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#### **Prologue**

Even among the noble houses of the great kingdom of Garlant, the O'Brian family had a long and storied history. They once stood at the right hand of the king and had wielded great influence among the nation's nobility. However, their house was now only a shadow of its former self. In particular, the current head of the family, Count Arthur, could hardly be said to be skilled at politics, business, or even flattery.

It was into this family that Yui had been born. As Arthur's third child and as the first girl, she should have been doted upon by her father—but reality was not so kind. He considered her a worthless failure. His attitude was absolutely not one that a father would normally have toward his child; it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he bitterly hated her.

Arthur hadn't ever been someone who especially loved and cherished his family, but while he was strict with Yui's two older brothers, he at least spoke with them. Yet if she even so much as tried to talk to her father, he would fly into a rage at her. While she was still young, she had understood that he disliked her, even if she hadn't known why. Yui's mother and her two brothers had figured she would find out the reason eventually, but perhaps out of some consideration for her, they hadn't told her, wanting her to spend her days as carefree as possible until then.

Yui was rarely permitted to go outside, so the one place she could relax was the library of her family's mansion. As a young child, she had learned to acquire new information through books, and it was through those books that she had discovered she was called a "Liefe," someone deficient in the ability to use magic.

The O'Brian lineage had always produced great numbers of knights, so for her father and the family's future as a whole, Yui's existence was unforgivable. Still, she didn't give up—if she couldn't find success in magic, she would achieve results in her studies. After reading all sorts of books, she learned much, and

she was even able to score at the top of her class on her written tests at the school for nobles she attended. However, she couldn't change the reality that she couldn't use magic, and at school, she was mocked and ridiculed. Her father's attitude wasn't swayed at all by her good grades, and he never showed her any love. He would even occasionally hit her, and he only got angrier if she made a fuss, so over time, she learned to not outwardly show any emotion.

One day, that life came to an abrupt end.

"Huh? What do you mean, mother?" Yui asked.

In contrast with her father, Yui's mother, Sherina, showed her daughter plenty of affection. With a sad look on her face, she repeated what she had just said to Yui. "Your father and I are getting a divorce. You and I are going to have to leave this house."

"Why?" Yui asked, her voice trailing off. No—somehow, she knew. "Is it my fault? Is it because I'm a Liefe and I'm not useful to this family?"

"No, not at all!" Sherina said firmly. "You already know that he and I have never been on good terms with each other, right?"

Yui nodded hesitantly. "Yeah."

The couple's marital life had started off on the wrong foot and never improved. Their children constantly saw the two arguing. Sherina had originally been a commoner. Her family ran a bakery, so her social standing should have made it impossible for her to marry a noble. That was until Arthur had fallen in love with her at first sight. She had felt no desire to marry him, but after he had threatened to close her family's bakery, she reluctantly assented.

"You're still a child, and I don't know whether I ought to tell you this, but since you're a smart girl, I'm sure you can handle it. He has another woman and no longer has any use for a commoner woman without a noble guardian, so I decided I'm going back home. Will you come with me, Yui?"

"Of course!"

Sherina hugged her tenderly. "Thank you. I wanted to take Cecil and Carlo with me too, but..."

"They aren't coming with us?"

Sherina looked upset. "Arthur won't allow it. 'They're this family's valuable successors,' he said."

"No way..." Yui pulled away from her mother and rushed out of the room, running to her brothers' room. She opened the door without knocking and entered to find her two beloved older brothers, looking just as they always did. Their calm demeanors made her think for a second that they hadn't yet been told that their parents were separating and that their mother and sister would be leaving.

"Cecil, Carlo..." she said.

"What is it, Yui?"

"You're in a hurry. Did something happen?"

Yui's two brothers were twins three years older than her. They looked enough alike to be easily mistaken for each other at first glance, but anyone who knew them well would instantly tell them apart. Cecil had dark-brown hair and brilliant, deep-blue eyes, and his kind, calm presence was just like their mother's. Carlo's hair and eye color were the same as his twin's, but he was much more lively and cheerful. In fact, their personalities were complete opposites.

When Yui saw her two brothers' faces, the thought that she would soon no longer be able to see them anymore brought tears to her eyes. Seeing this, her brothers were surprised. Their friends often told them they were obsessed with their sister, but that observation only pleased them. They amply demonstrated their brotherly overprotectiveness now as they began to panic.

"Wh-What's wrong?!"

"Are you hurt somewhere?"

Yui falteringly began to explain, holding back sobs. "Mother says she's divorcing father and that she has to leave here. She says you two can't come with us."

Understanding dawned on the twins' faces as they realized why she was

upset.

"Oh, so you heard," Carlo said, unexpectedly nonchalant. Cecil merely offered her a strained smile as he wiped Yui's face with his handkerchief.

Yui was so shocked to see that they weren't sad like she was that she burst into tears again. "Aren't you upset?" she asked them, an accusatory edge to her voice.

"We are!" Carlo exclaimed, hurrying to correct her. "We're very sad that we can't live together with you and mother anymore."

"You don't look it," Yui said, shooting him a reproachful gaze.

Carlo flinched. Cecil, calm as ever, quietly wiped away Yui's tears and corrected her misunderstanding. "Yui, we don't seem sad because there's no reason to be," he said.

"Why not?" Yui asked.

"It's not like we're never going to see each other again. If anything, it's more of a problem for you to *stay* in this house. Father treats you harshly, and just recently, he hit you across the face."

"That was because I talked to him."

"That's what I'm saying. What kind of father hits his daughter just for speaking to him? If you stay, something might happen that you'll never be able to recover from. I won't forgive him for cheating on mother, but this might be your only chance to escape from here. Mother thinks the same, which is why, for your sake, she decided to leave without taking us."

"So, it is my fault."

Cecil softly patted Yui's head. "Not at all. It's not your fault. It's to help you. You mustn't mistake the two."

"It's to help me?" she asked, wanting to be sure. Cecil nodded.

"That's right," Carlo said, showing his toothy grin. "Don't worry about it, and go with mother. We'll come see you all the time too."

"We'll still be able to meet?"

"Of course we will," Carlo said.

Yui stopped crying. She had thought she would never see them again.

"We'll see you all the time. It'll be fine," Cecil said. Yui felt relieved, but then he added, "The issue isn't us; it's what he'll do."

"Right?" Carlo said.

Yui tilted her head in puzzlement, and her brothers chuckled.

"We can't forget that guy. I've already contacted him, so let's head to his hideaway tomorrow," Carlo said.

Hearing the word "hideaway," Yui remembered with a start a person who was very important to her.

The next day, the three siblings arrived at a large, uninhabited mansion in the noble district. No one lived there, but it was regularly maintained, and though the building looked old, it didn't show any of the usual signs of age. As they headed to the neatly trimmed garden, they caught sight of the person they were meeting, and Yui broke into a run.

"El!" she cried, leaping into the boy's outstretched arms.

"Yui," he said with a kind smile on his face.

As a Liefe, Yui had been treated with contempt even at the school she went to. She couldn't make any friends and was often alone. Once she left the O'Brian household, she would also leave that school and transfer to a school for commoners.

Regardless, her experiences at school had left her incredibly wary of others, and the only person around whom she could let her guard down besides her mother and her brothers was the boy standing in front of her. The brilliant green of his eyes suited his jet-black hair, and even Yui, who didn't pay much attention to physical appearance, could tell that his face was attractive. He was the same age as her brothers, and his looks were still fairly androgynous, but it was clear that once he got a bit older, his features would grow more masculine and women wouldn't be able to take their eyes off him.

"El!" Yui cried again.

The boy was startled by Yui's moistening eyes. "Yui?" he asked. He hesitated, just as Carlo had the day before, and looked to Cecil and Carlo for help. The twins just waved their hands. "We'll leave the rest to you," one said, and they both left.

Realizing he was on his own, the boy peered into Yui's eyes. Because of her father, she didn't like to show her emotions, so it was rare for her to cry. In other words, for Yui, this boy was one of the few people with whom she was able to be up-front about her feelings.

"Yui, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Um, father and mother are getting divorced, so I have to leave with mother, and my brothers and I are going to have to live separately."

"I see," he said. He knew that Yui's parents had a poor relationship, so he didn't appear surprised.

"In a few days, we're going away to mother's parents' home in the commoner district. I know I won't be able to meet you here at the hideaway anymore."

She had few people she was close with, so the time she spent with him at the hideaway had become a great source of comfort for her. She was sad that she was no longer going to be able to live with her brothers, but they'd said they were still going to see her, and her belief in them made her feel better about it.

However, the only place where she and this boy had been able to meet was here at the hideaway. Once Yui moved, it would be difficult for El to go visit her in the commoner district, and it'd be equally difficult for her to travel to the noble district to see him. The two parts of the city were divided by a border with inspections at the gate, so it was hard for commoners to enter the noble district. That wasn't to say that it was impossible, but frequent visits by a commoner to a house that nobody was supposed to be living in would stand out, causing problems for the boy and her brothers, which Yui hardly wanted. Even more than that, though, Yui hated that she wouldn't be able to see him anymore. Unable to bear it, she began to cry again.

