noble quite as eccentric as you before, my lady."

Less of the eccentric...

Brigitte shot Carson a look, and he laughed heartily.

"That is why we all adore you so much, my lady." His rough hand ruffled Brigitte's hair. "So whatever your answer may be, I will stand by you."

"Huh?"

"And I won't be the only one. Scary Sienna, too, and Head Chef Nathan, old man Hans, Mike... The other servants, too, probably. We will serve no other mistress but you, my lady."

"...!"

Carson's words moved Brigitte deeply.

After a moment of silence, she chuckled. Then she wiped her eyes and smiled naturally again.

"Thank you, Carson."

Thanks to him, she felt as if the confusion within her had cleared up a little.

Not the path I should take... but the path I want to take.

There was no need to overthink everything, after all.

This wasn't a choice she was making because she had no other options.

Brigitte had longed to become a spiritologist since she was a child, and she had read endlessly about spirits in books. It was a long-cherished dream. Talking to Carson had reminded her of that.

Brigitte could feel herself blushing, and she didn't want Carson to pay too much attention to it.

"Right! Carson, let's hug!"

"Huh? Hug? My lady..."

This morning, hugging Roze, she'd realized something. Opening up to Sienna, and Carson, and Roze had soothed her heart.

When I'm with Yuri, my heart always beats so fast, it feels like it's going to explode, though...

Brigitte thought a hug was a great idea, but Carson narrowed his eyes warily.

"...My lady, please. Be more cautious. I am a man, after all."

That was just like what Yuri had said this morning. Brigitte felt like she was going crazy.

"Don't be silly, Carson! You're like an older brother to me!" Brigitte giggled, and Carson pouted.

Then he sighed and spoke in a subdued tone. "You know, every now and then these days, I get an urge to make you cry."

"Whaaat?!"

Brigitte's eyes widened. Did Carson really just say that?

She took a step back in alarm, and Carson shrugged.

"...I'm only joking. I wouldn't actually want to upset you, my lady."

Carson smiled, waved, and turned to leave.

Apparently, he was going back to the kitchen. By the time Brigitte realized he'd been teasing her, he was gone from sight.

Soon, it was time for the investigation into the phoenix, Peep.

The investigation was being conducted in an outdoor magical training area, so a small crowd of students had gathered to watch, including Nival, Kira, and some of Brigitte's other classmates.

Though Brigitte was nervous at first about all the attention, the investigation itself went by smoothly.

Under Tonari's instructions, the priests in charge of the investigation measured the length of Peep's body and made detailed sketches. After that, Tonari gave Brigitte several moves to have Peep perform.

The high priest, Liam, watched the proceedings with a smile.

"All right, all right. This concludes our investigation."

By the time Tonari spoke, night had begun to descend around the training area. The lively crowd of spectators had slowly trickled away until only a few were left.

Peep had been kept busy, breathing fire at Brigitte's request, absorbing magic, and healing the small scratches that Tonari had made. Now it sat looking exhausted on the grass, with its short little legs stretched out.

Tonari sat down beside Brigitte, who was attending to Peep.

"You both did great."

"Peep!"

Peep got up and poked at Tonari's worn-out shoes as if voicing a few complaints.

"Yes, yes. You were marvelous."

"Peeeep..."

Brigitte watched Tonari, who was chugging water and poking Peep playfully at the same time.

Tonari wiped his mouth and tilted his head.

"Hmm? What's up?"

"Ah... I was just thinking that spirit evaluations are kind of boring... I mean, it was a lot more straightforward than I was expecting."

"Well, all spirits are different. We just need to get a rough idea of their appearance, habits, and abilities," said Tonari, and that certainly seemed to be the case.

For example, Brigitte had never heard of a fenrir taking a human form. But every now and then, Blue would take on the likeness of their contractor as if it was no big deal. Still, that didn't necessarily mean all fenrirs had that kind of ability.

The investigation had gone by so calmly and smoothly, it seemed the other students had begun to view Brigitte and Peep with a softer perspective than before.

No doubt Tonari had done things this way on purpose, to demonstrate to the students that they had simply discovered a new type of spirit. To demonstrate that the presence of a phoenix wasn't something to make such a big fuss about.



But if I brought it up to him directly, I have a feeling he'd just sidestep the subject.

"Incidentally, Brigitte. What are your plans regarding participating in the National Founding Day parade?" Liam said, walking over, so Brigitte got hastily to her feet.

She brushed off her skirt lightly and lowered her head in politeness.

"I'm sorry, Head Priest Liam. After much consideration, both Yuri and I have chosen not to participate in the parade."

Brigitte and Yuri had decided this together. From the start, Yuri had been happy to go along with whatever Brigitte decided.

"I see. I understand. I will convey that to the archbishop myself."

Liam probably expected this response and took it in stride.

But for Brigitte, what she had to say next was what really made her anxious.

"And although it may be rude of me, I have a request for you, Head Priest."

"Oh? Whatever could that be?"

After taking a deep breath, Brigitte said, "I'd like you to wait a while before registering my phoenix in any book of spiritology."

A strong wind blew by.

Brigitte kept her eyes on Liam as she brushed back her messy hair.

Liam was looking at Brigitte with wide-eyed surprise. "...May I ask the reason?"

"Because, right now, I don't have the power needed to protect Peep."

Hearing its name, Peep chirped by her feet.

"I want to become a spiritologist. I still have a long way to go, but I'm going to make my dream come true. Until then, I just need some time."

Brigitte was only a student, and she could not protect Peep.

Even becoming a spiritologist wouldn't necessarily convey great power. If any unscrupulous individual set their sights on Peep, there was no guarantee

Brigitte would be able to fight them off.

Right now, though, Brigitte was in a precarious position. One word from her father could change her situation entirely. She would choose her own path and protect those close to her.

"So please..."

Liam shook his head gently before Brigitte could repeat her request.

"That's not something for me alone to decide."

It was disappointing, but Brigitte kept a poker face. If he'd been like, okay, no problem, then she'd probably have worried that she'd asked the wrong person.

Maybe that was why Liam kept talking.

"But I will speak to the archbishop myself. I can't promise anything, but I'm sure he will understand your feelings."

"Oh, thank you..."

"The shrine's lapse in judgment caused you much suffering. You were slandered, and we simply stood by and watched."

Liam wore an expression of deep regret. As a member of the West Shrine, he seemed to have a heavy burden on his shoulders.

Then Liam's eyes grew firm with resolve.

"Brigitte, will you please listen to what I have to say?"

Brigitte nodded wordlessly in response.

Though Brigitte was just a student, a minor, Liam treated her like a fellow adult.

"I'm from a commoner background, but after making a contract with a second-class spirit, I was able to enter a magic academy in the West. There, I met a boy who was being bullied because he had made a contract with a minor spirit."

Liam's voice was low, and it sounded as if he was trying hard to suppress his emotions.

"He didn't deserve what was happening to him, so I wanted to help. But he spurned my offers. He even yelled at me and threw rocks at me. 'Don't go thinking you're better than others just because you contracted with a second-class spirit,' he said."

"Goodness..."

"He probably saw it as someone more fortunate pitying him. I don't blame him, though. He grew up steeped in that kind of prejudice. The following day, he left the academy altogether."

Maybe Liam saw something of that boy in Brigitte.

"The ability levels of spirits shouldn't be a reason to discriminate. The Revan religion upholds that principle, but...even the followers of the religion change how they treat people based on the kind of spirit they're contracted with. That's just the reality of it."

Liam took a deep breath and then looked at Brigitte.

"Brigitte. I want to change the way the contracting ceremony is conducted, from the ground up."

"The way the contracting ceremony is conducted...?"

"Yes. I want to change the way we humans view spirits—comparing strength and dismissing the ones deemed 'weak' or 'no-name.' I want to change the world we live in until everyone living in it learns how to treat both children and spirits with benevolence and watch over their growth... That's why I became a priest."

Liam had confided in Brigitte a dream that was filled with kindness.

But it wouldn't be an easy undertaking. The contracting ritual had a long history. And the public consciousness had been shaped around it as it currently was. It seemed inevitable that tiny spirits would be discounted and first-class spirits elevated.

The people might laugh at the idea of change, seeing it as absurd.

But if the world Liam visualized did come to pass, then no child would have to suffer like Brigitte had.

Even children who contracted with tiny spirits. Even children who contracted with a powerful spirit but were forced to pretend otherwise.

If only there was a way Brigitte could contribute—what a wonderful thing that would be.

"I want to help, too."

She said it almost without thinking, then quickly covered her mouth. The last thing Brigitte wanted was to give the shrine an opportunity to exploit the powers of her phoenix.

"Wait, I meant—!"

"Thank you, Brigitte. I'm glad to have you in my corner. You seek to protect the tiny spirits of the world. With you as an ally..."

But Liam did not jump immediately to self-serving conclusions; he was utterly sincere.

Brigitte nodded as that sincerity touched her heart. Tonari had been watching this conversation silently, but now he stared off into the distance. "It sounds like a dream both noble and wonderful, Head Priest."

Though what he was saying was laced with sarcasm, he probably didn't mean it to sound that way.

"I would be most grateful for your assistance as well, Lord Tonari."

"As long as you stay away from any corruption, I'll do what's in my power."

"Thank you." Liam smiled softly.

There was a moment of companionable peace, then Brigitte remembered something important. "I'm sorry, I'm keeping someone waiting. I'm going to have to excuse myself."

"I understand. Sorry to keep you talking so long."

"Not at all," Brigitte said with a smile. This chat with Liam would have major ramifications in the future; she was sure of it.

She squatted down in front of Peep, who'd been tussling with Tonari, and the bird obediently hopped onto her shoulder.

"Please come visit the shrine again. This time, as a friend."

"...I certainly will!"

Brigitte smiled, then turned and took off at a run.

The person waiting on her was probably already at the gazebo near the library. It had gotten chillier out recently. Brigitte went as fast as she could, regretting that she hadn't suggested he wait for her in the warm cafeteria instead.

"Yuri! Sorry to keep you!"

She'd been worried that she'd find Yuri shivering, but he appeared completely unfazed. He didn't look up from his book even as she approached him.

"Has the investigation finished?" he asked.

"Yes. Everything went smoothly."

Brigitte sat down across from him, and Yuri closed his book.

"So, regarding our fourth challenge," he said.

Brigitte's eyes lit up.

It had been a busy weekend: the exams, then discovering that her mother was missing, the trip to the south territory, the overnight stay at the holiday villa there, getting to know her brother Roze a little more.

After such a busy time, Brigitte had been exhausted. She'd been dead on her feet when Kira and the others dragged her to the bulletin board to see the exam results. But once she was there...she'd seen something unbelievable.

"Oh-ho-ho!" Brigitte chuckled loudly behind her hand. "I won, didn't I?!"

Brigitte was so delighted, she couldn't help kicking her legs beneath the table and chuckling.

The total possible score for the three subjects was 300. This time, Brigitte's studies had paid off, as she'd achieved an incredibly high score of 298 points.

Her rival, Yuri, had managed 297 points. Brigitte won by just one point.

When she'd seen the bulletin board, she'd been so stunned, she couldn't

even speak. She'd wanted to rip the sheet off the board with her name in first place and take it home as a trophy.

She'd been careful to show restraint and poise in front of her classmates, but no doubt Kira had noticed her glee.

The first round was a draw, second round I lost, third was a draw, and now finally I've snagged a win!

So what if it was only by one point? A win was a win.

Yuri scowled in annoyance as Brigitte sat there dazed and grinning, reveling in her sweet victory.

"So, what are you planning to have me do?" he asked her.

"...Er, well..."

Brigitte snapped out of her reverie and tensed. Yuri narrowed his eyes at her.

"Well, what?"

"Well... So on the day of the National Founding Festival, there's going to be a big event in the royal capital, right?"

"Apparently so. Not that I'm particularly interested."

"I-I'd like you to come with me."

"What?" Yuri said, apparently not getting the message.

He wasn't angry or anything, at least...as far as she could tell? He was just being Yuri.

Although, thinking about it, maybe Yuri was a bit annoyed by her gloating... Well, now Brigitte was regretting her attitude, but her resolve was firm.

Because either way, she had a right to a little gloating over actual facts. And wasn't that a winner's privilege anyhow?

Eh, whatever!

Brigitte pointed right at the center of Yuri's chest.

"That's an order! Come with me and look around the festival!"

Yuri's eyes widened.

Brigitte stared back at him without blinking. Deep down, however, all she wanted to do was run screaming.

I—I said it!

By some miracle, Yuri had invited her to the evening ball on the night of National Founding Day, but Brigitte wanted to be with him all day, if possible. So she had to gather her courage on this occasion and invite him to spend the day's festivities with her as well. Or she'd no doubt lose her nerve.

But Brigitte wasn't brave enough to be cute and ask a guy out on a date. Instead, she had the bright idea of capitalizing on their fourth little competitive bet. If she won, she would ask him. If she lost, she'd give up (er, maybe). It was a big gamble for Brigitte. She'd staked it all on this wager!

Though I don't love that I had to use this opportunity to even have a hope of asking him.

That was why she'd been so delighted when she'd triumphed over Yuri, even if it was by one measly point.

Yuri took a long, deep breath.

"... Are you stupid or something?"

His exasperated sigh cut Brigitte to the core.

Ah, maybe ordering him around in such a calculated way wasn't the way to go about this after all. Maybe Yuri really, *really* didn't want to attend the festivities with Brigitte.

Just as she was about to lose all hope...

"That hardly counts as an order," Yuri muttered as he looked away.

Brigitte thought carefully about what Yuri was saying.

Yuri often spoke in a brusque, indirect way. But over the past six months,

Brigitte had come to learn that much of Yuri's gruff attitude was a cover for his embarrassment.

Er... So then, to translate...

"You're...pleased to be invited, then?"

"..."

At that direct question, Yuri seemed to hold his breath.

Bull's-eye, Brigitte thought, nodding to herself.

She felt a tingly sensation go through her. And her whole body felt hot, as if she'd covered herself with pocket warmers.

Yuri neither confirmed nor denied it, just propped his elbows on the table and gazed off into the distance.

"Hey, Yuri... You are pleased, aren't you?"

Brigitte got to her feet and leaned in, double-checking.

Yuri, on the other hand, sighed again and glared at Brigitte.

His gaze was somewhat reproachful, but his eyes were soft.

"Fine. All right. I'll go wherever you want me to go," he replied boldly, laying all of his cards on the table.

Still, this was another Yuri-like way of circumventing embarrassment. "I'll go wherever" was his way of trying to sound offhand and casual.

"Thanks!"

Brigitte broke into a huge smile as she grabbed something from her bag and sat down beside Yuri.

"Look, it's a pamphlet for the National Founding Festival! I had it all prepared!" Brigitte beamed at Yuri. "So then, where should we start, on the day?"

"Anywhere is fine."

"Oh, come on. All the candy shops are going to be selling exclusive National Founding Festival sweets!"

"! ...Where?"

"Well, look here!"

Huddled together, Brigitte and Yuri talked about the National Founding Festival with increasing excitement.

Just the two of them, chatting enthusiastically about this and that...

...Later, it would go on to become one of those core memories that Brigitte would look back on and blush.



"Welcome home, Sienna!"

"...!"

As soon as the door opened, one girl leaped at the other and was caught in a big bear hug.

Sienna held Brigitte, who was taller than she was, in her arms.

It was hardly the behavior of a noble lady... But Sienna couldn't bear to scold her. And only the cottage staff knew this silly, childlike version of Brigitte anyway.

"I'm home, my lady."

Smiling gently, she rubbed her cheek against Brigitte's soft hair. Inhaling deeply Brigitte's scent, she felt as if all the fatigue from traveling and living in an unfamiliar environment evaporated in a second.

"To reiterate what I wrote in my letter to you, I escorted your mother back to the main family home. I can't say she's all better, but she's recovered to the point where she can now walk unaided."

"Thank you so much, Sienna. I'm sorry for entrusting you with such a difficult task."

Sienna shook her head.

These past five days, Sienna had been in charge of taking care of Asha's daily needs at the villa owned by the Meidell family.

Clifford also stayed behind, helping with sourcing ingredients and preparing food, and even serving as a conversation partner of sorts to Asha.

It was at Asha's own request that Sienna and Clifford brought her back to the royal capital.

Though I wish she would have come to speak to the young miss at the first opportunity...

Asha had been hoodwinked by the evil alp spirit and had gone to the holiday villa, a place full of memories for her and Brigitte.

Even Sienna, who'd spent the past few days with her, didn't know why she had done this. Asha seemed to be foggy on the details, too, and didn't say much.

But Asha really should tell Brigitte the reason why, in Sienna's opinion. Even a mother who abandoned a wounded child ought to have the decency to take responsibility for all the trouble she'd caused.

Otherwise, the young miss will not be able to feel at peace.

In order to find Asha, Brigitte visited the main family house and the forests of the estate, where memories of her family were still strong.

But Asha had gone right back to that house, and it didn't sit right with Sienna.

Sienna slowly pulled away from Brigitte. "Has anything new happened with you, my lady?"

Sienna pointedly avoided mentioning Asha.

And she really did want to know how Brigitte had been. As her personal maid, it had been difficult for her to be away from her young mistress even for a few days.

"It's all right. Everyone helped me." Brigitte smiled wryly. "...But I was very lonely without you, Sienna."

"Oh, my lady!"

Sienna felt a thrill of emotion at those words.

Then Brigitte started fidgeting and *um*-ing and *ah*-ing.

"Actually...so, I'm almost done knitting the scarf, but I don't know how to hem the ends. I'm sorry to bother you so soon after coming back, but could you please show me how?"

Hmm? That's what she was having such trouble saying...?

Sienna was doubtful, but also pleased to be asked to help. "Leave it to me," she told Brigitte brightly.

But then she remembered something important.

"Oh, right. Mr. Clifford is still outside."

"Oh, he is? In that case, I should go and thank him as well."

Sienna nodded, then paused.

"Miss, your hair is messy."

"What? It is?"

While Brigitte was fussing over her hair, Sienna headed to the servants' quarters. She grabbed a paper bag from her own room and headed out via the back entrance.

Clifford had parked his carriage by the back gate and was waiting.

When he'd dropped Asha off, he'd stopped in front of the main gate. But here, he had come to the back gate. He was an observant man and understood that it would have been awkward for Sienna to arrive via the main gate when she worked at the nearby cottage.

Sienna had been impressed on many occasions by Clifford's attentiveness as an attendant.

He waits on that sulky-looking Aurealis boy, after all.

"Ah, Miss Sienna."

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Clifford."

Right, it was Sienna herself who'd asked Clifford to hang back. And why she'd distracted Brigitte inside.

Sienna handed the paper bag she was holding to Clifford, who looked puzzled.

Sienna spoke up first. "It's a personal gift."

"May I open it?"

"Certainly."

After getting permission, Clifford opened the paper bag.

Sienna watched, her breath caught in her throat. She had never given a gift to a man before. It was all quite exciting.

Clifford removed an object from the bag and stared at it.

"Is this for putting a magic stone in...?"

It was a handmade magic stone holder, just as Clifford had said.

If you put a fire magic stone inside on a cold day, for example, it could serve as a pocket warmer. Sienna had knitted it with light-blue yarn and made sure it wouldn't look too bulky in a pocket. She was rather satisfied with the result.

When Sienna and Brigitte went shopping in the royal capital, she had bought some wool in the same color as Clifford's hair. She'd also chosen an elegant blue button to serve as a fastening.

The reason she'd gone with a magic stone holder was because it was quite simple to make, and also a rather innocuous item.

It's all the fashion these days to present some handmade winter accessory or other to someone you like on the night of National Founding Day.

So Sienna had purposely avoided that day, which was soon to occur that upcoming weekend.

Sienna had opted to give a gift that wouldn't cause any misunderstandings to either the recipient or to anyone who heard about it.

"My mistress and I owe you a debt of thanks, Clifford."

As Sienna spoke these words, she noticed that Clifford appeared frozen and wasn't reacting at all. Anxiety set in.

"Oh dear... Have I inconvenienced you?"

Though there'd never been any sign of it, perhaps Clifford was a taken man.

He served as an honorable servant in a noble household, was good-looking, and had a cheerful personality. It would be odd for him to be single, come to think of it.

In that case...Sienna's behavior could be viewed as a nuisance. Her carefully prepared gift, planned out so as to avoid any misunderstandings, might still anger a partner at home.

"No, it's not that... My apologies. I've never received such a splendid gift. I'm really quite thrilled."

He didn't seem thrilled... But he also didn't seem as if he was outright lying.

"Thank you. I'm quite thrilled indeed, Miss Sienna. I'll cherish it."

Clifford smiled softly.

Sienna stared at that smile for a moment.

"I'll be sure to repay the favor in kind at some point soon. Well then, I'll be off."

Sienna watched the carriage leave and then returned to the cottage to find Brigitte rushing along the hallway clutching a hand mirror.

"Oh, Sienna. What's happening? Does my hair look any better?"

"I'm sorry, my lady. Clifford has gone home."

Sienna apologized. Brigitte seemed a little disappointed but said that she would thank Clifford another time.

Then Brigitte narrowed her eyes at Sienna and said, "Sienna... Did something...good happen?"

"...Nothing at all, my lady."

Sienna stopped smiling and composed her face into a neutral expression.

"Well then, my lady. Let's get to work on finishing that scarf."

Brigitte nodded, looking motivated.

As Sienna followed Brigitte up the stairs, she said a quick prayer.

Please, let the recipient of Brigitte's gift be thrilled to receive it, too...



Even If We Never Agree

The Field Kingdom's National Founding Festival.

On this, the day of the annual festival, the entire royal capital was in a highly festive mood.

Food stalls and vendors selling wares, all lined up along the main street. Stallkeepers calling out cheerfully to potential customers. The town was stuffed, with many tourists from nearby towns and cities present for the festival. The whole atmosphere was one of lively celebration.

Standing on the corner of the bustling street was Brigitte in her school uniform, and she'd just met up with the person she had come here to meet.

"Sorry. Were you waiting long?"

"No, no. I just got here."

Brigitte tried for a natural smile but ended up looking awkward and sort of twitchy.

Yuri, who'd just joined her, didn't seem to mind. But Brigitte's heart was thundering in her chest.

Maybe I underestimated how embarrassed I'd be...!

For the last little while, she'd caught glimpses of students in the same uniform in the crowd.

Mostly, they were boy-girl couples. Going around the festival together, like Brigitte and Yuri were doing, until the ball that would be held that evening.

...In other words, the chances of running into someone they knew were high.

And with rumors already circulating that Yuri and I are dating...

Still, this was her first time on an outing with Yuri, just the two of them. Maybe a day like today wouldn't come around again. Thinking of it that way, she couldn't waste this opportunity.

Yuri looked around, oblivious to what Brigitte was feeling as she stood there dawdling.

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"What's wrong? Shouldn't we set off?"
"Er... Um..."
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"What, are you hungry or something?"

Er, no?!

Although in truth, the air had been filled with delicious smells for a while now. Instead of protesting, Brigitte found herself changing the subject.

"Let's have another contest!"

"...Another one?"

Yuri looked confused, and Brigitte groped around for something convincing to say.

"Yeah. Just walking around the festival sounds kinda boring, right? And there are all kinds of food stalls and fun games and so on. So I thought a contest would be fun. Like the shooting booth? Or maybe the shorthand game?"

In the immediate vicinity were several booths running games.

They'd gone over the festival pamphlet together, so they had a rough idea of which food stalls were set up in which areas.

Maybe no speed-eating contests, though. You never know who's watching.

The edges of Yuri's mouth curved when Brigitte made this suggestion. His devilish grin sent a chill down Brigitte's spine.

Yep. Yuri was just as competitive as Brigitte was.

And maybe he was still sore about losing to her in the fourth round of their ongoing challenge. He seemed to jump right on board with the idea of a

competition.

"Best out of five?"

"Sounds good to me."

If they played an odd number of rounds, it would be easy to see who was the winner.

"Okay, then. Let's go."

"All right!"

Brigitte nodded with enthusiasm and was about to set off when...

...Yuri reached out and casually took her hand.

Holding hands!

It was quite the surprise attack.

Had the battle already begun? Did Brigitte lose the first round by getting flustered?

Brigitte flapped her lips, scrabbling for words, and Yuri turned his head to look at her.

"So we don't get separated in the crowd."

Oh, right. That was his reasoning.

Well, then, why shouldn't Brigitte hold his hand? She wasn't used to strolling around the capital, and it wouldn't be good to get separated from Yuri.

But a little warning pre-hand-holding would have been nice!

Yuri's unexpected touches always sent Brigitte's pulse racing.

Still...if you really thought about it...him announcing his intentions pre-hand-holding wouldn't necessarily prevent tachycardia.

I'd like to squeeze his hand right back, but...

Looking out across the crowd, Brigitte clocked a girl walking adorably arm in arm with who must have been her boyfriend.

She felt a stab of envy and also of annoyance with herself for not being

capable of greater openness.

"S-Sister!"

Brigitte heard a voice that had grown familiar of late, and she stopped in her tracks.

Roze was walking up, cheeks flushed.

"How wonderful to run into you in this crowd and everything!"

Roze sounded breathless. Brigitte smiled, tickled by the fact that he clearly was glad to see her.

"Right? Are you enjoying the festival with your friends, Roze?"

"Yes, with my friends from class."

Behind Roze were two boys.

But Roze had said that no fewer than eight girls had invited him to the ball. Didn't he get any invitations to tour the festival, too? Perhaps he'd turned them all down.

While she was mulling this over, Brigitte felt a strange presence nearby, and she frowned.

Hmm?

Looking over her shoulder, she spotted several girls hiding in the shadows of some of the stalls and houses, staring in this direction.

They were all staring at Roze...who stood in front of Brigitte and who was still visibly flushed.

E-even Sana is among them...

Sana, one of the kids who'd toured the shrine with them... She was staring at Roze, too, and chewing on her own handkerchief...

In fact, there were eight of these watching girls. Brigitte felt a trickle of worry for Roze. She hoped he wouldn't end up on the wrong end of some jealous woman's blade someday...

But Roze didn't seem to have noticed the surrounding girls. He cleared his

throat.

"S-Sister, would you like to—?"

"Hey!"

Yuri cut him off in a withering tone.

Roze frowned. Then his gaze drifted downward. When Brigitte realized what he was looking at, she almost jumped out of her skin.

Yuri's hand! We're still holding hands!

How embarrassing! In front of her little brother. And the junior classmen.

She tried to yank her hand free, but her fingers seemed to be entangled in Yuri's.

To make matters worse, she could feel Yuri's cold stare bearing down on her. Cowed, Brigitte turned her head to the side.

"You didn't let me finish speaking."

"I know what you were going to say. You were going to ask her to tour the festival with you."

"Yes, that's true... So?"

Roze was unrepentant. Yuri sucked his teeth in annoyance.

Then Roze's shoulders slumped.

"You're being unfair, Aurealis. I just wanted to get to know my own sister a little better."

"You think that cutesy act is going to work on her, do you?"

It was working on her. Brigitte blinked as Yuri tightened his grip on her hand and pulled her a step backward.