"El," she said through tears, "I don't wanna stop seeing you."

Troubled, the boy hugged Yui tightly and patted her on the back. "Yui," he said in a kind voice that made her feel calmer. He was like a third brother to her, only different somehow, but she didn't yet have the words to convey her feelings.

The boy let go of her, then took out a pair of pendants from his pocket. They bore engravings of the Elphie flower, the national flower of Garlant, and when the pendants were held together, the engravings formed a single pattern. There was a stone set in each of them; one was green, like the boy's eyes, and the other was a light blue, like Yui's eyes.

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"Pretty..." Yui said.

"Do you like them?" the boy asked.

"Yeah."
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"These two are a set," he said. "They mean that, even though we'll be separated, we'll be able to meet again someday, no matter what. This pendant will protect you even when I'm not by your side." He hung the pendant with the stone that matched his eye color around Yui's neck and fastened the one that matched Yui's eye color around his own. "It'll be okay. We'll see each other again, so just wait for me."

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"Yeah. I'll be waiting. I'll try my hardest, so come see me."
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"I will."

After the two exchanged that promise, they parted.

## **Chapter One: A New Life**

After being practically forced out of the O'Brian residence, Yui and her mother, Sherina, arrived in front of their family's bakery in the commoner district. It went without saying that the place was small—it wasn't even remotely comparable to the size of the O'Brian residence.

Yui had kept this a secret from her mother, but she and her brothers had come to the commoner district on several occasions to observe their grandparents. This meant that Yui wasn't surprised by the vast differences between the ways nobles and commoners lived. Still, knowing that she was going to be living there from now on felt incredibly odd.

"Yui, this is my parents' home," Sherina said. She took a deep breath, taking in the nostalgic atmosphere. The scent of freshly baked bread wafted through the air around them. "It smells good. That's my dad's bread," she told Yui. "All right, let's go inside."

Prompted by her mother, Yui entered the bakery.

"Mom, dad!" Sherina shouted, unable to conceal her delight at returning home. An elderly man and woman stepped out from the rear of the building. Yui recognized their kind features. However, this was her first time seeing their faces from up close.

Yui's grandparents froze, their eyes widening as they laid eyes on their daughter. "Sherina, is it really you?" Yui's grandmother asked.

"Yes, it is. I sent a letter saying I'd be back soon, didn't I?"

"You did, but I didn't think you'd really come. I thought we'd never see you again."

Yui's father, Arthur, had banned Sherina from seeing her parents. He also never took her to high society events. In fact, he had hardly ever let her leave the house at all. She had been virtually under house arrest. However, Sherina had maintained written communication with her parents, and Yui and her

brothers had noticed that every time their mother received a letter from her parents, she would hide from her children and quietly cry. That was the reason they had wanted to see what their grandparents were like, but they thought introducing themselves to the couple living quietly in the commoner district would have been a bother, so in the end, they'd only watched them from afar.

After a tearful reunion with her mother, Sherina joyfully embraced her father. Yui met her grandfather's gaze and flinched.

"Sherina, is this who I think it is?" he asked.

"Yes, she's your granddaughter," Sherina replied. "Okay, Yui, say hello to your grandpa and grandma."

"Oh, um, my name is Yui O'Brian. Grandfather, grandmother, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," she said, lowering her head and dipping into a graceful curtsy. It was an entirely typical greeting for a daughter of nobility, but her grandparents' eyes widened, and they didn't respond. Yui looked at her mother nervously, wondering if she'd done something strange. Sherina giggled softly.

"Yui, you aren't the daughter of a count anymore, so there's no need to greet them like a noble would. Besides, it isn't 'grandfather' and 'grandmother.' It's 'grandpa' and 'grandma.'"

"Grandpa? Grandma?"

"That's right. From now on, don't call me 'mother' anymore either. Call me 'mama.'"

"Mama..." Yui said. The word was unfamiliar to her, and she spoke it as if testing it out.

Her mother smiled happily. Yui had never seen her smile so brilliantly before. Up until then, her smiles had been kind but lonely with a hint of sorrow. Yui had assumed that that was just the way her mother smiled, but seeing her now, Yui realized that she had been quietly suffering the entire time. The O'Brian residence had been Yui's home, but it had never been that way for her mother. This saddened her, and she lowered her face.

Her grandfather knelt down to meet her gaze once again. "It's nice to meet

you. I'm Orso, your grandpa. How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"You're already that old?" He offered her a toothy grin. "Welcome, Yui," he said, extending a hand toward her.

Yui felt disoriented, but she still took his hand and shook it. Then her grandmother squatted down in front of her.

"Hello. I'm your grandma, Maria."

As her two grandparents gazed at her with kind smiles on their faces, Yui found herself feeling awkward. "It's nice to meet you," she repeated and bowed her head.

Once everyone finished greeting each other, Yui's grandparents quickly closed up the bakery, then showed Yui and her mother around. The building contained both the bakery and their living quarters, with the living room in the back. Sherina had fond memories of the house, but to Yui, who didn't know how commoners lived, everything felt brand-new.

"Let's head upstairs, Yui. I'll show you your room," her grandmother said. With a smile that closely resembled Sherina's, she directed Yui to the second floor. "This is it. When I read the letter saying you'd be coming here, I rushed to clean it out, but if there's anything not to your liking, just let me know."

Yui's new bedroom was cramped; although it was a typical size for a commoner's quarters, it probably wasn't even half the size of her former room in the O'Brian residence. Commoners lived very differently from nobles, and Yui would have to get used to that. Still, she didn't feel particularly down about it. Her grandparents were kinder than she had expected, and more than anything, she was filled with relief to have finally been released from her former life. It was reassuring knowing that she would never again be subject to her father's terrifyingly cold gaze. She had no idea if being a Liefe was truly such a bad thing, but at the very least, her grandparents didn't seem to hate her for it. It might take time to get used to everything, but she had a feeling that she could do it.

Yui took out the pendant she'd hidden beneath her clothes and squeezed it in her hand. The stone of the same color as the boy's eyes brought back memories of him.

"It'll be okay," she said to herself. He'd promised he would come see her. Yui knew she could make it until then.

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Thus Yui's new life began, but from the very first day, everything was unfamiliar to her. Sherina fit right back into the life she'd once led, but for Yui, things as simple as meals were a struggle. At the O'Brian residence, the servants did everything from preparing their food to setting the table, but here, the family couldn't eat if they didn't make their own meals.

Yui had never cooked before, so she wasn't allowed to use a knife. Instead, she was taught how to set the table and perform various simple chores. It was a wonder to watch her mother and grandmother happily preparing their meals together in the kitchen.

Sherina had become visibly more lively ever since returning home. Given her commoner upbringing, she didn't have a noble patron besides her husband. However, her relationship with Arthur had been incredibly poor, and even the servants had treated her differently. This was the case for Yui too, but she had at least been able to go outside, and her brothers and El had stood by her for emotional support. Sherina had been all alone. Yui couldn't imagine how difficult it must have been for her.

Seeing how happy her mother looked now that she could finally live peacefully, Yui knew that leaving had been the right decision. She could only say that about her mother, however, as she herself worried whether she would be able to make it in her new environment.

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"Mother?" Yui said.

"Yui, it isn't 'mother,'" replied Sherina.

"Um, mama?"

"Yes?"
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Yui didn't think that how she addressed her mother was all that important, but none of the other children in the commoner district said "mother," so she

had to do as they did, lest she be seen as an outsider. She had also been told not to greet others the way nobles did, but if she wasn't careful, the words would slip out. She still had much to get used to.

"Where will I go to school?" Yui asked. Now that she was a commoner, it would be impossible for her to return to a school for nobles.

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"Ah, that's right. I have to get that done too."

"Will I fit in?"

"It'll be okay. There's no need to worry."

"But I'm a Liefe."
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She hadn't said anything about it to her mother, but at her old school, she had been bullied for being a Liefe. All the other students there had insulted her for her inability to use anything but nonelemental magic, and she was afraid she would be bullied for the same reason at her new school too.

"Liefe" was the term given to those unable to use the four basic elements: fire, wind, water, and earth. They could only use nonelemental magic, which was often referred to as "support magic." However, nonelemental magic was quite difficult to control, and hardly anyone went out of their way to use magic that even adults would give up on in frustration. It would be a different story if nonelemental magic were necessary, but nobody was inconvenienced by not being able to use it. That was why just about anyone saw Liefes as useless.

Liefes were so mistreated because they looked different from those around them. Their hair and eye color were distinctively faint, and Yui's were no different. Her hair was a light brown, almost blonde, and her eyes were a pale blue. Combined with her slim figure, she gave off an ephemeral impression, which made her appear weak. This, along with that fact that she was a Liefe, had led to an endless number of people picking fights with her.