"No. I don't think that. Listen, Aurealis, I have no intention of encroaching on your turf."

"Then what are you doing here, hmm?"

After that, the two of them started furiously whispering back and forth. Brigitte tilted her head to one side.

"Yuri, Roze, you two are becoming such good friends lately."

"Brigitte... Are you deaf and blind?"

Wow, that's rude!

But it was true. Roze and Yuri could speak much more openly to each other than she and Roze could. There was still that sense of psychological distance present.

Roze seemed to be thinking along the same lines. He lifted his chin with determination.

"Sister. Please. You still speak so formally around me. Can't we be more casual, like real siblings?"

"What?"

"You don't want to?"

Roze, a little taller than Brigitte, was leaning forward and somehow managing to give her the upturned puppy-dog eyes. And he even looked like a puppy. A forlorn little puppy alone in the rain.

He's adorable!

Squeeing internally a little, Brigitte cleared her throat.

"Okay, Little Bro. How's that?"

"...Perfect! Big Sis Brigitte!"

Roze's eyes lit up, and so did his smile.

In that instant, several of the girls who'd been staring at them let out little grunting squeals.

Brigitte looked around, wondering what was the matter with them, as Roze leaned in to whisper something to her.

"Sis, Mother is doing well. You don't need to worry. I'm keeping a close eye on her."

"Thanks, Roze."

"See ya!"

Smiling, Roze left with his friends.

Brigitte waved good-bye, but Yuri sucked his teeth with loud annoyance again.

"We've wasted enough time. Let's get moving."

"R-right!"

Yuri took her hand, and they set off again.

As they walked, Brigitte found herself thinking about Yuri's family.

The only one she knew personally was Clyde Aurealis. He'd introduced himself to her as Yuri's third-born older brother.

Yuri was the youngest of four siblings. The first wife of Yuri's father had died young, and Brigitte knew that Yuri was the son of the second wife. To rephrase, that was about the extent of what she knew.

"Yuri, are you close with your siblings?"

"No. Not at all."

Yuri responded without looking at her.

"None of them like me, except for my oldest brother."

"Oh..."

Yuri didn't seem interested in pursuing the conversation.

Brigitte wanted to know more about Yuri... But she didn't want to pry.

Yuri always listens to me chattering away about things...

He'd been a helpful presence to Brigitte many times, but she'd never been able to do anything for him.

Brigitte realized they'd stopped walking. Yuri looked down at her and sighed a little.

Maybe he was annoyed with her questioning. The thought made her feel timid, and she couldn't lift her head to look at him.

"Never mind about me anyway. There's no need to look so gloomy."

"What do you mean, never mind about you? I do mind."

This conversation was important. Yuri was important.

"Well, I don't care."

"You don't have to talk like that..."

"Because you're far more important to me."

"[..."

Brigitte froze, her lips unmoving.

She looked up at Yuri. She felt as if maybe he'd gone a little pink.

It couldn't just be her imagination. The rims of his ears were definitely a bit red.

"You were looking forward to today's festival, weren't you?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah! Very much so!"

Brigitte nodded vigorously.

She then found herself tugging on Yuri's hand. Yuri chuckled in response to this childlike behavior.

Seeing Yuri enjoying something so trivial made Brigitte smile, too, and then soon they were chuckling together.



"Yay! Great job, Peep!" Brigitte cheered.

"Peep!"

Peep flapped its wings in response.

A roar erupted from the onlookers, followed by applause.

What were they doing? Well, target shooting.

Down a quiet alleyway, color-coded targets were set up. Each target was worth a certain number of points, and high scores could be achieved by hitting the small bull's-eye in the center.

What made it different from regular target shooting was that it was spirits doing the shooting, not people.

In chick form, Peep made an adorable sight spitting small jets of flame at the targets. It'd attracted quite a crowd of spectators.

So far, Yuri (and Blue) had won the first game, which was disc-throwing.

Brigitte won the slide puzzle game they'd tackled for the second round.

Yuri won the third round, the shorthand-writing game, and Brigitte (and Peep) had just managed to win the fourth round, the target shooting, by a small margin.

"That's two for two, Yuri!"

With Peep on her shoulder, Brigitte called out to Yuri, who was leaning against the pole of a nearby food stall.

"This is finally starting to get interesting."

Yuri smiled confidently.

"What should we do next?" Brigitte asked.

She wandered around, checking out the various banners. There weren't all that many game stalls they could use for their competition.

They'd taken their time and wolfed down various food stall delicacies in between games, so it wasn't much longer until the parade.

They needed an odd number of rounds to decide a winner. One final bout should do it.

"Oh! It's a stamp rally," said Brigitte. "How about that?"

"...All right."

Yuri took a second to respond, but Brigitte was still high on her last victory and didn't think about it that much.

The booth staff person handed them both a stamp rally card.

It was a simple game, suitable even for children. You just had to get the card stamped at the five locations listed, then return to the original stall for a prize.

The back of the card had hints as to where each location might be.

"The first person to return with five stamps wins."

"Right."

"Ready, start!"

Brigitte set off immediately, leaving behind a fairly unmotivated Yuri.

Now then, which is the closest stamp location?

As she walked, consulting the card every few steps, she heard a familiar voice calling her.

"Brigitte!"

"Oh, Kira! And Lisa, too!"

Kira came running up, with Lisa behind her. It looked like the two had been enjoying the festival together.

Incidentally, Nival said he'd be going around the festival with friends from class. Brigitte hadn't run into him yet, but doubtless he was having fun somewhere.

While Brigitte was thinking about this, she met Lisa's gaze. Lisa quickly looked away.

Before, Lisa would start trouble with Brigitte, either by arguing with her or messing around while they were looking for magic stones.

But Brigitte knew now that all of that had been a result of Joseph's manipulation.

Brigitte had gotten an apology, so to her, it was all water under the bridge. But apparently, Lisa still felt awkward.

Despite the tension in the air, Kira remained perky as she asked, "What have you been up to, Brigitte?"

"Yuri and I have been competing against each other."

"Competing? Oh yeah, I was wondering where Aurealis was."

"We're currently seeing who can complete this stamp rally the fastest."

Brigitte gave a brief explanation.

"...Sounds dumb," Lisa muttered quietly. Kira shot her a look, and Lisa shifted awkwardly. "...I mean, weren't you two on a date? What are you splitting up for? Seems dumb to me..."

"<u>|</u>"

That remark sent a shock straight through Brigitte.

Gosh... She's right!

Lisa had a completely valid point.

We were supposed to be enjoying the festival together. Why a timed stamp rally, of all things?

Come to think of it, when she'd suggested the stamp rally, there'd been a weird look on Yuri's face. Maybe he hadn't wanted to say no, since Brigitte seemed so excited about the idea...

What the heck was I thinking?!

Shocked at her own lack of foresight, Brigitte hung her head.

Kira seemed worried.

"Why don't we go and look for Aurealis together, Brigitte?"

"Huh? Don't drag me into this."

"Oh, why not? And, Lisa, don't you want to clear the air with Brigitte?"

"Huh? Who ever said anything about that?"

Lisa and Kira started arguing. In the moment, though, Brigitte found their bickering a welcome distraction.

"Thank you, both of you. Will you help me look for him, then?"

"Leave it to us! Do you know which direction he went?"

"Um..."

At that moment, Brigitte heard some raised voices among the crowd.

She looked over and saw three men dressed all in black (which was odd for a

festival) shoving their way through the crowd. A child wailed from somewhere, maybe having been pushed over.

As they continued on, earning looks of annoyance from those around them, Brigitte's eyes met theirs, and she shivered slightly.

"Brigitte? What's wrong?"

"Those guys..."

No, she wasn't imagining it. All three of them were staring at her.

No, wait... They were focused on her red hair. And they were coming straight for her...

The men approached Brigitte. She almost cowered as the tall men stared down at her, but she forced herself to meet their eyes.

One of the men stepped forward, as if to represent the group, and spoke to her with a surprising level of respect.

"Countess Brigitte Meidell. Your father has summoned you. Please come with us."

Brigitte gasped at this.

Father...summoned me?

She didn't recognize any of the men. Were they hired by her father just for this?

"What does my father want?"

"We cannot answer that."

"...Oh." Brigitte nodded meekly.

She didn't really fancy standing up to these men, especially when they'd come all this way to fetch her. Deag would have told them to use any means necessary to get her to come along.

With Peep's help, she could probably extricate herself from this situation. But the area was crowded. She couldn't get innocent bystanders involved.

"Brigitte..."

Kira's face was pale; she must have sensed the tension.

Brigitte looked at the other two girls and tried to smile bravely.

"Don't worry. I'll see you at the party tonight."

Brigitte waved and smiled, but Kira stared after her with obvious worry.



The carriage Brigitte was riding in slowly came to a halt.

The men riding with her indicated that she should step out from the cab.

"Let's go."

The three men surrounded and escorted Brigitte.

"Peep..."

As she made her way down the mansion hallway, Brigitte heard an anxious chirping coming from her hair.

She patted the area lightly, but the trembling continued.

No, wait. It's me. I'm the one trembling.

Peep was just reacting to Brigitte.

Brigitte was shown to the study and told to go inside. She obediently stepped through the doorway and found herself faced with the one who'd summoned her.

"...Father," she said, her voice heavy.

Deag Meidell was leaning back in his chair and perusing some document in his hand.

A few seconds later, he raised his head.

"I dispatched three men, but it seems there was no problem."

That was when Brigitte knew for sure.

Deag had ordered those men in black to bring Brigitte. And he *had* told them to use any means necessary.

Pain shot through the back of her left hand, and Brigitte squeezed it with her other hand. It was all she could do to keep from fainting on the spot.

Even though there's no scar there anymore.

Peep had helped to heal the scars on Brigitte's skin, but the pain persisted. Whenever Brigitte saw Deag, she felt as if it were still eleven years ago.

...No. Calm down.

Trying to stay strong, Brigitte cleared her throat.

"I didn't resist, if that's what you mean. But I thought you were going to wait until the day after National Founding Day for my response?"

" "

"You asked me if I have any plans of returning to the family home. I intend to give you my answer tomorrow. So why did you summon me here in this way?"

Brigitte stared him down bravely, but Deag merely looked bored.

"Brigitte. You've been mistaken from the beginning."

"I...I have?"

"You should have given me your answer the day I visited the cottage. From the beginning, you only ever had one choice. Dallying until the deadline is just another testament to your own laziness and indolence."

Brigitte was stunned as Deag continued talking.

"Brigitte, I want you to get engaged again."

There was an odd sound, like air escaping a balloon.

It took Brigitte a moment to realize that the sound was coming from the back of her own throat.

"Yes, the third prince might have rejected you, but you're contracted with a phoenix. So you still have something to offer."

"...Get engaged to...to whom?"

Deag said the man's name, but it was someone Brigitte had never heard of.

Once again, she felt that odd gasping noise in her throat.

This man...doesn't care one whit for me after all...

Brigitte felt sick, as if everything was spinning around her.

She wasn't sure she'd be able to stay on her feet much longer.

"You summon me back to the main house, and now you're telling me to marry someone I've never even met?"

"Yes."

"Father... It's Peep you're after, right? The power of the phoenix."

"Correct again."

"From the very beginning, you've never cared about me or my feelings."

"These questions are pointless." Deag sighed, exasperated, as if Brigitte was a disobedient child. "This is something you don't want, presumably. But I wish you'd show a little gratitude for my kindness in inviting a useless girl like you into my home."

Why...?

It was as if they were having two different conversations.

No matter what Brigitte said, Deag would never hear her.

Deag knew that Brigitte had no intention of returning, so he was going on the offensive.

He hadn't even given Brigitte time to make her response. He'd made a unilateral decision about her own future.

Still, Brigitte wasn't just going to back down. She needed to stand up for herself here, or she'd be forced to return...

"No. I refuse..."

The moment she spoke...

...a loud, shattering sound erupted right next to Brigitte's head.

"<u>!</u>"

Her mind went blank for a moment with shock.

Brigitte collapsed to the ground, shaking, and managed to turn her head.

Shards of glass were scattered nearby, and it vaguely occurred to her that Deag had thrown an ashtray at her head.

" ..."

Several drops of blood splattered onto the carpet.

She must have been cut by one of the shards. Brigitte touched her cheek but felt no pain. She was still somewhat in shock.

"I don't remember asking your opinion!"

Deag's rage was so explosive, it seemed to shake the entire building.

"I don't need your opinion. Just keep your mouth shut and do as I say!"

Brigitte was frozen in place as he screamed at her.

"...At the end of the parade, I will use wind magic to announce your new fiancé to the whole of the royal capital."

Then Deag got up to leave the room, as if the conversation was over.

"You...promised," said Brigitte.

His feet stopped.

"You said that when I grew up...you would show me an ifrit's magic up close."

For just a moment, a look of uncertainty crossed Deag's face.

Brigitte got to her feet, not noticing this. Several drops of blood dripped from her face, but she paid no heed.

She felt as if her brain itself was burning. It was something close to absolute rage.

"I'm not getting engaged. I'm not coming back to this house."

"What?"

Brigitte yelled, her emerald eyes brimming with emotion: "This is *not* my home!!!"

Deag's eyes widened.

It wasn't what Brigitte was saying that seemed to floor him, so much as the raw strength in her eyes as she glared at him.

"Sienna, Carson, Nathan, Hans... I have everyone I love with me already. *That* is my home!"

"...It's not your home. It's just a convenient storage shed for me to keep you in."

"If it's a shed, then your house is a dark and stagnant prison."

Deag's face contorted with anger.

He shoved Brigitte in the shoulder, and she hit the door. But still she did not look away.

"If you refuse to comply, then you can leave the phoenix and get out. I'll have that shed of yours dismantled."

"No."

Brigitte shook her head hard, with no hesitation. She was completely rejecting him.

Deag stared at Brigitte as if he had no idea what she was anymore.

I've made up my mind.

No matter how scared she was, she would grit her teeth and resist the urge to cry.

There was only one thing she wanted.

She wanted to live among those who accepted her.

CRASH! There was a colossal noise.

Brigitte crouched by pure reflex and covered her face.

"What's going on?!" Deag yelled. There were footsteps outside the door, raised voices.

Stunned, Brigitte looked up.

The windows in the study had all shattered. An ice wolf had just landed on the floor, covered in shards of glass.

A young man jumped off the back of the glorious wolf.

"Good day, my lord."

When Brigitte heard that voice, her eyes filled with tears—and this time, she couldn't hold them back.

Why are you always here for me when I need you...?

She gazed up at the young man with the blue hair.

Deag looked shocked to his core. His voice shook with rage.

"Yuri Aurealis...? What the heck do you think you're doing?!"

"Oh, don't worry about it. I just came to say hello to my future father-in-law."

He said it almost as if it was some kind of promise.

[&]quot;Brigitte, you see, is my fiancée."



The Parade Begins

For Brigitte, time stood still. She couldn't move.

My fiancé? Yuri...?

Yuri moved quickly, striding over and gently helping Brigitte to her feet.

That was when Deag appeared to snap out of his stupor. "Hold it!"

He reached out, as if to grab for Brigitte, and Blue peeled their lips back from their teeth in a snarl.

"Blue!"

"Right!"

With the two of them on their back, Blue quickly jumped from the windowsill.

As they landed in the gardens of the Meidell mansion, men spilled out the doors and came after them. They were the same ruffians in black who had kidnapped Brigitte earlier.

There were also multiple spirits on guard surrounding the mansion, intended to block Brigitte's potential escape. Presumably, they were contracted with the ruffians.

"...We can force our way through, but it'll be bad if they follow us."

Yuri was worried about endangering anyone in town.

Deag was the head of an esteemed household, and surely he wouldn't do anything to disrupt the historic festival. That said, there seemed to be no limit to what he might do to get his hands on Brigitte's phoenix.

"Master! What should we do?" Blue asked.

"Just dodge all attacks for now. I'll intercept the enemies."

"All right!"

Blue leaped in the air to avoid a flying blade made of flame.

At almost the same time, Yuri stretched one hand out in front of him.

Without an incantation, he cast a third-class Aqua and a second-class Splash spell.

S-so strong...!

Brigitte was deeply impressed.

She'd seen Yuri's magic once before, and each spell was so powerful, it could easily be mistaken for advanced magic.

A ball and a jet of water came shooting at the spirits with incredible force.

But the spirits weren't going to be deterred so easily, and they blocked the attacks by conjuring walls made of earth.

With one eye on that battle, Blue continued to jump and dodge.

"Yeek!" Brigitte squealed, almost unseated.

Yuri immediately tightened his arms around her. He was holding her...from behind.

This situation was extremely tense for Brigitte. And she needed to know something...

"Yuri, how did you know to find me...?"

"Kira told me that you were kidnapped by some suspicious men. She apparently had her brownie follow them, and you were seen being taken into the Meidell mansion."

That was why he came to help.

Brigitte understood now, but there was one more thing she wanted to ask. She clenched her fists.

"S-so...what did you mean by f-f-fiancé...?"

"...Huh?"

Yuri looked somewhat stunned.

They both stared blankly at each other.

"...You remember what happened eleven years ago, don't you?"

"I...I have this impression of you being there, in the reception room, the day of the contracting ceremony..."

"..." Yuri sighed heavily.

"I mean, I know. You only said that to distract my father and let us escape, right? That was a lie to prevent me from having to get engaged for real..."

"'Engaged for real'?" Yuri's eyes flashed dangerously. "No...that doesn't matter right now. Anyway, you all right?"

"Huh?"

"You're injured."

That was when Brigitte remembered.

Yes... Her cheek had been cut. She touched it again, but it was still bleeding... Her fingers came away stained with red.

"It's nothing." Brigitte tried to smile brightly. "You came for me, Yuri. So everything is all right."

"Peep!"

Peep popped its head out from Brigitte's hair.

The frightened spirit was staring at Brigitte, blinking furiously. Apparently, it was intending to try to heal her injury.

"No, Peep. Don't come out now."

"Peep?"

Rejected by Brigitte, Peep shook all over, as if asking, Why not?!

"Because it was you who Father was after, Peep."

Then Brigitte gasped.

The windows, neatly smashed in. A man standing there, hand outstretched...

"Master Yuri!"

"...!"

Deag was generating fireballs in his hands and flinging them their way, one after another.

Yuri reacted quickly, summoning another spirit.

"Undine!"

"Yes, yes, leave it to me. I'm not sure I'd like to face an ifrit, though...," the undine grumbled as she floated in the air, but she was still creating a water ball.

Fire and water collided in midair overhead, causing jets of steam.

The waves of hot air fanned Brigitte's cheeks, but the onslaught continued unabated.

Well protected by Yuri, Brigitte had a thought.

...Ifrit?

The undine was the one to mention that spirit...

Clinging to Blue, Brigitte narrowed her eyes and watched closely.

Deag continued to exchange attacks with the undine. Beads of sweat were visible on his forehead. He was wasting a lot of magical power summoning all those fireballs.

That's strange. Why doesn't Father summon his ifrit?

Brigitte tried to think of it from every angle.

I feel like I'm missing something important.

Deag and Roze were contracted with ifrit spirits. Asha's was a salamander.

The Meidell household was a fire household. One might even say there was too much fire represented there.

She'd wondered quite a bit about how an alp, an evil spirit from the Unseelie Court, had been able to infiltrate the Meidell mansion so easily. And according to what Roze said, Asha had been under the thrall of that evil alp's magic for

almost the last decade.

What's more...

Never mind Brigitte and Yuri—why did Roze, of all people, refuse to attend the parade?

Participating would be a great honor for a Meidell family member. If Roze was going to be the heir to the family, it would be a great opportunity to get his name and face out there.

And yet Roze had refused the archbishop's invitation on the spot, without even consulting with Deag. Roze had always been the hesitant type—but he didn't seem to have even given it a second's thought before saying no.

Roze had turned down the archbishop outright.

...It couldn't be...

But Brigitte had reached her conclusion.

Fireworks rose from the far corner of the royal capital, and loud applause and cheers were audible on the breeze.

Small whirlpools of flame and currents of water were shooting into the distant sky.

The National Founding Festival was still in full swing. The priests of the shrine would begin the parade through the royal capital, accompanied by their contracted spirits soon.

The parade lasts about a half hour...

The procession would enter via the west gate of the royal capital and straight down main street. As they reached the outer gate of the royal palace, the heads of the four great noble families would summon their contracted spirits. Then high-level magic spells would be cast from the grounds of the four great residences, lighting up the sky directly above the royal palace and bringing the parade to a close. It was a tradition in the Kingdom of Field.

Deag must have noticed the loud commotion coming from afar. He lowered his raised hand, looking frustrated.

By that time, the spirits that had been stationed around the garden had disappeared.

The men who'd been fighting with the help of their spirits looked utterly exhausted. It was as if just standing was causing them pain.

They're out of magic...

Of course their magical powers would dry up after such a spectacular battle. Yuri was the odd one, deftly and calmly commanding two first-class spirits against such a number of opponents.

Deag pressed his temples in vexation and looked over his shoulder, back inside the room.

"It's time for the parade preparations. Hurry and proceed," he called to the head butler.

The butler bowed, glancing briefly at Brigitte.

Gramps...!

"Of course, have the wind magic casters stand by as well. We'll have them cast Wind Whisper as planned."

The moment she heard Deag's cold command, Brigitte jumped off Blue's back.

"Brigitte?"

"Yuri. I have to tell my father something."

Yuri stared at her, but Brigitte was calm.

He casually shifted his gaze toward the flower bed, and Brigitte nodded when she understood what he meant.

"Is that okay?"

"Yes."

Smiling, Brigitte stepped forward.

She knew that Yuri was watching her back. As a result, her legs did not tremble.

"Lord Deag Meidell."

She called out to him, addressing him as if he were a stranger. Deag, about to leave the study, paused in his tracks.

But when he looked back, his face was contorted.

He was furious with her stubborn refusal to follow his orders.

Deag stood there, eyes darting about as if he was searching desperately for something.

Brigitte brushed her bangs off her face.

"You look anxious," she said. "Searching for your son, are you?"

"...What?"

"Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say...your ifrit?"

Deag's face froze. "Roze told you, did he?"

Brigitte shrugged. "No. But judging from your response, it seems I guessed right."

"What?!"

Deag seemed to realize that Brigitte had tricked him. A vein pulsed at his temple as he angrily opened his mouth to speak.

"Sister... Of course. You saw through everything."

As if waiting for that cue, Roze emerged from the mansion.

Deag slammed his fists against the windowsill, sending shards of glass dancing.

"Roze! Where the heck have you been slacking...off...?"

But Deag soon trailed off.

Roze wasn't alone.

He was with Asha Meidell.

His arm around her shoulder, Roze helped her across the garden.

Asha looked slightly healthier than she had when Brigitte had last seen her at

the holiday villa. She was still thin and drawn, but she was doing her best to walk on her unsteady, sticklike legs.

The two stopped in front of Deag and Brigitte.

"Mother...," Brigitte murmured.

Asha looked up, her lips moving slightly. "Can you explain the rest, Brigitte...?"

Unlike Deag, there was no anger in Asha. Instead, her tone was gently encouraging. Brigitte wasn't sure what to do with such treatment.

"...Of course, Mother."

Brigitte looked at Deag again.

"Your contracted spirit, the ifrit, hasn't made an appearance for a while. That's odd. If their contractor is in danger, a spirit cannot fail to come to their aid."

Previously, Joseph had stolen the magic breaker from the shrine—and that could forcibly break a contract between human and spirit.

But Deag had used magic earlier, which meant that his contract with the ifrit had not been broken.

Deag's face contorted as he realized what Brigitte was going to say.

"...Stop."

"It's not your ifrit that's the only one acting strange. I bet the countess's contracted salamander spirit is as well."

"Shut up!"

"I will not!"

There was only one conclusion.

"...Both of you have lost the devotion of your contracted spirits."

When Brigitte said this, Asha pursed her lips, and Deag only listened with wide eyes.

"As long as the spirit contract remains intact," Brigitte went on, "the contractor's magical power will be replenished over time...but the contractor

cannot summon their spirit from the spirit world."

At the Otoleanna Academy of Magic, they had learned this in the spring of their first year.

Spirits couldn't be forcibly summoned from the spirit world. They only came when they wanted to.

"In your everyday life, nobody would notice. But as representative of one of the four noble families, you are required by the yearly National Founding Festival to produce a spirit to participate. In the parade, specifically."

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"In the four great noble families, only those with the most powerful spirit or the next most powerful spirit are allowed to succeed to the peerage. The parade is a great opportunity to let the people know more about the four great noble families. It's an obligation that cannot be avoided," Brigitte explained smoothly. "Lord Meidell. Even though you had lost the favor of your ifrit, you decided to deceive the royal family and the people in order to protect the name of the Fire Clan and keep your position as head of the family...by using *Roze's* ifrit."

It was simple enough once you made the connections.

There was one reason why the alp was able to sneak into the mansion: Roze was the only one who possessed an ifrit.

Busy with school life and studying to become heir in the future, he often would have been away from the house from a young age.

The reason Roze refused to participate in the parade was because he knew that Deag would be using his ifrit and passing it off as his own at the same time.

Just as he'd been doing for the past eleven years.

"Is that not so, my lord?"

Deag did not respond to Brigitte's question.

Finally, after a long, long silence, Asha spoke. "...It's just as Brigitte said."

"You...!" Deag shot her an accusatory glare.

Those were not the eyes of a loving husband. Although Asha was clearly frightened, she faced his fury head-on.

Then she looked once more to Brigitte.

"Both the ifrit and the salamander had had enough of us after our harsh treatment of our daughter. They deemed us unworthy to be their contractors. In these past eleven years, they have not responded to our calls even once... You know, Brigitte..."

When Brigitte heard her name, she looked at Asha.

"You thought it was odd, right? How the burn mark on your left hand had not disappeared?"

She did not have the ugly scar she once had, but Asha was right. And she'd often wondered about it.

For example, before summer vacation, Lisa had burned her arm while digging for magic stones. She'd touched herself with a torch that had been lit by Joseph's fire magic.

However, when they'd met earlier, there'd been no trace of a scar on the back of Lisa's hand. Brigitte had heard that the academy had called in a priest to heal her, and she was secretly surprised to find that a burn scar could be eradicated so completely.

"...Yes. Not even a priest's healing magic could completely heal my wound."

From the fingertips of her left hand to her shoulder, Brigitte's arm had been completely mangled.

Even after being healed by the priest who'd rushed to her aid, a large wound remained on her hand, and the young Brigitte had often suffered with fever.

Looking pained, Asha now revealed the reason why.

"That was because...the head of the family...used the flame of an ifrit."

"...What?"

"The head of the family didn't just use the flames from the fireplace...he used his ifrit's powers to burn you. It took the spirit only a few seconds to realize what he was being made to do, and he returned quickly to the spirit world. That is why your scar lingered."

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Brigitte's knees buckled, and Yuri grabbed her.

"Brigitte...?"

But Brigitte could not respond.

Instead, she clung to his arm to prevent herself from sliding to the floor.