The bullying at her old school had mostly consisted of malicious gossip, but that hadn't had any effect on Yui, who devoted all of her free time to immersing herself in the world of books. There were some who became so irritated by her persistent disregard that they resorted to physical violence; however, when they found themselves on the receiving end of Yui's reprisal, they no longer

bothered her. But just as things had begun to settle down since turning the tables on her would-be tormentors, Yui was pulled from that school. She didn't know what the school for commoners would be like, but the thought of having to start all over irritated her.

Yui wasn't the type of person to take bullying lying down, but very few people knew that about her. Even her mother thought of her as a quiet, polite girl. This was the inevitable result of her never bringing friends home and instead spending all her time holed up in the house's library. Not wanting to worry her mother, Yui had stayed quiet about the bullying at school, so naturally, her mother wasn't aware of the violent retaliation Yui visited on her bullies.

Sherina kindly attempted to reassure her. "No one will care about a silly thing like that. A friend of mine who lives in the neighborhood has a child the same age as you. She's coming to see me tomorrow, so you two can get to know each other then. He's a boy, but I hear he's quite popular and has a lot of friends, so I'm sure he'll help you out."

Yui believed her mother, only to be sorely disappointed the next day.

"Oh man, she's a Liefe," the boy said, pointing at Yui and laughing. He displayed the typical straightforwardness and occasional cruelty of a child his age. His name was Keanu. He was a lively boy with striking red hair, and though he and Yui were the same age, he towered over her small frame.

Keanu's mother swiftly hit him. "I do apologize," she said. "My son can be a bit of an idiot."

"No, I don't mind," Yui replied. She was used to this kind of reception, but at the same time, her impression of Keanu couldn't have sunk any lower.

Having accumulated numerous things to catch up on over the years, the mothers soon became engrossed in conversation, and the children were left out.

I'd rather be reading in my room, Yui thought. She turned around to leave, but Keanu grabbed her by the arm. His grip was so painfully tight that she wasn't strong enough to brush him off. Her gaze grew harsh. "What?"

"Come with me," Keanu said.

"I don't wanna."

She wasn't simply going to give in to such an arrogant attitude, especially considering her fresh dislike for him. However, taking advantage of his larger build, Keanu began to drag Yui away.

"Hey, stop it!" Yui said.

"Just come with me!"

The two mothers finally noticed what was happening and broke off their conversation.

"Hey, Keanu, what are you doing? Haven't I told you to treat girls with respect?!" Keanu's mother said.

Trembling in fear, he responded in a small voice. "I'm going to introduce her to my friends."

I didn't ask for that, Yui thought. She looked to Sherina for help, but her plea was rejected with a happy smile.

"Oh, how wonderful. Ever since we got here, she's been cooped up at home, reading books all day. Yui, go out and make plenty of friends."

Yui had always loved to read and preferred staying indoors if at all possible. She had initially begun reading in an attempt to figure out how to use nonelemental spells, but in an unexpected development, she had found that her curiosity was greatly stimulated by magic. Over time, as she had gradually learned to apply her technical knowledge, her studies had begun to take on a more scientific bent. By this point, her knowledge rivaled that of many scholars. This was in part thanks to the countless magic books in the O'Brian home's library, but also because, for some reason, the attic of her commoner grandparents' house was full of expensive magic books, which she had been staying home to fervently read. Sherina, who knew none of this, simply thought her daughter was a typical bookworm.

So, struck by misfortune, the heavyhearted Yui was dragged to an empty lot where a number of children around her age were playing games. When they saw Keanu coming, they gathered around him, their eyes sparkling. Sherina hadn't been wrong in saying he was popular. Yui had no clue why such an

overbearing boy was so well-liked, but the other children seemed overjoyed at his arrival.

"Keanu, let's play tag!" one child said.

"No, let's have a mud fight!" another exclaimed.

The noisy children soon noticed that Keanu had brought Yui along with him.

"Hey, who's she?"

"She's the grandkid of the old man from the bakery," Keanu said.

"Oh yeah, that's right," one boy replied. "The grown-ups said his daughter got kicked out by a nobleman and came back home."

The boy's comment annoyed Yui. It felt like he was insulting her mother. The conversation continued without anyone noticing her irritation.

"Wait, so she's a noble?"

"Not anymore. She was kicked out. And she's a Liefe. Is that why her dad got rid of her?"

"What's a Liefe?"

"I know! A Liefe is a failure. They can only use nonelemental magic."

"Really? They can't use anything else?"

"Yeah. That must be why her dad ditched her."

"Whoa, how sad."

In contrast with their words, their faces were lit up with delight, like those of a pack of wild beasts that had spotted their next helpless meal.

"Why'd you bring somebody like her here, Keanu? We'll catch her wimpiness."

"No way we will. I'd never be friends with her." Keanu looked at Yui. "Don't hate us. Hate your mama for having a Liefe."

Yui clenched her fist. She could ignore whatever they said about her, but she couldn't stand anyone bad-mouthing her mother. "...up," she said.

"Huh, what was that?"

"I can't hear you! Aha ha ha!"

Her voice had been too quiet for them to hear, and they were using even that as fuel for their bullying. She repeated herself clearly this time. "I said shut up. If I have to keep listening to you get so full of yourselves over something so worthless, I'll catch your stupidity."

The empty lot momentarily fell still. Then the boys came up to Yui, their faces bright red.

"Huh? What's a failure like you saying about us?!"

"Stop acting cool, you loser!"

Yui laughed derisively at them, her expression filled with contempt. "Are you angry because I'm right?"

"What?! Hey, let's get her!"

"Yeah, let's show her where she belongs!"

With that, each of the kids used magic. Orbs of fire and water appeared in their palms.

"This is your last chance to cry for forgiveness," one said threateningly.

Yui just piled on the insults. "Then do it. You're acting quite full of yourselves, even though you can only use weak magic like that."

"This loser...!"

In response to her provocation, the boys all fired off their magic at the same time. Some of the other children screamed, thinking the boys had taken things too far, but Yui remained calm and stared down the magic orbs approaching her. Then, just as the orbs were about to hit her, they dissolved into thin air.

"What?!" one of the boys exclaimed. None of them knew what had just happened. They stood still, blank looks plastered on their faces.

Taking advantage of their confusion, Yui quickly closed the distance between herself and one of the boys and drove the heel of her palm into his stomach, knocking him to the ground. Without losing any momentum, she floored the boy next to him with a roundhouse kick. The other children remained frozen,

staring at the girl who had, in the space of a moment, taken down two boys larger than she was.

Yui looked down at the boys on the ground, who shot back hateful looks. As the thought came to mind that her previous attack hadn't inflicted much damage, the boys' friends approached her angrily.

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"Why, you...!"

"Get her!"
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Still unfazed, Yui grabbed a handful of sand from the ground. Then, letting the grains spill from her hand, she poured magical energy into them and quietly voiced an incantation before blowing on them with a light puff. Flowing sand wrapped around the boys, morphing into a raging sandstorm.

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"Waaah!"

"Heeelp! I'm sorry!"
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Sand and tears combined, dirtying their faces with mud. Their previous assertiveness had completely disappeared.

I should stop this soon, Yui thought. However, her anger flared up again when she remembered what they had said, and after some hesitation, she decided to continue. Just a bit longer...

Their cries and shouts echoed throughout the surrounding area. The children watching were at a loss as to what to do and simply stood there, motionless. Just then, a voice rang out.

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"What are you doing?!"
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With a start, Yui turned around to see her grandfather, Orso, carrying a large bag—probably on his way home from shopping. Noticing the angry look on his face as he got closer, she hastily halted her magic. The boys plopped down on the ground, weeping from fear.

I might have overdone it a bit, Yui thought. However, this was no time to worry about the boys; she had to think of a way to explain all this to her grandfather.

"What happened?" Orso shouted, but nobody answered. Or rather, nobody

could answer because nobody there understood what had just happened—except for Yui, that is. Her gaze shifted awkwardly, which caught Orso's attention.

"Yui, what happened?"

"Um..." Yui was at a loss for words. One of the sobbing boys pointed at her.

"She did it!" he yelled. "She's a Liefe, but she tried to kill us using some crazy power!"

"Is that true?" Orso asked incredulously. His reaction was only natural. It made sense to assume that Yui couldn't use magic.

"Um..."

"Is it?"

Yui nodded, bracing herself for her grandfather's anger. Still, she didn't regret a thing. "They insulted mother, so I got angry and thought I'd punish them a bit."

"This doesn't look like 'a bit' at all," Orso said, looking somewhat troubled. However, Yui couldn't give up now.

"They said father abandoned us and I should hate mother for having me. I couldn't help myself."

"Oh, well, there's nothing to be done about that, then." Surprisingly, Orso readily took Yui's side. He smiled, but there was a hint of anger in his expression. "Hey, you kids, the next time you insult my daughter or granddaughter, it'll be me you have to deal with, so don't do it again. Got it?"

His forcefulness startled even Yui, who was standing beside him. The boys' faces paled, and they all nodded.

"All right. Let's go, Yui," Orso said.