"It wasn't...just the fire in the fireplace that burned me."

It wasn't even Deag's own fire magic.

That horrible burning was caused by the ifrit's power...

Deag...had intended to kill Brigitte.

That's how little Father loved me.

"If this thing really is our child, she would never have contracted with a noname. By making her touch the fire, I was only trying to find out if she was a changeling."

Even those cold words were just a lie to fool those around him.

Deag hated his daughter with all his heart, so much that he had tried to kill her with his own hands.

Even though Brigitte had already decided to cut him out of her heart forever, this revelation was devastating.

Asha gazed at Brigitte, tears streaming down her face. Instead of wiping them away, she opened her mouth to speak.

"...As a woman who married into the Fire Clan, I was frequently told by the previous head of the family to give birth to many gifted children. But I—I was blessed with only you, Brigitte. You were my only hope. But then you made a contract with a tiny spirit..."

People said there was an invisible vessel inside a human body that stored magical power. The storage capacity of that vessel was hereditary, passed down

through generations. This was why the Fire Clan and Water Clan had become so well-known. However, only a handful of people could make a contract with the highest-level spirits.

So families blessed with great magical ability would aim to have many children. This would lead to the greatest chance of one of them managing to contract with a first-class spirit.

The Aurealis family had four sons, but only the eldest and Yuri, the fourthborn son, had managed to make contracts with the most powerful spirits.

Asha's words revealed the true feelings she had been carrying within her all this time—she had never been allowed to express this before now.

"I was scared of being told that it was all my fault. I was so frightened, I couldn't think. So I looked away from you as you cried out for help. Even worse, I blamed you, though you did nothing wrong. As a mother, I should have risked my life to protect you while you stood there crying...and crying..."

Asha dissolved into tears, and Roze had to hold her up.

"Don't, or we shan't be able to meet," Asha had said to her maid.

She wanted to meet Brigitte, who was afraid of fire...

But Deag would not permit her to visit the cottage. Perhaps she had argued with him until she was forcibly confined to the mansion.

Asha was in a state of constant mental suffering, which left her vulnerable to the alp's intrusion.

"Enough already." Deag raised his voice, as if doing so would erase Asha's words. "You always run your mouth, woman. It's pathetic."

"Lord Meidell."

It was Yuri who'd interrupted.

Deag shot Yuri a look of hatred. "What, boy? Stay out of this. It's nothing to do with the Aurealis family."

"Is it not? I'd advise you not to say anything more."

"...What do you mean?"

"This conversation has been overheard all over the royal capital," Yuri said plainly, no hint of a smile.

"What are you talking about? The wind magic hasn't been cast yet..."

"Oh, I have my own wind magic users with me."

Nival and Kira popped out from the flower beds just then, as if Yuri had given them their cue.

Yuri had indicated the spots where they were hiding to Brigitte earlier. And she'd seen the ariel spirit, too, behind Nival.

"Wind Whisper."

The water spirit undine had a unique ability called "Water Mirror." But wind spirits had the ability to transmit sound, including voices, and could let the wind carry them across a wide area.

And coincidentally, the parade was currently in full swing.

Many priests were contracted with wind spirits, too.

So the ariel had used Wind Whisper to send this sound-casting magic toward them. By now, most of the town should have heard all about Deag's behavior.

"It was incautious of you to believe there were only two of us, Lord Meidell," Yuri said calmly.

Finding his own tricks used against him, Deag seemed beyond words.

"You make it sound so easy, Yuri," said Nival. "We're outta magic and on our last legs here." He did look pale and quite exhausted.

Brigitte called out to him with concern. "Nival! Are you all right?"

"Yes, Brigitte! Don't worry!"

As Nival got to his feet, Kira narrowed her eyes.

"...Did that conversation just now really make it across the entire royal capital?"

"Huh? Well, I'm not sure... But I think so?"

"You think so?!"

Yuri briefly glanced toward the debate as he continued speaking to Deag.

"Treating Roze's spirits as your own might damage your reputation, but it's not technically a crime. That incident eleven years ago, though, when you used a spirit's power to harm your own five-year-old daughter—that's a whole different matter."

The royal capital had its own Magic Corps stationed there at all times. They were the ones who took Joseph away when he attacked the academy.

If someone committed a crime or an act of violence using spirits or magical powers, the Magic Corps would interrogate the individual in accordance with the Magical Safety Act. This was a law widely enforced in shrines and academies.

In addition, educational institutions such as the Otoleanna Academy of Magic had some punitive powers of their own. That was why Nival had to wear a magic-suppressing collar when he caused his ariel to go out of control and why Lisa was suspended after attacking Brigitte with a magically lit torch.

It was difficult to prove a crime had been committed within a closed household, especially when nobility was involved. The Magic Corps couldn't intervene if the family itself claimed that what happened was an accident or was part of educating its younger members. That was the reality of the Kingdom of Field.

However, Deag himself had admitted out loud that he had assaulted a child using magic. So now the Magic Corps would be able to investigate, just as Yuri had said.

Though the scar on Brigitte's hand was all healed, Deag's reputation would never recover.

Fweeeeep... There was a high-pitched whistling sound.

Brigitte turned her head in the direction of the royal palace. That sound signaled the end of the parade.

The parade seemed to have proceeded despite whatever upset had been caused by the Wind Whisper. This event had been held annually since the founding of the Kingdom of Field, and it could not be so easily interrupted.

At the end of the parade, the heads of the four great noble families would summon their contracted spirits and conclude the event with a simultaneous blast of magic into the sky.

Flames burning.

Wind roaring.

Waters raging.

Soil rising.

For just a few seconds, the sky would be filled with the four clashing elemental magics.

That moment was steadily approaching. Sixty seconds after the whistle blew, the four spirits would cast their spells simultaneously.

"Roze!" cried Brigitte. "The ifrit—"

"Sister," Roze cut in.

She turned to him in surprise and saw him smiling brightly. He was still supporting Asha.

"I won't summon my ifrit."

Brigitte's eyes went wide, and even Deag was staring at Roze.

"Why, Roze? Why...?"

Deag's eyes were pleading, and it was the first time Brigitte had ever seen him so weak.

It must have been the same for Roze, but still, he shook his head, like he was shaking away pain.

Then Roze just looked at Brigitte.

She expected to see anger, resignation, disappointment at having all the hidden truths revealed, maybe even anguish over being caught up in this incident as a member of this family.

But there was no trace of any of that on Roze's face.

"Show them your spirit, Sister. Show everyone in the capital."

Brigitte's eyes widened even more.

Roze grinned impishly. "Please show everyone who's ever bullied you how amazing you really are!"

Usually, Brigitte would have been conflicted, despite Roze's urging. She never wanted to draw any attention to her phoenix, Peep.

But if she opted out now, she would let Roze down, along with all his faith in her.

I'm sure High Priest Liam will work to make my wish come true.

Liam had said he wanted to change this world, where people were discriminated against based on the spirits they contracted with. Brigitte wanted that, too.

People had mocked her for contracting with a tiny spirit, but surviving that was what had led her to Peep. She wanted people to understand that.

She took a deep breath and then looked at Roze.

"I'm your big sister, right? I guess I have to fulfill the wishes of my little brother."

"Sister...!" Roze's face lit up.

Brigitte glanced at Yuri. No doubt he immediately spotted the fear in her eyes.

"Do you need me?" He reached his hand out casually.

Yuri had supported her all this time. No matter how scared she was, when Yuri held her hand, she felt as if she could do anything.

So Brigitte would.

Roze had mustered up the courage all by himself to rebel against Deag. She owed him.

"I think I'll be all right. But stay close, okay?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Yuri replied, "I'll be watching."

His words gave her the final push she needed.

"Peep!"

"Peep!"

When she called that name, a small yellow creature popped out from her hair.

Like a leaf changing color, it instantly transformed.

"Fly, Peep!"

A beautiful phoenix appeared, its entire body covered in flaming red feathers.

The phoenix, thought to exist only in legend, soared.

Sparks scattered in the air like sun shards falling from the sky, mesmerizing the whole audience.

Meanwhile, Brigitte raised her voice.

"Peep!"

In that moment, with the royal palace's spire as a landmark, the most powerful magic spells shot into the sky from three directions at once.

Water, wind, earth.

The spirits of three of the four great noble families emitted a light that was so bright, so strong, it lit the whole evening sky.

The phoenix tipped its head back and breathed a mighty fireball from its beak.

It was as powerful as the flaming arm of the great ifrit.

The fireball turned into a coil of flame that stretched out and joined the other three elemental magics in midair.

The entire sky glowed with a light more dazzling than that of any firework.

"Wow...!" Roze cried, and Nival cheered, "That was amazing, Brigitte!"

Not that it's a competition, Brigitte thought, looking up.

As a child, Brigitte and her mother had watched the display from the square of the royal capital.

Back then, Brigitte had been afraid of it. She'd seen that power as something terrible enough to create storms, rend the seas, and crack the earth—and she was certain it would spill into the royal capital and destroy it.

It's not like it is a competition between the great houses.

But back then, Brigitte's fears had been turned on their head... Like the scene unfolding before her now.

The spirits did not seek to harm one another with their magic. They allowed their spells to mingle in the sky; then they all disappeared together.

The sky was left streaked with the faint afterimage of the incredible display.

"Wow..." Kira breathed.

Asha and Deag were still staring at the sky.

Red, blue, green, brown... Sparkling light in four colors began to rain down from the sky.

Brigitte caught some in her palm, like flakes of out-of-season snow.

"Beautiful....."



Brigitte held out both hands so Yuri could see the red and blue particles that had fallen together and mingled in her palm.

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"Right, Yuri?"
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"Yeah."

Yuri's face came close to hers.

Brigitte froze in surprise as Yuri brushed his hand against her hair. "You've got some here," he said.

Some of the particles had gotten stuck in her hair, apparently.

Yuri's mouth curved into a smile, and Brigitte mumbled her thanks.

When the parade ended, there was a roar from the crowd, followed by excited chatter.

"Peep!"

Peep came soaring down from the sky, and Brigitte held out her hands to catch it.

In her hands, it transformed back into a little chick, bounced around on her palms a few times, then settled.

"Welcome back. Good job, Peep."

"Peep!"

Peep shook out its feathers, seeming excited still after unleashing its full power.

But then a cracked voice shattered the peaceful moment.

"Are you satisfied now, Brigitte?"

Brigitte turned wordlessly to face her father.

Most of the town would have seen the phoenix flying through the sky.

The ifrit was gone from Deag, the supposed head of the great Meidell family. Everyone who'd heard the Wind Whisper would have realized by now that it had been true.

"Answer me! You've betrayed your family. You've betrayed your parents. Are you satisfied with yourself?!"

"Yes. I am."

Deag was speechless.

"Is that the answer you want from me, Father?"

Deag stiffened, trembling with anger.

But Brigitte kept going. "Why didn't you kill me eleven years ago?"

He'd had plenty of opportunities.

There was no need to banish her to the cottage. Deag could easily have sent a servant to assassinate her when no one was watching.

And yet Brigitte was still alive.

She didn't exactly expect anything from Deag at this point, but she couldn't help feeling that there was some reason he hadn't killed her.

Deag remained silent for a while.

He opened and closed his mouth a few times, as if he was wondering not just what he should say but whether he should say anything at all.

Deag scruffed up his hair. "... As long..."

"Huh...?"

"I thought...as long as you lived...some other way might present itself..."

His voice was extremely faint.

Just as Brigitte was about to ask him what exactly he meant, she heard clattering footsteps approaching.

A group of people wearing navy blue uniforms stepped into the garden.

It was the Magic Corps.

The ariel's Wind Whisper must have reached them; Nival looked visibly relieved.

The distinguished-looking man at the front of the group stopped in front of

Deag.

"You are the Earl of Meidell, correct? Will you come with us and answer a few questions?"

"...All right."

Deag seemed to consider resisting for a second, but he chose to go quietly. Without looking back, he climbed into the bare-bones carriage that was waiting.

"Lady Brigitte."

Brigitte turned to see the head butler of the family bowing to her.

His sharp eyes watched as Deag was taken away.

"Gramps... Did you know about everything?"

"I'm just a butler. I can't speak for the master of the house. But I'm willing to tell you what I know."

Brigitte nodded, and the head butler slowly began.

"The master...had a brother, a much older brother. He was contracted to a tiny spirit."

Brigitte gasped. She had never heard anything about this.

Like me.

"The master's parents called the eldest son a disgrace to the family and had him thrown in the family dungeon. The master and the elder brother communicated in secret after that."

"..."

"Then, on his fifth birthday, the master contracted with an ifrit. The family was filled with joy. The master was very proud, too. He always was gifted from a young age... He believed if he succeeded as heir, he could free his brother from that dark dungeon."

Deag saw his brother as a precious family member. Contracting with a first-class spirit meant he could perhaps save him from an impossible situation.

But I've never met any uncle of mine.

She'd never even known she had an uncle.

An ominous feeling filled Brigitte's chest. "...What happened to the elder brother?"

The head butler shook his head in response.

"That very night...they found his final words, written in blood on the floor of his cell. I wish I'd died a long time ago, it said..."

Brigitte couldn't speak. Sorrow welled in her chest, deep enough to ache.

That's... That's so awful.

Deag must have been so proud, so happy, so excited to potentially save his brother on his fifth birthday. How must he have taken the news?

Had her uncle despaired? Did he resent his younger brother for being gifted where he wasn't? Was he envious?

Or was he just filled with sadness that it wasn't him? That nobody wanted him anymore?

I know a little of how that feels.

People had rolled their eyes and laughed at Brigitte.

She was labeled as worthless. For her, life afterward was just about going through the motions.

"Peep!"

Brigitte lifted her head, her eyes widening. Peep, on her shoulder, rubbed its little cheek against hers.

The warmth of its touch helped Brigitte to hold her head high, with resolve in her eyes. The head butler smiled a little at her.

"The master... I think he saw his elder brother in you, miss. I think he sent you to the cottage in lieu of the dungeon. Still, he couldn't escape the curse of his parents' example. He blamed and disparaged you, as his parents did to his elder brother."

Waste of space. Useless. Leech. Parasite.

Deag had shouted these words over and over as he burned Brigitte's arm in the fireplace.

Deag's parents—Brigitte's grandparents—had passed away long ago. Brigitte had heard that they'd died when she was a baby. But their passing had not brought Deag any release.

Perhaps the torment suffered by his brother had rubbed off on Deag as well and driven him to darkness.

Still, I can't forgive what he's done.

Yes, Deag had hidden his motives from her. He had burned her arm. He had banished her to the cottage and treated her with contempt.

She had suffered through those days. That part of her life, her past, would never go away.

"Thank you for telling me, Gramps."

Still, Brigitte offered her thanks, because knowing was better than not knowing.

And the head butler, who'd known her since she was a child, could see that she meant it.

"My lady... You have truly grown strong."

"I hope so."

Brigitte smiled, warmed by the somewhat embarrassing compliment.

"We'll bring your fellows in, too."

Looking over in the direction of the voice, Brigitte saw the Magic Corps members packing Deag's exhausted hired men into the carriage, one after another.

Roze and Asha obediently went to accompany the Magic Corps men, too.

"Roze! Mother!" Brigitte ran over to them.

Deag's own words had been spread across the capital in order to expose what he'd done.

That was the right thing to do, Brigitte knew. But it had drawn in Roze and her mother, too.

Brigitte didn't know what the outcome would be, but it would have some sort of impact on Roze's promising future. Even though he'd only been doing what Brigitte's father had told him to do.

"Roze, I—," Brigitte began.

"I will be the next Earl of Meidell," Roze declared, his eyes clear.

As Brigitte stood there, stunned, Roze scratched his cheek a little awkwardly and continued.

"The Meidell family may lose their peerage...but I don't really mind. Either way, I'll take responsibility for Father. I won't let him hurt you or Mother again. I swear it."

Asha, supported by the guards, gazed at Roze with wide eyes.

Brigitte felt her own eyes filling with tears. "But..."

"Don't look so sad. I want you to smile always, Sister."

"...Roze..."

Roze reached out timidly to Brigitte, who was fighting tears. "Sister..."

Yuri slapped his hand away.

"Uh... Aurealis... This is a brother-sister moment. Could you stay out of it?"

"Those aren't brotherly eyes. I can see what you really want."

"You're one to talk..."

The two of them muttered at each other, but Brigitte couldn't make out what they were saying through her sniffles.

Roze sighed in resignation and squared off against Yuri. "I'll be back soon. But while I'm gone, please take good care of my sister."

"You don't need to tell me." Yuri snorted, and Roze smiled brightly.

"Well, good!"

Then Roze and Brigitte's mother got into the escort carriage.

Brigitte and the others watched corner and was out of sight.	them leave	e, until the	e carriage	rounded the



The Night of the Ball

That evening, carriages stopped one after another outside the Otoleanna Academy of Magic, conveying a host of splendidly dressed boys and girls.

Tonight was the ball to commemorate the founding of the kingdom, held in the academy's great hall.

The carriage carrying Yuri and Brigitte was next to arrive.

Yuri stepped down first, dressed in formal attire. He held his hand out to Brigitte, who took it.

Then she paused.

"Brigitte?"

"...Ah. Sorry, Yuri. I was just thinking about something."

"About your family?"

After some hesitation, Brigitte nodded.

A few hours earlier, Deag, Asha, and Roze were taken away by the Magic Corps.

Though she knew Asha and Roze had only been taken as witnesses to the investigation, she couldn't stop thinking about them being escorted away. She was in a total fog.

I have to stop this. I'm finally here at the ball with Yuri.

She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts.

But just as she regained some of her composure, she realized she was

trembling with nerves.

At Joseph's request, Brigitte had avoided parties. Then, when she'd finally attended one after a long absence, he'd unilaterally broken off their engagement.

She could never forget how miserable she felt leaving that party alone after the public ridicule.

I don't want Yuri to feel embarrassed being with me.

Brigitte found herself staring at her feet.

Yuri lightly touched her cheek with his fingertips.

"Yuri?"

"...I forgot to mention something important."

Before she could ask what he meant, Yuri brought his handsome face close to hers.

As Brigitte froze, he whispered in her ear. "...You're beautiful. You look amazing."

"…!"

Brigitte's face instantly flushed.

She was wearing a beautiful pure-white dress, with multiple layers of delicate lace that puffed out in a graceful way. Her hair was braided in a half-up style, complete with the hair ornament given to her by Yuri, and she wore elegant blue earrings.

Sienna had thoughtfully put the outfit together for her. The blue was for Yuri, Brigitte's escort.

"Oh, thank you... You look nice, too, Yuri."

Yuri laughed.

He was wearing a red tie pin—the color of Brigitte's hair.

"Shall we go?"

"Yes, let's."

Brigitte took the arm he offered. The nervous shakes seemed to have disappeared.

Beneath the bright, glittering chandelier was a sea of couples.

A colorful array of dishes was lined up on the buffet-style tables.

The members of the orchestra were playing elegant music over by one wall. As soon as they entered the lively venue, heads turned, and eyes fixed on Brigitte and Yuri.

Well, that made sense.

Just a few hours ago, the whole capital had learned of a huge scandal involving Brigitte's father. Few students had expected Brigitte to even show up.

Wow... They're really staring, though.

She was attracting even more attention than she'd expected.

Glancing around the huge hall, Brigitte noticed a male student gazing at her with a flushed face.

Hmm?

She squinted slightly, and the boy looked away in a panic.

Brigitte glanced at Yuri—who stood with his arms crossed, surrounded by an aura that was downright murderous.

"Yuri, your face looks even more frightening than usual."

When she pointed it out, his brow softened a little.

"Thank you, though, Yuri. I know you're concerned about me. But I can handle a few stares."

"...Do you realize why they're staring at you?"

"Of course. The Meidell family has just fallen in disgrace, so of course they're fascinated."

Yuri sighed. "I knew it. You have no idea what's actually happening."

Brigitte tilted her head in confusion.

"Brigitte!"

Nival and Kira appeared as Yuri escorted Brigitte down the stairs. After leaving earlier, they'd apparently gotten ready and reemerged in time for the party.

When Kira saw Brigitte, she let out a squeal of joy.

"You look wonderful, Brigitte!"

"Very beautiful, Brigitte!"

Nival was red with excitement, too; he and Kira were in perfect sync.

"Thank you. You two look great together," Brigitte replied.

Nival wore a deep-green suit, while Kira wore a bright-red gown.

Brigitte paused and examined the colors again. "Hmm?"

"We're wearing outfits that match the color of your hair and eyes, Brigitte!" Kira explained.

They both squealed again and clutched their cheeks. Brigitte was a little impressed by how well they matched each other.

After a few more excited noises, Kira started looking Brigitte up and down.

"Did you leave Peep at home?"

"Nope. He's right here."

"Peeeep."

Peep popped out of Brigitte's rose-decorated purse. After healing the wound on Brigitte's cheek, Peep had been resting.

"Peep..."

Brigitte had opted for a fairly roomy purse, but Peep still seemed a bit squished.

Though maybe that was because there was something else in the bag.

"Ah! No, Yuri, don't!"

Yuri was leaning forward, drawn in by Peep's intense black eyes, and Brigitte

frantically hid the purse behind her back.



Yuri frowned suspiciously, but she couldn't let him know what was inside right now. She racked her brain for a way to distract him.

"Oh, um, how about some food? I'll go fetch some!"

"No thanks."

He'd scuppered her plans with a single shrug, but luckily, timing was on Brigitte's side.

The string instruments had just finished being tuned; it was almost time for the first dance.

For a moment, silence enveloped the hall.

Beneath the brilliantly sparkling chandeliers, couples muttered together.

"Kira. Would you, um, like to dance with me?"

Looking a bit embarrassed, Nival invited Kira to dance, using the standard language for such a request.

"It would be my pleasure."

Nival's face lit up.

"Brigitte?"

Brigitte, who'd been mesmerized by the general scene of the ball, snapped out of her fog.

Unable to look Yuri in the eye, she mumbled some excuse.

"I, um, I have almost no experience dancing..."

Though I've been practicing like crazy!

Sienna had taken the role of the leader to teach her, and together she and Brigitte had practiced all kinds of steps. Still, it had been so long since Brigitte had last danced in front of people that she couldn't shake her feelings of anxiety about the prospect.

"Y-Yuri, you see, I'm afraid I'll step on your feet, and..."

"You don't need to worry about that. It's nothing."

Yuri bowed gracefully and held out a hand.

Then with a smile—a real one, anyone would agree—he invited Brigitte to dance.

"Would you do me the honor of a dance?"

"...Gladly." Brigitte took Yuri's hand, filled with sudden happiness.

The orchestra struck up a waltz.

The piece was familiar to Brigitte; she'd danced this one countless times during her practice sessions with Sienna. Spirit Symphony No. 3, "Unicorn Forest."

It was a particularly popular piece among the symphonies, themed entirely around spirits.

The unicorn was a ferocious and fearsome spirit, but it became docile when embraced by a virgin maiden. The main instruments used to express this relationship were the violin and timpani.

Um, so I draw back my right foot here... And...

The dance began quietly with a scene of a maiden wandering in the forest.

Her movements were wooden, and Yuri seemed to notice something was wrong as he held her against him.

"You're still nervous."

"Well, I mean, it's you..."

Brigitte was so distracted by the musical number and trying to keep up with the steps, she barely even realized what she'd just said or Yuri's silent response.

Instead, she desperately tried to recall the upcoming steps.

Umm, next is...

"Yeek!"

She was pulled forcefully, and Brigitte's feet left the ground for a moment. She felt her throat close up in alarm.

But she didn't fall. Yuri had caught her tightly around the waist.

She lifted her eyes to meet Yuri's, right in front of hers.

He held her arched back easily in his arms.

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"Yuri...!"
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"Yes...?"

Brigitte gasped his name in protest, but Yuri appeared to be enjoying himself.

The tempo increased as the maiden encountered the raging unicorn. Powerful timpani beats thudded through her.

Yuri spun Brigitte around the dance floor.

The hem of her poofy dress fanned out like something in a dream sequence, and she performed a waltz turn that evoked the imagery of an innocent, adorable maiden approaching a unicorn.

The students dancing around her let out sighs of admiration. Little did Brigitte realize she was now the center of attention in the great hall.

Because before she even knew it, Brigitte found herself enjoying the dance, even laughing.

She'd never imagined that one day she'd dance like this.

Yuri gave her a secret smile, one that only she could see, as they gazed at each other.

From then on, Brigitte couldn't look away.

She didn't need to remember the steps. She didn't need to watch her feet. She just followed Yuri's lead.

The gentle sound of violin strings seemed to envelop them.

In the end, the unicorn fell asleep on the maiden's lap, breathing peacefully...

When the performance was over, Brigitte let out a sigh.

When she let go of Yuri's hands, she missed the sensation. She wanted to dance with him more and more.

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"Yuri... I... Huh?!"
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Slowly opening her eyes, Brigitte did a double take.

Yuri was gone. She was surrounded by boys, all blushing red.

"You were wonderful, Countess Meidell. W-would you do me the honor of the next dance?"

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"Hey, I was first."
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"I asked her first. You get in line."

"I was the one who spoke to her first!"

Wh-what's going on?

Brigitte's eyes widened.

Up until now, Brigitte had played the role of miserable wallflower in social situations. Otherwise, she was confined to the house by Joseph. She really couldn't make sense of these reactions.

It would be rude to turn down an invitation to dance. If she danced with Yuri for a second or third time in a row, it wouldn't look good.

As she stood there dithering, Yuri, who'd been swept away in the crowd, called out.

"Nival!"

"You don't have to say it! Brigitte, would you please dance with me next?"

"Yes, of course."

She nodded back at Nival, who pumped his fist a little with excitement.

What about Yuri, though?

The son of a duke, a prodigy contracted with two first-class spirits, Yuri was in high demand as well. A whole circle of girls in their fancy finery had formed around him.

Brigitte couldn't help looking over.

"Kira."

"Got it."

Kira ran up to Yuri. Even though she was wearing heels, she moved swiftly. The collection of spectators drifted away with a bit of disappointment.

After the second dance, Brigitte was starting to get slightly sore feet.

"Brigitte! I'm...so touched! I'll remember this night for the rest of my life!"

"I had fun, too, Class Prez."

"It was such an honor!"

Nival burst into tears, which seemed to keep most of the other students at bay.

Brigitte was grateful for that as she winced and looked down at her legs and feet.

They...they kinda hurt.

Her calves felt tight, probably because she wasn't used to moving this way. Brigitte was good at sports, but dancing in a social setting was a completely different experience.

"Brigitte, are your legs aching?"

Yuri came close and spoke to her in a low voice. Brigitte had thought he'd been busy, dancing a ways off with Kira. He must have seen her limping even from a distance.

"Y-yes. Just a little."

Brigitte nodded with some reservation, but Yuri came even closer.

He tilted his head and brought his face down to hers.

He sighed and whispered into her ear.

"Let's sneak out."

"..."

Brigitte blushed and nodded at the invitation.



Brigitte and Yuri snuck out of the party venue and were now enjoying the night breeze in their usual gazebo.

Brigitte had never been here at night. Somehow, it felt really special.