"O-Okay." Yui hurriedly turned around and followed behind him.

On the way back, Orso questioned Yui. "Yui, you can use magic?" he asked.

"Yeah. Well, only nonelemental magic."

"Being able to use nonelemental magic at your age is quite a feat. If you could

do that much, couldn't you have shown it to your father to win his approval?"

Yui's expression immediately darkened. "I never showed him anything, but one time I told him I could."

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"And then?"

"He said, 'So what? You're still a Liefe.' He didn't care."

"I see."
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They both fell silent. Orso quickly changed the topic, trying to lighten the mood.

"I saw you've been getting through the books at home. They're quite technical. Can you read them?"

"Yeah. At the O'Brian residence, there were a bunch of books I used to study. I'm researching magic."

"What kind of magic?"

"New magic, formulas, things like that. There aren't a lot of people researching nonelemental magic, so I get to discover all sorts of new things. It's fun."

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"Can you show me?"

"Sure."
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When they arrived home, Orso set down his groceries and followed Yui to her room. There, she took a single notebook from a stack of them and showed it to him. The pages were crammed with technical jargon and magic formulas. If she were to be honest, Yui thought Orso wouldn't understand what she'd written. The magic she was researching was so complicated that many researchers had given up on it. Nonelemental magic wasn't seen as important, so few people understood it. However, Orso's expression changed as he read further, and Yui started to worry that she shouldn't have shown him.

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"Did you write all of this?" he asked.
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"Yeah."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Incredible," he mumbled, sighing in amazement.

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"Grandpa?"
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"Sorry, this really is incredible. I would never have thought that someone your age could understand something like this." Orso returned the notebook to the stack, then squatted down so that his face was level with hers. "Yui, if you made this public, even your father might change his mind, but you mustn't show this to anyone just yet. You're still a child, and adults would try to take advantage of you. Until someone comes along who can protect you, this'll be our secret. You understand, right?"

"Yeah. Grandpa Theo said the same thing, so I get it."

"Grandpa Theo?"

"He's my friend's grandfather," Yui said hurriedly, her heart skipping a beat. Grandpa Theo was the grandfather of her beloved El, but she couldn't tell Orso what his real position was.

"Theo..." Orso mumbled, making a sour face.

"Grandpa?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Really? Then, grandpa..."

"What is it?"

"I'll keep the research a secret, but I can use magic, right? Like today, if some stupid kids are trying to pick a fight or something—my brothers said I shouldn't go easy on people like them."

"You're right. You'll be going to school soon too. There'll be a bunch of those idiots trying to bother you because you're a Liefe. If they do, don't hold back," Orso said, grinning.

Yui smiled brightly and nodded. "Okay."

"Don't take it too far though."

"Don't worry. When I was at the school for nobles, I made sure mother never found out."

"That's promising. But it isn't 'mother'; it's 'mama.'"

"Oh..." Yui had been saying "mother" the entire time. It looked like it would be a while before she got used to it. However, with Orso's approval, Yui's mood had improved.

On the first day of school, Yui had the misfortune of being placed in the same class as Keanu and a few other familiar faces. However, she didn't think she would have to do anything—their faces paled when they saw her. This was a good sign of things to come

# **Chapter Two: After Graduation**

Three years had passed since Yui had left the O'Brian residence. She'd gotten used to living as a commoner, and after she'd advanced from elementary to middle school, she had made close friends. She was, somehow or another, satisfied with her new life. A large part of that satisfaction was thanks to the indescribably delicious bread her grandfather baked. It wasn't only bread; he made her all manner of pastries, confections, and treats. Yui, who loved sweets more than anything else, was completely enthralled by the bakery's delights. Although the leftovers were always lined up on the table at every meal, the happiest time of the day for her was when she could eat her grandfather's freshly baked bread at breakfast.

Another development during the past three years was that Sherina had gotten engaged to a man named Layce. Yui was surprised to learn that he, too, wasn't a commoner; he was a count, even though her mother had long said that she no longer wanted to have anything to do with nobles. Their engagement had been decided upon only recently, but Yui had spotted him near the bakery multiple times since she and Sherina had come to live with Yui's grandparents. Initially, Yui had been suspicious of the man watching the bakery from afar, but apparently, after he'd heard that Sherina had gotten divorced and moved back in with her parents, he had gone there to get to know her. He'd liked Sherina for some time and had just been too nervous to approach her. Only recently had he begun to enter the bakery and strike up conversations with her, until at last his wish was granted and they got engaged. They would hold the wedding after Yui graduated from middle school.

Yui herself was currently preoccupied with choosing which school she would attend after graduation.

"Ugh..."

As Yui looked at the row of papers on the table in front of her, troubled, Sherina came over with a sympathetic smile on her face.

"Are you still hung up on this, Yui?"

"Mama, I just don't know."

Yui had gotten used to calling her mother "mama" over the past three years.

"That's quite a few letters you've got there. Are they all invitations to schools?"

"Yeah."

In Garlant, attending elementary and middle school was compulsory for all citizens, but there were various paths one could take after middle school. Many chose to begin working, but around half moved forward to a more advanced school. Nearly everyone who continued their education attended a vocational school that offered classes specialized in their area of interest.

Yui had resolved to follow in her grandfather's footsteps and continue running the bakery, planning to go to a school that specialized in bread making, but something unexpected had happened. Every middle school student in the country participated in a tournament consisting of one-on-one matches to test their abilities in magic and martial arts, and those who placed highly earned recommendations to attend one of the "Three Academies." These elite magic academies specialized in the study of magic, with Dyne in the east, Celeste in the west, and Luster in the capital. Many who attended those schools went on to take up high-ranking positions in prestigious, exclusive institutions like the guild, the church, the army, or the royal palace. Additionally, attending any one of those schools had become a kind of status symbol, so the vast majority of nobles enrolled in them.

Due to some sort of mistake, Yui had obtained a recommendation to Luster Magic Academy. In other words, she'd placed highly in the middle school tournament. This had been completely unprecedented for a Liefe and resulted in a bit of an uproar. That aside, Yui, who'd had no intention of going to Luster, was thrown for a loop. Knowing that she would be able to study her beloved magic there, she was now greatly torn between Luster and the culinary school she'd originally planned on attending.

"Should I prioritize my future and go to culinary school, or should I go to Luster Magic Academy?" she wondered aloud.

"What are you saying? Of course you have to go to Luster."

Surprised by the familiar voice, Yui and Sherina broke into grins and turned around.

"Carlo!" Yui exclaimed.

"I'm here too," Cecil said, entering the room just after his brother.

"Hi, Cecil!"

For the first year after they'd been separated, Yui had been unable to see her brothers, but once they'd been admitted to Luster Magic Academy, they had begun coming to visit her often, taking full advantage of their newfound freedom from their father. Occasionally, they would make use of their exceptional good looks, standing in front of the bakery to draw in a large number of women passing by on the street, which contributed greatly to the bakery's sales.

"Are you struggling to pick?" Cecil asked, taking one of the invitations off the table and flipping through it.

"Yeah, I am. If I'm going to take over for grandpa, I'd have to go to culinary school."

"But you want to go to Luster."

Yui nodded.

"Then you should go," Cecil said confidently. "If you do, you'll be able to study your beloved magic as much as you want. I remember how jealous you were when I showed you one of our textbooks."

She couldn't refute that. The classes at the elite academy would be on another level than those at the middle school she attended. She was constantly dissatisfied with how simple her classes were. Also, by attending Luster, she would obtain various certifications that would normally require her to attend multiple vocational schools. It went without saying that she would have to develop the skills necessary for those certifications, but to Yui, that was only another point in favor of the academy. The problem with Luster—a magic academy—was that it didn't have baking classes.

"You can learn how to bake from grandpa, but he can't teach you everything you can learn at Luster," Cecil said.

"Well, yeah."

"The academy has a library that rivals even the national library, and there are rare and valuable magic books that you can find only there. You want to see them, right?" Carlo said.

"You can read them as long as you're a student," Cecil added, grinning. "Which means if you aren't a student, you can't read them."

"I'll go!"

Yui's resistance had been overwhelmed by the twins' tag-team effort. The national library was like an oasis in a desert to her, and she went there four times a week. However, its stock placed more of an emphasis on books with popular appeal, and Yui had already made good progress through the limited selection of technical magic books there. She wanted to buy new books, but magic books were extremely expensive, and she couldn't in good conscience beg her mom or her grandparents, who lived on only a commoner's means, to buy them for her.

And so Yui decided to go to Luster to pursue new books and make good on a promise she hadn't yet fulfilled.

## **Chapter Three: Luster Magic Academy**

Yui's mornings were busy. After getting out of bed earlier than most other students did, she changed clothes, tied her light brown hair back, then put on the pendant El had given her. She hadn't seen him in four years—that is, he hadn't come to see her since then.

Brushing off the vaguely gloomy feeling inside her, Yui left her room to go help her grandparents, who'd already gotten up and begun busily working in the bakery on the first floor. Yui put on an apron and, with practiced movements, helped them prepare for the day as always. The bread Orso baked had an excellent reputation, and there were some who traveled from far and wide just to buy it.

After the morning preparations were complete, Yui took off her apron and returned to her room to get ready for school. She changed into her school uniform, undid her hair, then tied it back up with a cute ribbon. When she walked into the kitchen, schoolbag in hand, Sherina was there.

"Good morning, mama," Yui said.

"Good morning. Your breakfast's ready."

"Thanks!" She pulled up a chair and began eating.

"Oh, I think I already told you, but tonight we're having dinner with Layce, so don't stay out late," Sherina said, smiling.

Yui's mother had gotten married without incident to her fiancé, Layce, and now lived at his house. In the beginning, she'd asked Yui to come live with her and Yui's new father, but Yui had staunchly rejected the offer, preferring to remain with her grandparents. However, her grandparents were too busy with work to take care of her, so her mother came to make her breakfast every morning. This made her feel guilty. Though she'd initially refused, saying that she'd be turning sixteen this year and could make do on her own, she was happy that her mother was still concerned about her. This was especially true

because they were living separately.

Yui joined her mother for dinner at Layce's house on a regular basis, which had been one of the conditions she'd agreed to in order to live separately.

"Yeah, I know," Yui said. Finishing her breakfast, she turned to her mother. "Thanks for the food." With that, she picked up her bag and headed for the door.

"Goodbye, Yui. Take care."

"Yeah. Goodbye, mama."

Exiting a different door from the bakery's entrance, Yui headed to school.

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Garlant had produced many talented and skilled conjurers over the years. As a result, their advancements in magic were a cut above the rest. It had developed many different magical devices and weapons, contributing to the country's substantial military might. The country also boasted a prolific agricultural sector and exported many of the crops that grew in its fertile soils. Due to all of this, Garlant was highly influential among neighboring countries.

Long ago, that strength was deployed in frequent conflicts, but the previous ruler, King Theodore, had negotiated for peace with the surrounding countries, and the present reign of King Bernard was as peaceful as could be.

To enter the school Yui now attended, Luster Magic Academy, candidates were required to graduate middle school and pass an entrance exam. After that, students attended the school for five years. Even Yui, who had entered on a recommendation she'd received at the tournament, still had to take the entrance exam. This was because the students were ranked based on ability as determined by their test scores and divided into classes from A to I. Many of class A, which comprised the most gifted of students, went on to positions at institutions that only accepted a select few talented individuals. However, this wasn't of any importance to Yui, who planned to take over her grandfather's bakery after graduation.

Arriving at the academy, Yui glanced around the premises she'd gotten used to seeing in the three months attending the school. The size of the academy still

impressed her every time she saw it. Being one of only three magic academies in the country, the school accommodated a large number of students, so the campus was divided into three structures: the north building containing the classes A through C, the east building containing classes D through F, and the west building, containing classes G through I.

The east and west buildings looked like any other school's, but the north building, with its large array of influential and promising students, featured lavish facilities and accommodations, including a fancy cafeteria. One of the reasons for this was undoubtedly that many of the top students were of noble families and had received an elite education from an early age. The other buildings on the academy's expansive grounds included lecture halls, a coliseum where mock battles were held, and facilities for magic courses and private practice. New students frequently got lost because of the academy's size, so it was customary for teachers to patrol the grounds for the first month of school.

Having already attended Luster for three months, Yui made her way to class H in the west building without any issue. The distance between the entrance to the school and her classroom annoyed her.

"Morning, Yui." Rouelle Eden, a friend of Yui's, was the first one to notice her. She was a strong-willed girl with a high ponytail.

"Good morning, Rouelle," Yui replied.

"Hey."

"Good morning!"

Standing next to Rouelle, two more of Yui's friends greeted her. The first was the short-haired, mischievous-looking Gayne Clay, and the second was the straight-haired, affably smiling Finney Barcas. The three of them had been Yui's friends since middle school. Others in their class also greeted Yui from across the room. After responding to each of them in turn, she arrived at her seat.

Class H was the second class from the bottom, and its students were largely unexceptional, but that fostered a sense of solidarity among them. Yui's classmates had initially been hesitant to approach her, but by now, they were all on good terms. This was undoubtedly thanks to Yui's three friends, who treated her as they would anyone else.

The morning's classes ended without a hitch, and after lunch break, they moved outside to begin the afternoon practical magic lesson. Yui's classmates were excitedly sharing their predictions for what types of spells the class would be casting today, but in the midst of that, Yui alone wore a gloomy expression.

"I say this every time, but cheer up, Yui," Gayne said.

"I imagine it's boring, though, just sitting and watching all the time," Finney added.

Yui grimaced. "I'd much rather have no class in the afternoon and go home. Helping out grandpa would be better than this."

"There, there. Cheer up." Rouelle passed some candy to Yui, fully understanding how to handle her. "Here, take some of these. You can sneak a few during class."

Yui's expression instantly shifted into a broad smile. "Thanks!"

"We're going now, so sit there quietly," Rouelle said, advising Yui as a mother would her child. Then she, Gayne, and Finney left together to join their classmates.

Yui put some distance between herself and everyone else and sat down. The students listened to their teacher's instructions, then began to happily cast the spells they'd been taught. Watching them from afar, Yui felt bored, and she began to wonder whether entering a magic academy had been a mistake. Liefes were seen as unfit to be conjurers as a matter of course, and given how many schools there were where one could study all sorts of things, there were very few Liefes who went out of their way to study magic. There were fewer than ten Liefes attending all of the Three Academies. Because of that, all of the practical courses were on the four basic elements, so Yui could only watch.

Second-year students and up could take electives on nonelemental magic, but since none of the courses were very intensive, it seemed she would have to make do with studying on her own. She was fine with that, though. After all, she'd come this far in her research with only self-study. There were plenty of nonelemental magic books at the school, and the campus was a good environment for studying.

Still, Yui found all this wasted time hard to stomach. It pained her just thinking about how many books she could have been reading instead of just sitting there. She'd put up with it until now, but she was about to reach the limits of her patience.

"All right, I'll cut class," she said to herself.

Yui was feeling somewhat pressed for time. After four years since her promise with El, she had found some success in the research she had started for his sake, but it had stalled without producing the results she really wanted to see. The classes at the academy were certainly advanced, but they were way too easy for her. One reason for this was because she was in the class ranked second from the bottom; being a Liefe, she had no choice but to give up on the practical portions of her exams. Compared to the more advanced lessons of class A, where the elite of the elite were gathered, the contents of her classes were simpler.

That didn't mean she wanted to be in class A, however. According to a friend there, the atmosphere was harsh, and class was competitive. Yui liked the laid-back atmosphere of class H and would rather stay where she was if at all possible. Class A also had loads of homework that would cut into the time she had for research. That would be a major issue.

Yui slowly got to her feet, but just as she was about to turn around and leave her classmates behind, someone behind her spoke to her out of nowhere.

"Hey."

Yui turned around to see a pompous-looking upperclassman with upturned eyes standing there with an entourage of several other students behind him. She could tell his year and his class based on the color and pattern of his tie. He was in class A, and the three lines on his tie meant he was a third-year student.

"Are you Yui Curtis?" he asked. There was a forcefulness in his tone.

"Yes. Do you have business with me?" Yui replied with a frown. Still, he was two years above her, so she spoke politely.

"Heh, not bad, not bad at all. I'm Baron Burts's son, Nore Burts. Starting today, you'll be my woman," he said.

"Excuse me?" Yui was flabbergasted. She stared unblinkingly at the person in front of her, sure that she must have misheard him.

"You must be happy I came to ask you out directly."

Unfortunately, she had heard him right the first time. Yui searched for the right words to reply, then said, "No thank you. I'm fine." Him asking her out as soon as they met—and so condescendingly too—had been so absurd that those were the only words she'd managed to get out.

"There's no need to be shy," he said.

"No, not at all, I'm not being shy."

"Of course not. You must think you aren't suited for me. I am a noble, after all. Don't worry about it. I'm an accepting guy."

Yui had absolutely no clue where this self-confidence was coming from. It was almost impressive. What a sketchy guy, Yui thought. What are these people even doing? It's the middle of class. Not that she had a leg to stand on, as she had been just about to cut class herself. Will the third-years' homeroom teacher take me seriously if I say that he's skipping class to hit on girls?

Just then, an angry voice broke her out of her thoughts.

"Hey, are you listening?" Nore yelled.

Yui's mood worsened. "Yes, I am. Anyways, I won't go out with you. Please learn how to be polite to people you've just met. And why are you cutting class for this? I'll tell the teacher."

"What did you just say to me?!" His face turned bright red. Apparently, she'd touched a nerve. "I'm a noble, and I'm saying I'll go out with a commoner like you. Come here!" he yelled, roughly grabbing her wrist.

The strength of his grip made Yui reflexively cry out. "Ow, stop it!"

He was a guy, and he was older than her. Just in terms of their physical strength, Yui had no chance of winning or even of brushing off his arm.