The ivy, which had been a deep green when she'd first come here, was now withering. Winter was coming in fast.

Brigitte sat there in silence, and Yuri murmured to her.

"Are you tired?"

"Only a little bit. But...it was a lot of fun."

Sitting side by side, they were closer than they usually were.

Yuri seemed very concerned about Brigitte's legs, and he had led her by the hand all the way here. He was still holding her hand. Brigitte felt hot—probably the residual heat from the ballroom.

"You're a good dancer, Yuri."

"It's nothing special," Yuri responded evenly.

Brigitte looked at him and started to feel a little mischievous.

When Brigitte had visited the Aurealis house, Yuri's attendant, Clifford, told her that Yuri had been practicing hard, as he was unfamiliar with the customs involved in escorting a woman to a dance.

Brigitte scooched a little closer and cupped her hands around her mouth, like she was about to tell a secret.

"Don't tell me... You practiced just so you could dance with me?"

"|"

Yuri's mouth clenched tightly.

He looked sharply at Brigitte, but his gaze didn't have its usual edge. And there was a slight blush on his cheeks, visible in the moonlight.

"Let me have my dignity. Don't overanalyze it."

His reply was all the response she needed.

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"S...sorry."
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"Why are you so embarrassed?"

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"I...I mean..."
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Yuri's words caused the temperature of Brigitte's entire body to rise. Her heartbeat stuttered, and she found she was having trouble breathing.

But tonight, no matter how embarrassed she felt, she wasn't going to run away.

"Yuri... Um, about the next competition..." She rushed to change the topic, and luckily, Yuri went with her.

"Oh yeah. We never did resolve that."

The fifth challenge had been put on ice when Brigitte was suddenly summoned to the Meidell mansion in the midst of the stamp rally.

"So I'd like to issue you a new challenge."

Seeing the interest in Yuri's eyes, Brigitte grinned.

"Okay. If I can surprise you, Yuri...then I win. How about that?"

"Well... That sounds difficult to evaluate..."

Up until now, their competitions had always had clearly defined parameters. Like written tests or magic stone gathering. Yuri seemed reluctant to accept the ambiguity of this new challenge.

"If I manage to surprise you, Yuri, then you have to admit it honestly. If you're not surprised, be honest about that, too."

Brigitte boldly decided to leave the evaluation up to Yuri.

It put Brigitte at a disadvantage, but Yuri, who was as competitive as she was, couldn't resist the opportunity.

"Sounds good."

Brigitte clenched her fist in triumph. All right. The rules were set.

But from here forward, she had to stay focused. Clearing her throat, she looked at Yuri.

"So, could you close your eyes until I say you can open them?"

Yuri obediently followed her instructions, folding his arms and closing his eyes. Brigitte took the opportunity to turn around and take out something from

her party bag.

Peep was gone; Kira had taken it for the time being.

Brigitte had asked Kira to take care of it before leaving the party hall, and she'd readily agreed. Though Peep hadn't looked too happy about it...

Okay... Stay calm... Just stay calm...

Brigitte grabbed the object, almost fumbling with it.

"D-don't open them yet."

"I know. Not until you say so, right?"

"Exactly!"

She wrapped the scarf around Yuri's neck, embarrassed at the closeness. She could count each of his individual eyelashes. But she forced herself to continue wrapping.

Yuri frowned as he felt the softness of the scarf, but he kept his eyes closed.

In just a few seconds, Brigitte was done.

Still, she hesitated a few seconds, making sure the scarf was neatly wrapped and looked nice on him. Then she spoke.

"Okay, open your eyes."

Yuri's long eyelashes trembled as he slowly did as she said.

He stared at Brigitte, a little dazed, then he looked down at his neck.

"What's this ...?"

Yuri now wore a knitted woolen scarf around his neck.

Brigitte had chosen the color to match Yuri's eyes—dandelions blooming under the blue sky.

She'd knitted this special National Founding Day gift, pouring all her thoughts of Yuri into it.

I'm glad I chose this color.

Brigitte took in the sight of Yuri all wrapped up warmly and nodded with

approval. It didn't go with his formal attire, perhaps, but the scarf did suit him.

Yuri was silent for a while. He fingered the scarf thoughtfully, but he didn't speak.

Does...? Does he not like it?

His reaction was making Brigitte nervous.

"Did you knit this, Brigitte?" Yuri mumbled, his mouth hidden in the scarf.

"Yeah. Were you surprised?"

"...Very."

That was apparent in his voice, too.

It was an unexpectedly positive response, and Brigitte felt her spirits soar.

"So then I win the fifth round of—"

Our competition, Brigitte had meant to say, but she didn't finish the sentence.

"I...love it."

Because Yuri had already pulled her into his arms.

"Huh...?!"

The sudden embrace made Brigitte gasp.

Held in Yuri's strong, manly arms, she found it hard to breathe.

What's this for? She wanted to say, but she couldn't form words... She could only gape soundlessly.

Yuri stroked the back of Brigitte's head as she sat there in confusion.

"I'm really happy. Thank you."

"|"

"I'll treasure it until the day I die."

It was hyperbole, but Brigitte couldn't bring herself to laugh. Yuri's husky whisper had been filled with such emotion.

I can't believe he really likes it...

If she'd been a girl more used to romantic touch, she would have wrapped her arms around Yuri in return. But Brigitte could only sit there with her arms dangling.

Instead, she kept her face buried in Yuri's chest and inhaled deeply, and the smell of his sophisticated cologne seemed to envelop her.

It was a strange sensation, leaving her excited and soothed at the same time.

She wished she could stay like this forever...

No...! Stop it, Brigitte!

Brigitte scolded herself as she nearly closed her eyes in ecstasy.

Yes. She had another goal for this evening.

She had to dance with Yuri, give him the scarf as a gift to surprise him.

And finally, most important of all...

"Y-Yuri... Umm... I have a favor to ask..."

When she timidly spoke up, Yuri released her. He didn't seem completely happy to do so, but he listened attentively.

"...I mean, since I won, I guess it's a request."

"Uh-huh."

"I want you to listen to what I'm about to tell you."

Yuri seemed taken aback. "I'll listen to anything you have to say. I told you that, right?"

He gazed into her eyes as he spoke, and Brigitte felt herself flush again.

"Th-that's good. I appreciate it."

"...Well, anyway. Let's hear it, then."

"O-okay. Thank you." Brigitte took two deep breaths.

It's okay. Yuri won't turn away from you. He'll wait until you're ready.

Brigitte knew Yuri's specific brand of brusque, awkward kindness better than anyone.

"Yuri!"

Yikes—in her nervousness, her voice had come out too loud.

Yuri watched Brigitte in silence as she cleared her throat and tried to adjust the volume.

She took a deep breath in and then let it out again.

She gazed straight ahead...and saw the beautiful starry sky behind Yuri.

Just a few months ago, the world had seemed to her like a dark cage keeping her locked inside.

Now I know it isn't.

No matter how dark the night was, the moon and the endless stars always shone their gentle light over the world.

He'd shown her that. And there was something she wanted to tell him.

She wanted to express her gratitude with a heartfelt smile on her face.

"That day... Thank you, for holding my hand that day."

Yuri had stood before her, holding on to her hand as she cried. And he didn't let go.

Thinking back, in the library, too... It was probably no coincidence that Brigitte's lonely fingers had bumped into Yuri's as she reached for that book.

He'd always been there. From long before Brigitte had even remembered the touch of those gentle hands.

"Thank you for protecting me all these years, Yuri."

There was no reply. Yuri just stared at Brigitte and didn't move a muscle.

"...Hee-hee." Brigitte chuckled. "Oh, I'm glad. I managed to get it all out."

"...!"

Yuri covered his face with his hand, as if he was fighting something down.

He seemed to be clenching his teeth, and the only sound that could be heard was his heavy breathing.

"Yuri...?" Brigitte said with concern, and Yuri shuddered violently.

"...I'm sorry. Back then, I heard you, but..."

"Back...then?"

"I heard your voice, but I pretended I didn't."

She inhaled sharply, realizing what Yuri was talking about.

When Joseph locked her in the storeroom, Brigitte had said that she loved Yuri.

Yuri had assured her he hadn't heard anything, but...now he was owning up to the lie.

"I wanted you to hate me." Yuri looked down, running a hand through his hair and completely ruining the style. He seemed oblivious to that as he kept talking. "All I could do was hold your hand. I regret that I couldn't do more. I felt pathetic. You were my fiancée, and I couldn't protect you. I was so weak... I hated myself."

Fiancée...

Brigitte almost echoed the word but pressed her lips shut.

Right now, she wanted to hear every word Yuri had to say.

"For a long time, I felt like I deserved your hatred—that's why I acted so cold to you. So you'd hate me. But...the more I got to know you, the more I was drawn to you. I wanted to know you better. I had this self-serving desire to be close to you, to see your smile..."

Brigitte could hear the gathering tears in his voice.

She reached out and gently laid her hand on Yuri's downturned cheek.

Yuri seemed surprised but didn't resist the touch.

He looked up at her, and his glistening eyes met hers.

It was...beautiful.

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"Yuri...are you crying?"
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"Now you're disappointed in me, aren't you?"

Yuri laughed weakly at himself. He was normally so confident; this expression didn't suit him at all.

This was a rare thing, and Brigitte's face lit up. "No! I want to know more about you, too. I feel the same."

She wiped away his shining tears with the pads of her fingers.

For a while, they stayed like that—until Yuri put his arm around Brigitte's waist.

Brigitte's cheeks grew warm as Yuri moved in.

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"Y-Yuri?"
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With his free hand, Yuri stroked Brigitte's earlobe. Then he touched her neck, where her pulse was pounding away. He seemed to be cherishing each beat of her heart.

Brigitte's breathing grew harsh, and though she wanted to flee, Yuri held her tightly around the waist. His touch made her skin tingle.

No. She never wanted to run away. And she was aware of that now.

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"Yuri, I..."
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u n

Without a word, Yuri's face came closer.

Brigitte still had her hand on Yuri's cheek. It felt as if she was drawing him toward her, too.

The dangling ends of the scarf brushed against Brigitte's bare shoulders.

Her skin broke out in goose bumps, and her breath quickened.

Just as their lips were about to touch...

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"...No, we can't," said Brigitte.
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Yuri immediately froze.

His eyes wavered at the rejection.

"...You don't want to?"

"It's not that..."

Brigitte was quick to deny it.

No, that wasn't the issue at all. The issue was that she very much did want to.

"Even now, I just feel so shy... I think I might die, so..." Brigitte's lips trembled. "...Don't kill me yet..."

At this rate, it really would be the end for her. Her body would overheat, her heart would explode, and she'd drop dead right there.

Yuri sighed, as if her heartfelt pleas had reached him deeply.

"...I'm weaker than I once was," he said ruefully.

At least he had abandoned his plan to kiss her, it seemed; Brigitte sighed in relief.

But the next moment, the passion in his eyes lanced through her.

"You're so adorable, Brigitte."

"…!"

His sweet voice, his gaze, the heat of his fingertips—all of it together made her feel faint, or maybe like her whole body was turning to liquid.

As Brigitte sat there, flustered and speechless, he whispered faintly in her ear.

"No one else could ever compare."

Once again, his lips came closer.

And all Brigitte could do was shut her eyes tight.



Longed-For Words

"Brigitte."

At the sound of that voice, Brigitte stopped in the act of putting away her textbooks.

She looked at the classroom door and saw Yuri standing there.

The whole classroom was lively and noisy, but no doubt Brigitte's heart was beating louder still.

H-he came to pick me up again today...

Up until now, they'd run into each other in the library or the gazebo, but they'd only made plans to meet up on a few occasions.

However, ever since National Founding Day, Yuri had started coming to pick Brigitte up after class like this almost every day.

"Have fun, Brigitte."

"Wow, Brigitte...!"

"S-see you!"

Waving to Kira and Nival, Brigitte ran over to Yuri.

"Um, well, it'll be pretty cold in the gazebo," said Brigitte, "so shall we go to the library today?"

"I have this, so it'll be fine."

As they walked down the hallway, Yuri began to deftly wrap the scarf around his neck, leaving Brigitte unsure of what to say.

Compared to the scarves in the stores, and even the scarf Sienna had knitted as an example, the stitches were sloppy. Brigitte had poured her heart and soul into making it, but every time she looked at it, it started to bother her.

Now she was regretting that she hadn't done a better job.

"Yuri, you don't need to show it off so much."

But the boy known as the Frozen Blade simply beamed proudly.

"I want to show it off."

Lately, Yuri had seemed a lot softer around the edges.

Brigitte was blushing hard, and her face hurt from smiling. Even the girls they passed in the halls went pink upon seeing them together.

The National Founding Festival was over, and winter was coming to the Kingdom of Field.

The Meidell family had managed to retain their peerage, but Deag had been forced to step down as head of the family for his improper use of spirit magic.

He and Asha had decided to move to a territory of theirs that was far from the royal capital for a few years, along with the head butler and several other servants.

I wonder if someday I'll be able to talk to my mother and father again.

When that day came, Brigitte wouldn't hesitate to take the chance.

Roze had been interrogated for a while, but he had returned to school last week.

He was the legitimate heir to the Meidell peerage. But since he still had a year until he came of age, the Meidell territory had been temporarily placed in the care of the royal family. Meanwhile, Brigitte's life hadn't been much affected. She could still stay in the cottage, or in the main house if she wanted.

When they arrived at the gazebo, Yuri and Brigitte took seats casually beside each other.

...Actually, Brigitte wasn't feeling that casual. Her heart was thundering. But Yuri seemed calm, so she tried not to let her nerves show, either.