"Hmph, a Liefe like you better not be thinking you can beat me!"

I'll hit him so he has to shut up, Yui thought. Just then, someone else arrived.

"Hey, what are you doing to Yui?!" Rouelle shouted. Having sensed a disturbance during class, she ran over with tremendous speed and landed a flying kick on Nore.

"Gah!" he exclaimed. Blown away by the force of the kick, he crashed into a wall. Rouelle nimbly landed on the ground.

"Nice work," Yui said. Some of her classmates who had noticed the quarrel clapped in amusement.

"D-Do you know what you've done?! My father is—"

"And what about it?!" Rouelle asked. "If you really are a noble, you should at least try to have a bit more class! Who the heck would go out with you with that attitude? Feel free to think that you're hot stuff, but don't bother other people—especially not Yui!"

Nore was shocked into timidity by Rouelle's intensity, but out of one last spurt of obstinacy, he spat, "You won't get away with this!"

"That was a boring response. You should come up with a smarter one."

"Grr, you commoners!"

"Oh? I don't think you can say that," Finney said, appearing from out of nowhere with his usual affable smile.

"Wh-Why not?"

Finney brought his face close to Nore's and whispered something into his ear. Nore looked at Yui, and he started to tremble with fear, his face turning gradually pale. Immediately afterward, he got up and left, looking almost as if he were running away in fright. The students he'd brought with him hastily followed after him.

"What did you say?" Yui asked Finney.

"It's a secret," he said, smiling.

Nore's behavior had been odd, but she let it slide, knowing from years of experience that it was pointless trying to get an answer out of Finney. Instead, Yui turned to the friend who had saved her. "Thanks, Rouelle."

"No worries. I'm just glad you're okay," she replied, enveloping her in a protective hug.

"You're so chivalrous, Rouelle," said Gayne.

"Right?" Finney added.

The two of them were amazed by Rouelle's heroic actions and sounded almost as if they'd been charmed by her.

Despite that minor affair, the rest of the school day ended without incident.

"It's over now, but every time I remember the guy, I get angry. I should've kicked him one more time," Rouelle said passionately.

"Wasn't that one kick enough? Are you trying to kill him?" Gayne was taken aback. Nore's life would have really been in danger if she'd done anything more.

"Still, I hear he's popular," Finney said. He always had some tidbit of information at the ready, though no one knew just where he got it. "He's the eldest son of a baron, and the Burts barony is decently wealthy. He seems stupid and has a nasty personality, but he isn't bad-looking."

"Him?! I could never. What poor taste!" Rouelle exclaimed in disbelief. Standing next to her, Yui nodded along.

"You seem to attract those weirdos, Yui," Gayne said.

"I'm not exactly happy about it."

"By the way, Yui, didn't you have to go home earlier than usual today?" Rouelle asked.

Yui looked at the clock. Time had passed quicker than she'd thought. "You're right. Sorry, I'm going home now. See you later!"

"Bye!"

Gayne nodded. "Hey, take care on the way."

"Later," Finney said.

Yui quickly gathered her things and left the classroom in a hurry.

After Yui left, Rouelle still couldn't get over her anger. Today hadn't been the first time someone had tried to bother her friend. Yui was conventionally attractive, and her distinctive pale-blue eyes and light-brown hair tinged with blonde made her cute, like a doll. The vast majority of people typically had hair that was darker shades like red, brown, or black, and their eyes were more vibrantly colored. Yui's features, which were more cute than beautiful, combined with a Liefe's ephemeral impression, roused feelings of protectiveness in others. Moreover, her usual lack of expressiveness made the smile she showed to those she was close with all the more effective. All things considered, there were a decent number of people who secretly harbored feelings for her. Even within their class, there were a few too many covert elements for Rouelle's liking.

Putting that aside, Rouelle had also repeatedly witnessed people find fault with Yui for being a Liefe. There were some, like Nore, who resorted to violence, but Rouelle had dealt with them every time. Surely more would pop up in the future. She sighed. "Hey, Finney, what did you say to make that noble shut up? He seemed pretty scared."

"Yeah, people who throw around their status like that hardly ever back down when we commoners speak up," said Gayne, who was just as curious.

"It's simple. I just told him about a certain 'Prince of Darkness' who dotes on Yui," Finney answered with a beaming smile.

"Oh, so that's also an option. I see," Rouelle said, satisfied by Finney's explanation. She knew just how frightening the so-called demon he was referring to was.

"Just about anyone would run in fear if they heard that," Gayne said. "I might even feel a bit—no, a lot of sympathy for that guy now." He pitied Nore, who'd probably made an enemy of the most dangerous man in human history.

## **Chapter Four: A New Father**

Yui hurried home, took off her school uniform, and changed into a dress she had taken out of her closet. Then she grabbed her things and returned outside, where a carriage was waiting for her. She got in, and it took her to the noble district, an area of the city close to the royal palace where nobles lived alongside the wealthy and powerful. In contrast with the areas of the city where the general public lived, this district was quiet and refined, and the paving stones were maintained so scrupulously that there wasn't a single gap between any of them.

Yui's carriage arrived at one of the residences. It was an elegant, imposing structure—the house where her grandparents lived could hardly compare. At a single glance, one could tell that the owner of the mansion was quite wealthy.

The carriage went through the gate and crossed a large, well-manicured garden with plenty of flowers. When Yui arrived at the entrance, the driver of the carriage opened the door for her. Then, as if he'd been expecting her, a butler nearing old age appeared from inside the house.

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"Welcome home, Lady Yui."

"Hello, George."

"The madam is waiting inside."

"Okay."
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George motioned her inside, and she stepped into the house. When Yui entered one of the rooms, her mother greeted her with a smile.

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"Welcome home, Yui."

"Hello, mama."

"I baked some sweets for you. Let's start right away with some tea."

"Sweets? Awesome!"

Sherina happily began preparing tea. Several servants, including George,
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worked in the mansion, so it wasn't necessary for Sherina herself to make the tea. However, because of her ordinary upbringing, she felt awkward having every one of her needs taken care of by others, so she took care of everyday chores on her own. There were quite a few noblemen who disapproved of their wives doing what was considered "servants' work." Sherina's previous husband had been that way, which had made her feel constrained. However, Layce was an understanding person, and he respected whatever Sherina chose to do. He would positively beam when he watched Sherina, and this showed Yui just how much he loved her. That made Yui happy.

Sherina placed the sweets she'd made onto the table, then she and Yui enjoyed a conversation while drinking tea.

"A few days ago, Layce's friends Loic and Louie visited, and they said they wanted to meet you," Sherina said.

"Loic and Louie." Yui repeated. She remembered them—they had introduced themselves to her as Layce's friends at Sherina's wedding.

In accordance with her wishes, Sherina's wedding had been a modest ceremony, despite Layce's rank as count. Only family and close friends had been invited. As a result, there had been relatively few guests, so Yui remembered them all. It hadn't been a luxurious wedding like those of many nobles, but it stuck out in her memory as having been a quiet ceremony where everyone had been friendly.

"They told me just how much Layce dotes on you," Sherina said.

Yui's face stiffened. "D-Dotes...?"

"Yes, dotes. You know, Layce buys cute things and clothes that he thinks would look good on you, and George gets angry at him, telling him that the closet is already jam-packed. I've heard that Layce has even hung up a photo of you at work, and he boasts about how cute you are. It makes your mama a bit jealous."

"R-Really?"

This was the first time Yui had heard any of this. It made her head hurt. She'd had no clue that he was doing such embarrassing things without her

knowledge. She resolved to object to his behavior when he got home, and at the very least, she knew she had to get him to take down the photo.

After that, for the better part of an hour, Yui was subjected to tales that showed just how much Layce saw her as his daughter. She was happy to hear that he cared for her, even though they weren't related by blood, but she gradually grew tired of hearing about it.

As the conversation progressed, Sherina, who had been chattering cheerfully the entire time, abruptly switched topics. Her expression suddenly became serious. "That's why I want to ask," she said, "don't you want to start living with us soon? Layce would love to have you here just as much as I would. Or do you not see him as your new father?"

"That's not the case at all. I've always liked papa. But I'm happy with my life as it is now." Yui hesitated before continuing. "That house is close to here..." She awkwardly averted her gaze.

"That" house was the O'Brian residence. Yui's brothers lived there, but so did her father, Arthur. Travel by carriage was common in the noble district, so it wasn't very likely for them to run across each other, but whenever Yui thought of that slim possibility, she couldn't help but grow timid. She still didn't have the courage to see him again.

Sherina understood what Yui meant, and she suddenly looked sad. "I'm sorry."

"Mama?"

"If I'd been stronger, you wouldn't have had to go through all of that..."

"None of it is your fault, mama. He threatened you, and he never listened to what others had to say."

"You just might be right..."

Yui saw faint tears in her mother's eyes as she recalled her previous marriage.

The O'Brian family had a long history of producing strong soldiers, and because of that, Yui's father placed a heavy emphasis on the power of people's magical energy. He firmly held to the arrogant view, prevalent among many in

the nobility, that to be stronger was to be superior.

Sherina met Yui's father when she was a student—they both attended the same Luster Magic Academy that Yui now went to. She was a popular beauty, and Arthur, who was two years her senior, liked her and proposed that they begin dating. Sherina was put off by Arthur's haughty attitude, so she refused, but he persistently continued to ask her out until she finally hit the end of her rope. She ended up rejecting him rather harshly.

Just when she thought he had finally given up, he showed up out of nowhere after her graduation and demanded that she marry him. Naturally, she didn't want to agree under any circumstances, but he threatened her, asking if she was really okay with her parents' bakery going under. Her parents—Yui's grandparents—said that they didn't mind giving up their bakery, but with no power to resist him, Sherina reluctantly agreed to the marriage. She worried that Arthur might escalate things to direct harm toward her parents.

After they got married, the twins were born, and Arthur was happy to see that they both had powerful magical energy. However, when Yui was born as a Liefe, her lack of usefulness to him was intolerable to Arthur. He angrily shouted at her whenever he saw her, and if she cried, he would hit her for annoying him. The servants, not wishing to incur the wrath of their master, committed themselves to ignoring all this, which meant that Yui's only allies were her mother and her brothers. Over time, Yui grew to suppress any display of emotion, not wanting to displease her father by laughing or crying. Many times, Sherina even put herself on the line to try to stop him, but he never listened, and he even said that it was *her* fault for having Yui. Arthur's attitude toward Yui never changed, right up until her parents got divorced.

Yui never thought that it was her mother's fault. It wouldn't have been strange for Sherina to have hated Yui, given that she was the product of a forced marriage, but she lovingly raised Yui and protected her when no one else would.

While these painful memories flashed through Yui's mind, she tried her hardest to cheer up her mother.

"There were definitely difficult times, but there were plenty of good times

too. You and the twins always helped me," Yui said, making an effort to speak cheerfully. The person who had supported her the most came to mind. Though his appearance in her memories was frozen as it had been four years ago, just remembering him made her feel happier. "It was never your fault, mama. Hey, papa's coming soon, and we have to go meet him at the door."

Sherina wiped her tears. "You're right. If I'm crying, he'll get worried." She smiled, and Yui smiled too.

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There was a knock on the door, and George entered the room.

"Madam, the master has returned," the butler said.

"Thank you, George," Sherina said. "Yui, let's go."

"Okay."

Arriving at the front entrance with her mother, Yui saw a tall man with deep blue eyes and long, almost black, navy blue hair tied back in a ponytail. He was her new father, Layce Curtis. For some reason, Cecil and Carlo were also there, standing behind him.

When Layce noticed her, he dashed forward and hugged her with all his might. It was closer to a bear hug than a regular one. "Yui! I couldn't wait to see you!"

"Mmph... I can't breathe." Everything else about him is great, except for this, she thought with her last vestiges of consciousness.

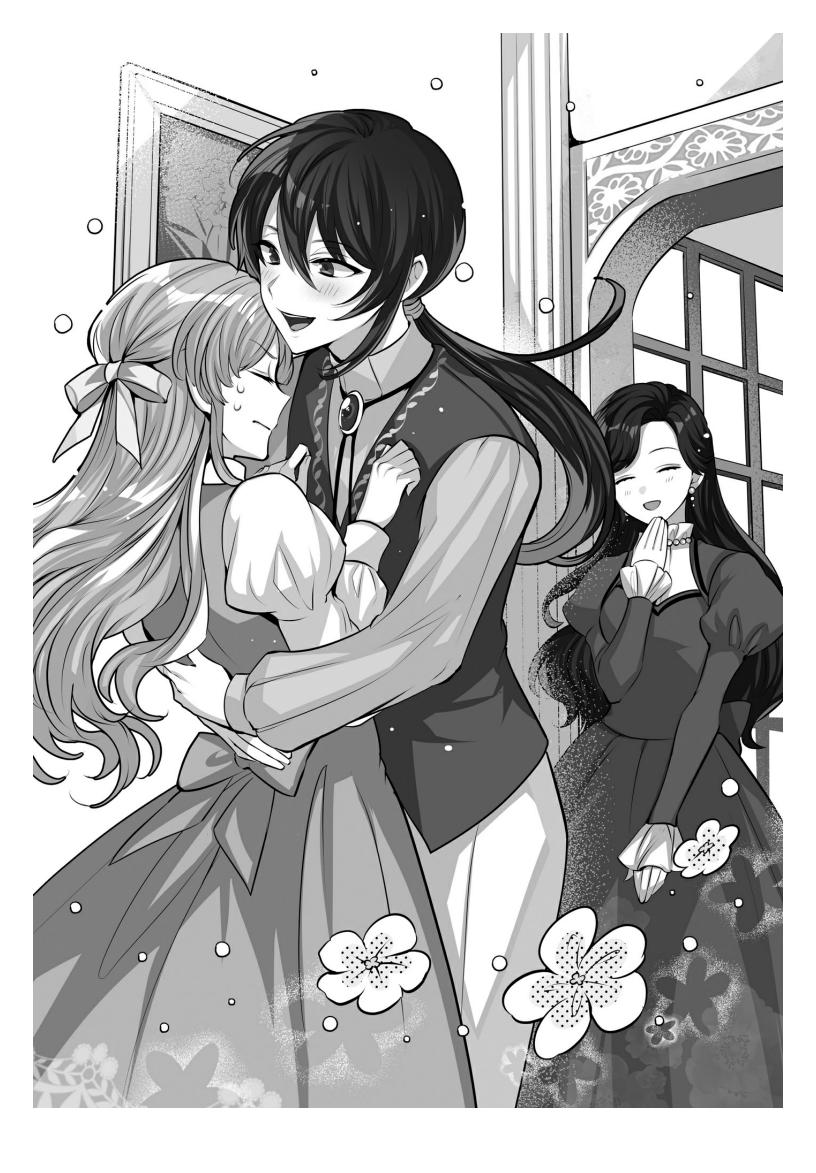
"Layce, if you don't relax your arms, she'll snap in two," Sherina said. Heedless of Yui's suffering, she was smiling.

He finally noticed that Yui was losing strength. "My apologies. I was so happy, I forgot to control myself. Are you okay?"

"Somehow," Yui replied through labored breaths.

Layce hugged her every time they saw each other. By now, it had become his customary greeting. Yui had once tried to avoid him, but he had almost burst into tears, so she hadn't tried to get out of a hug since. The sheer amount of love he showed for her made her question whether they really weren't related,

and she had even actually were.	once, in complete	seriousness, a	sked her moth	ner if they



"I know you're thrilled to see her, but don't take it too far," Sherina said. "I'm here too, you know, but you won't even look my way. Don't you think that's cruel?"

"I'd never neglect you, Sherina. You'll always be my number one."

Yui sighed at her parents' flirting, then went over to her brothers. "Why are you two here?" she asked.

"On our way home, we saw a familiar emblem on a carriage racing through the noble district," Cecil explained. "Knowing it was dad, we stopped it, and he told us that he was rushing home because you were here today."

"So we thought we'd tag along," Carlo added.

Both Cecil and Carlo referred to Layce as "dad." On paper, they were part of the O'Brian family, so he wasn't their father, but they had begun calling him that based on the inexplicable argument that their little sister's father must be their father too. Regardless, Layce never corrected them, so Yui figured that it was all right.

"And now we're here, and I'm getting hungry," Carlo said.

"You stop them, then," Cecil said with an awkward smile. Layce and Sherina were still in a world of their own.

"No way. Dad gets pissed whenever we interrupt them."

"I guess that means it's Yui's job."

The two of them looked at her, their gazes expectant.

Yui sighed. "Mama, papa—Cecil and Carlo are getting tired of waiting."

Sherina finally looked at her, dragging herself and her husband back to reality. "Oh? Sorry, you two."

"I'm hungry," Carlo said.

"Very well. Then let's eat."

Until they arrived at their seats at the table, Sherina and Layce remained snuggled up close to one another, with Layce occasionally whispering sweet nothings into his wife's ear. The children knew that the two were newlyweds,

but they still felt awkward just looking at them. However, whenever Yui warned Layce, he quickly forgot, but if anyone besides Yui tried to stop them, he would shoot them a piercing glare. Still, when dinner began, the flirting stopped, and Sherina caught up with the twins, whom she didn't get to see often enough for her liking.

Cecil and Carlo told her all sorts of amusing stories. There was one time when they'd held a match during martial arts practice, and Cecil had completely blasted Carlo away with magic. Yui's mood was lifted just from listening to them and being a part of the joyful atmosphere. This kind of scene could never have existed back in the O'Brian household.

If only moments like these could continue forever, Yui thought, but she knew they couldn't. Her brothers were part of the O'Brian family, and no matter how much she dreamed about them living together with her and her mother, Arthur would never allow it.