A chilly wind blew. It was quite cold outside after all, since it was late November.

"Well, I suppose I'll wrap up, too." Brigitte quickly took out her cold-weather gear.

She slipped the green snood that Kira had given her over her head.

Inside her bag was the lap blanket Sienna had given her. Yuri already knew it was a big blanket, so he took half and spread it over his own lap.

The two of them leaned in close, and Brigitte's right shoulder felt hot where it touched Yuri.

"You're not cold, are you?" he asked.

"More like too hot... I mean, no! I'm perfectly fine."

"Peep!"

Intrigued by their chatter perhaps, Peep popped out from Brigitte's hair.

It was so adorable, Brigitte had to smile.

Peep was wearing a little hat, courtesy of Kira.

The yellow and red knitted hat was made of fine yarn, and Peep seemed to have taken quite a shine to it. The little pom-pom on the top was so cute, too. Every time Brigitte saw it, she was impressed.

"I'm glad you got a nice present, Peep."

"Peep!"

Brigitte smiled, and Yuri quietly muttered, "I'm a little cold."

"Huh?"

Brigitte turned to Yuri, alarmed.

She searched his face, and Yuri reached for her hand and held it. His skin was so hot that the temperature took Brigitte by surprise.

He most certainly was not cold.

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"...Liar."
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But Yuri didn't seem bothered by her light scolding. Though his cheeks did seem a little red...

"I should be thankful for winter. It gives me more excuses to hold your hand," Yuri said shyly, and Brigitte hardly knew how to respond.

"...!" Too much! Too much!

Their clasped hands rested on the blanket, and Yuri squeezed hers tight.

As they sat there, she couldn't help remembering that night...

...The night of National Founding Day.

Brigitte had said no, so Yuri hadn't kissed her on the lips.

Instead, his slim lips had landed on Brigitte's cheek. Even that had been enough to send a shudder through her. But Yuri's eyes had been warm and sweet.

His gaze was so gentle that it made her want to take back what she'd said before.

But Yuri hasn't even said he likes me!

Yuri had claimed a number of things that would be unthinkable under normal circumstances, such as being attracted to her and wanting to be close to her.

Certainly, the two seemed to have come to an understanding about their feelings. But Yuri hadn't said it in so many words yet.

I...I guess I could say it first?

Brigitte fidgeted, and then Yuri mumbled:

"The graduation exam."

"|"

Brigitte lifted her head suddenly.

The graduation exam at the Otoleanna Academy of Magic was said to be very rigorous, with many students failing every year.

However, the content of the exam itself was kept secret, as it changed every year.

If students failed, they could still graduate without any problems if they passed the retake after the winter break.

"It goes without saying, doesn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

They looked at each other and grinned.

Needless to say, neither Brigitte nor Yuri intended to have to retake the exam. Yuri's lips parted.

"Let's have one last competition, Brigitte. And, if I win..."





Blue Treasure

At first, it was just a passing amusement.

While walking through his pack's territory, he came across a shard of shattered crystal. Upon peering into it, he saw an upside-down reflection of something other than the familiar frozen ground.

What could this be?

He was about to knock away the mysterious crystal shard with his paw, but then his fellow fenrirs told him what it was.

...Apparently, in the human world, a contract ceremony was held almost every day.

After reaching five years of age, a child would stand in front of a crystal made of similar magical power and wait for a spirit to appear for the pact.

The story itself didn't really interest him, but the piece of crystal was beautiful, so he decided to pick it up in his mouth and take it home to his den.

Every night, the fenrir would gaze upon it, and occasionally the image of a human child was reflected in the crystal.

There were many spirits that took human form, so the appearance of these creatures was nothing new. But some of them would be anxious, some would be near tears, and others would be grinning playfully—it was quite entertaining to observe them. A good way to pass the time.

The fenrir saw the faces of dozens, perhaps even hundreds of children there.

The fenrir did not know how many of them were able to successfully make a

contract with a spirit. After some time passed, the children would disappear like an illusion, and their faces would never appear again in the crystal.

What kind of world did they live in?

How did spirits who lived among them feel?

Little by little, the fenrir's whimsy turned into curiosity, then into deep interest. At some point, he began to stare intently at the crystal whenever he had a spare moment.

Then one day, he saw a certain little boy.

This one looks interesting, he thought.

The fenrir's attention was captivated by his eye-catching blue hair.

In the frozen land where the fenrir lived, the clear blue sky could only be seen when the snowstorms stopped. The boy's hair color reminded the fenrir of that rare color. It was a beautiful sight.

The fenrir did not like the boy's hesitant expression, but he was very magically gifted. The fenrir could sense this boy's power was much greater than that of the children he had seen before.

The fenrir watched with excitement, his bushy tail wagging hard.

The fenrir wanted to make a contract with this boy. He went immediately to speak to his fellows.

Some of the fenrirs objected. Humans were short-lived, fragile creatures who died quickly. They insisted that there was no need to lend their strength to such a race.

But some fenrirs were supportive—particularly the ones who had made contracts with humans in the past.

The fenrir regretted never paying attention to their stories, but there was no time for regrets. Time flowed differently in the spirit world compared to in the human world. While they sat around talking, the boy might contract with another spirit.

They told the excited fenrir the basics of what he needed to know.

Even if a fenrir made a contract with a human, he would not remain in the human world forever because it's the human's magical power that would sustain his presence, and not his own power.

Basically, contracted spirits only responded to the whims of humans when they were summoned; otherwise, they lived their lives in the spirit world as usual. By peering into the crystal, it was possible for a human to check on the state of their contracted spirit, and it was also possible to talk to them through the crystal.

Apparently, a certain fenrir had once wandered into the human world, drained the magical powers of its contractor, and nearly killed him.

It all sounded a bit complicated and restrictive, but that was no reason for the fenrir to give up on the boy.

As instructed, the fenrir went before the crystal again, rubbed his forehead against it, and called out.

...I choose you.

...So you choose me, too.

When the fenrir spoke, the crystal began to glow.

A hole leading to the human world opened up with the crystal at its center, and the fenrir jumped in without thinking about the consequences.



"Master!"

Calling as they landed in the human world, Blue looked around the dark room.

Huh? they thought, tilting his head. Sometimes this happened. Yuri's location and theirs didn't match up. They thought they were traveling to where Yuri was, but they'd landed in Yuri's bedroom instead.

A cool breeze wafted in through the open window.

Outside the window, the light indicated morning. Blue gave the air a sniff, and the bed sheets still felt warm. Not much time had passed since the owner of the

room had left.

Blue considered going after him but decided to leave it. Instead, they took on the form of a young boy and tumbled into bed.

"Hmm!"

They bounced up and down a few times. The bedding Yuri used was exceptionally soft. When Blue sometimes tried to crawl beneath the covers in fenrir form, they got too hot and started shedding excessively. If they were in human form, Yuri didn't mind all that often.

Yuri had an abundance of magical power, but at first, whenever he summoned Blue, he would turn pale and sometimes collapse. Just as their companions had said, humans really were fragile creatures.

However, Yuri's magical powers had increased over time. This was likely due to his natural talent, but it was also the result of repetitive, physically grueling magical training from a young age.

Now Blue was free to go out and roam the human world as they pleased. Their pack mates spoke well of Yuri, which pleased Blue. They were as proud as if the praise had been for themself.

Isn't that right? My master is amazing.

"Oh, it's you, fenrir."

The undine had slipped in from outside via the window.

An undine was a water spirit with the appearance of a human woman and a devilish beauty. She was also contracted to Yuri, just like the fenrir was.

Blue was disappointed that the human they had chosen hadn't ended up being all their own. Even after the undine, more water and ice spirits had come, trying to make a contract with him. But the presence of Blue and the undine had scared them off, and they'd given up.

It would have been nice if Blue could have chased off the undine as well, but it didn't work out that way. Perhaps the undine was thinking the same thing.

"Or perhaps you go by Blue now," she was saying.

"Either one."

Blue rolled over onto their back on the bed.

Blue was the name Brigitte had given them—because of their blue fur and eyes, no doubt.

How very simple. If names were decided for such reasons, then all the members of the Aurealis family ought to have been named Blue.

Right, while Blue was ignorant of the fact, Yuri's family was known as the Water Clan, a widely known family among ice and water spirits. Blue's pack mates had assumed Blue had pursued the contract while knowing who Yuri's family was, so they were surprised to learn Blue didn't know.

But whenever they saw anyone with blue hair other than Yuri, Blue's heart never fluttered. Yuri was the only person who ever made them feel a burning urge to make a contract right away.

That probably wasn't going to change in the future, either.

If their contractor died, Blue would be able to make a pact with another human, but Blue liked their current master so much that they didn't want to even think about their eventual separation.

"Hey, don't you need a name, undine?" Blue asked, sitting up.

The undine tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Hmm, I've never really wanted one. Maybe I should ask Mr. Yuize to give me one?"

The undine was referring to Yuri's attendant.

"You like him, don't you, undine?"

"Hee-hee-hee, yes, a little bit. His reactions are always so adorable. No matter how I tease him, he always tries to pretend it doesn't affect him... Ooh, it makes me positively *shiver*!"

"Hmm." Blue tilted their head, not really understanding. The undine's way of talking about things was difficult to understand.

"If you like him that much, you should have made a contract with him."

Blue would have preferred to be Yuri's only contracted spirit. They wanted

that excellent human all to themself, for the boasting rights. Yes, they still secretly felt like that.

The undine, who had been floating happily in the air, suddenly stopped moving.

Her smile had changed a little.

"That's not possible."

"Why?"

"If I poured everything I am into him, he would break. Then we wouldn't be able to play anymore. That would be boring, wouldn't it?"

The undine chuckled, apparently highly amused.

Certainly, Clifford would not have the capacity to withstand a contract with a spirit of her level. This was true of most common people, not just Clifford.

"Master is my only master. As he is yours, right, fenrir?"

"Of course." Blue snorted air through their nose.

There was a full-length mirror in the bedroom, and Blue got off the bed to stand in front of it.

A blue-haired boy stood before them. They'd grown up a little since they had first gazed through the crystal that day.

"I look like a little version of Master, don't I?"

They turned, examining his rear to make sure no tail was sticking out.

Brigitte had once teased them by claiming she could still see a tail. She'd been fibbing, of course, but ever since, they always checked to make sure they'd transformed fully.

"Yes. Like a portrait."

Though they hadn't been able to reproduce the color of Yuri's eyes, in human form, they looked almost exactly like a young Yuri.

Blue's fellow fenrirs would be very surprised if they knew Blue did this. Even Blue themself had no idea that they had the ability to transform.

If they hadn't met Yuri, they might never have known.

"The young master didn't smile at all, though, did he?"

"...No."

"But if he sees me smile, as his own past self, perhaps he would remember a little."

That was why Blue had reproduced Yuri's appearance.

From such a young age, their master had been through such harsh training. He had no time to laugh or smile. How adorable the young master had been, so grim, so bruised, so clumsy!

So Blue would smile in his place.

Blue would laugh and cry and get angry and stuff himself with tasty food and run around in the garden and jump on the bed, just like any ordinary human child.

"That's why you're always snapping at the Red Fairy."

"...I don't snap at her."

"Oh, is that so?"

Blue puffed out their cheeks. Humans were fragile creatures, so they would never turn their sharp claws or fangs on one. Blue knew how to respect them.

Though to be honest, sometimes Blue did feel like biting Brigitte. Whenever Yuri was around her, he loosened up. He would smile, even show a little anger.

Blue had wanted to be the one to draw out those emotions, so Brigitte annoyed them and made them a little jealous. It was complicated, though.

That was why Blue hadn't rejected the nickname she'd given them, though she wasn't even their master.

"Undine..."

"What?"

"Actually...could you call me Blue after all?"

The undine smiled casually. "Okay, Blue."

"Yeah!"

With a smile and a nod, Blue ran out of the room.

A carriage was waiting outside the window. They had to catch up with Yuri before he left.



Long time no see. Harunadon here.

Thank you very much for purchasing *If the Villainess and Villain Met and Fell in Love*, Vol. 3.

This is the third volume. The third one! I'm really, really sorry to have kept you waiting.

After hearing the news that it would be quite difficult to put out another volume, this author was quite despondent. But thanks to the support of the readers—everyone who picked up copies, who sent letters of support, and who recommended it on social media—the decision was made to publish a third volume.

When I received the news, I jumped for joy.

I plugged in my USB to start prep work right away, and I found that there was already a folder for Volume 3 in there. I checked the data and realized I'd created the folder in March of last year. I was way ahead of myself (lol).

That once-empty folder is now filled with data. Just as I was filled with happiness and enthusiasm as I worked on the third volume.

Let me also give you some important news.

The second volume of the manga will be released on the same day as the third volume of the novel!

The manga version is illustrated by Chiru Ukai. As Brigitte and Yuri keep growing closer despite their differences, the story gets increasingly nostalgic and cute, and it provides plenty of heart-pounding moments.

The story also differs in many ways from the novels. Each time, I'm amazed by Chiru Ukai's bountiful imagination and power of artistic expression. I hope you'll enjoy the very charming *VillVill* manga.

Finally, it's time for some thank-yous.

Just before the publication of the second volume, *VillVill*'s supervising editor changed.

The new editor, N, worked hard to secure the next volume. Thank you very much, and I look forward to continuing working with you!

To the illustrator, Yomi Sarachi. When I saw the completed cover illustration, it took my breath away. *VillVill* wouldn't exist without Yomi Sarachi's illustrations. Thank you very much.

And I would like to express my sincere gratitude to *you*, for picking up this book.

I hope I can soon open up the folder for Volume 4, which I created today.

And I hope that you will continue to support the VillVill series.

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

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