"Hey, how long are you going to live at grandpa's place, Yui?" Carlo asked, snapping Yui out of her thoughts. "Aren't you going to move in with mom and dad?"

"Umm..."

This was something she hadn't wanted to talk about if at all possible. Layce looked at her with sparkling, hopeful eyes, making her feel all the more awkward and unsure of what to say.

Insensitive to Yui's discomfort, Carlo smiled. "You must really not like dad."

Layce looked shocked. "Is that true, Yui?!" he asked as though the world were ending.

"No, of course not!" Yui said, hurrying to deny it. Layce looked relieved.

"But you know, a girl Yui's age is going to have mixed feelings about having a new father. You're not forcing yourself, are you, Yui?" Cecil asked teasingly. He already knew the answer but had asked anyway, enjoying the way Layce's face flipped between joy and sorrow with a single word from Yui.

"Not at all. He treats me well, and I'm really happy he's mama's new husband and my new father."

Layce beamed. "There's no need to flatter your dad." When Carlo cackled at his easy-to-read expression, Layce looked at him. "Quiet, Carlo. Don't bother your sister."

"Then why won't you live with him? There must be something you don't like, right?" Carlo asked.

Yui frowned. Cecil and Carlo exchanged looks, then continued pressing her.

"Oh, is there really something?" said Carlo.

"Is it because dad's annoying?" asked Cecil.

"Go ahead; tell us. If he's done something wrong, we'll deal with him."

"Why is everyone just assuming that I'm at fault here?" Layce moaned.

None of them said it, but they were all thinking that it must be something that Layce had done regularly.

Then even Sherina, who'd been wanting Yui to move in for some time, joined in. "I'm sure you know, Yui, but Layce truly cares for you. He's said that he would do whatever it takes for you to come live with us. If there really is something holding you back, let me know."

"If you have any complaints, it's best to voice them now, you know," Cecil said soothingly.

"Well, it isn't quite a complaint."

Even Carlo urged her to speak. "Then say it. We'll take care of it if we have to."

Not wanting to say anything, Yui had been expertly avoiding the issue. However, now seemed like a good time to speak up. Resigning herself, she began to explain. "At first, I did want to live together with you guys."

"Then what made you change your mind?" Cecil asked.

"Because they're both so...close."

"You mean mom and dad? Isn't that a good thing? They're newlyweds, after all," he replied, not understanding what the issue was.

"Well, yeah," she said awkwardly. "Carlo, Cecil, you should already know this,

but they don't pay attention to their surroundings. Even when I'm standing right next to them, it's like I'm not even there." She hesitated. "Sure, they're newlyweds, so I try not to think too much of it, but, well...I never quite know where to look."

As Cecil and Carlo listened to their sister, they each silently turned to look coldly at Layce.

Yui continued. "At my age, I find it quite difficult to handle, or I just think I must be in the way."

Silence fell. The next moment, Carlo stood up and pointed a finger at Layce. "I knew it was your fault, dad!"

Cecil nodded. "You reap what you sow. Maybe try to control yourself a bit. I know you're excited to have just gotten married, but don't you think it's only natural for a young girl like Yui to feel uncomfortable?"

"Gah..." Layce went over to Yui and knelt down in front of her, taking her hand and looking at her with a deeply upset look on his face. "I'm sorry, Yui. I had no idea that my love for Sherina was causing you such torment. How foolish have I been that I didn't notice?!"

"Papa, I didn't say anything that dramatic." Yui hadn't been tormented or saddened; she'd simply wondered if she was in the way.

"Please believe me when I say this: the world would have to tear itself apart before I ever thought of my darling daughter as a nuisance."

"He's not listening at all," Sherina said, poking fun at Layce's usual overreaction.

"I'll restrain myself as much as possible from now on, so come live with us!" he said.

Yui hesitated, then promptly refused. "Um, I'm sorry."

"Why not?!"

"I don't think you'll be able to restrain yourself. Besides, I like grandpa's bread."

"No way!"

Yui knew from Layce's usual behavior that self-restraint would be absolutely impossible for him. She also thought that it would be inconsiderate of her to impose herself on her mother, who was finally happy in her new married life. More than anything else, however, Yui's true reason for refusing was that if she lived with her parents, she wouldn't be able to eat her grandfather's bread every day.

Layce hung his head, dejected that Yui had chosen bread over him.

"That really got him," Carlo remarked.

Cecil shrugged. "It's his own fault."

"Yui really loves my father's bread and sweets," Sherina explained.

"Gah... Very well. I'll put the offer on hold for now."

"Just give it up already," Carlo said.

What's with you today, Carlo? Yui thought.

Layce lowered his gaze in frustration, but he showed no signs of giving up. Suddenly, he raised his head. "In exchange, please go on a date with me once a month!" There was nothing there to suggest he was joking; the desperation in his eyes was evident.

"He's only gotten more obsessed," Carlo said.

"Mom, do you think it might've been a mistake to marry dad?"

Both brothers were glad that Layce cared for his daughter, but this level of love was off-putting. Yui looked to Sherina, who was unsure of how to reply. Her mother smiled and nodded.

"Okay, I will."

"Don't you forget it!" Layce exclaimed.

Just then, Sherina started. "Oh my, is that the time? It's gotten late. Don't you two think it's about time you headed home?" she asked Cecil and Carlo.

Cecil hummed in thought. "Well, that might be a pain, so can I just stay here tonight?"

"Me too," Carlo said, energetically raising a hand.

"If it's fine with both of you, then I don't mind," Sherina said.

The house contained two so-called guest rooms that Cecil and Carlo could use at any time. In fact, they treated the Curtis residence as a second home and often informed the O'Brian residence that they were going to stay at a friend's house. Though it was uncertain whether Arthur was aware of this, the twins said it was fine because he hadn't yet said anything about it.

Once Layce had calmed down, Yui, who was beginning to feel sleepy, decided to go to bed. Her brothers disappeared into the rooms on either side of hers, and she entered her own. The furniture and decorations in her room were all custom-made and crafted by famous designers; Layce had carefully chosen them after a rigorous selection process to ensure that they would all be to Yui's tastes. Things like this clearly showed just how much he doted on her.

Yui remembered what her mother had said: that George had gotten angry at Layce for buying too many things for her. She went to the closet to check. Her room was quite large, several times larger than her room at her grandparents' house, and the closet was just as proportionally large. The closet had been almost bare the last time she'd visited, but opening it this time—she was speechless. She quietly closed the closet, turned on her heel, and went to her bed.

"I never saw that," she said to herself. Then, so as to erase the spectacle from her mind, she got into bed and went to sleep. Some time after that, she got George to find a new wardrobe for her, and she ended up using that instead.

At the beginning of the next week, Yui and Rouelle were walking down one of the academy's hallways.

"How was your dinner with Lord Curtis? Did he lose it again?" Rouelle asked.

"Yeah, this time was even worse than usual," Yui said, smiling awkwardly as she recalled the dinner.

"It sounds like he hasn't changed at all."

Rouelle had met Layce for the first time just after he had become Yui's father. Yui had already made it known that her mother was getting remarried, so when Layce mentioned wanting to meet her friends, she brought Rouelle, Gayne, and

Finney to his house.

At first, when he gracefully smiled at Rouelle as he politely greeted her, the three had gotten the impression that he was a kind gentleman. The instant he saw the two boys, however, his eyes flashed with hostility. He was definitely still smiling, but his eyes weren't smiling at all. He rapidly interrogated the boys about whether either of them was going out with Yui, whether they had feelings for her, and so on. His merciless questioning had even made them worry for their own safety, but after Sherina admonished him, things ended without incident. During that same visit, when Layce heard that Rouelle often protected Yui from those who tried to hassle her, he took an extreme liking to her, and ever since then, she had been regularly updating him on how Yui was doing at the academy. Needless to say, she had reported to him about Nore.

"Well, it's not that I don't understand how he feels," Rouelle said.

Yui tilted her head in puzzlement.

"You're like a little kitten or something. You make people want to protect you. Don't you worry about your own safety sometimes?"

"That just makes it sound like I'm helpless," Yui said, sounding upset.

"Not at all. It means you're cute." Rouelle smiled at Yui, who still looked unconvinced. "And you resemble your mother. That's probably what makes him act that way."

"Yeah, that might be it."

If Yui had been a boy, Layce probably would have treated her normally, as he did her brothers.

As they walked, they came across a large crowd of students blocking their path.

"What's this?" Yui asked.

"I don't know."

Other students wondering the same thing were gathering, and the crowd continued growing. Yui spotted some familiar faces in the crowd.

"Look, there's Finney and Gayne," she said.

"Let's go."

They approached the two boys, who were toward the rear of the crowd, observing the other students.

"Finney, Gayne!" Yui called.

"Oh hey, Yui, Rouelle. You two come to gawk too?" Gayne said.

"What's with all the people?" Rouelle asked.

Finney frowned. "Hmm, there are so many that I can't really tell."

They were at the rear of the crowd, so even if they stood on their tiptoes or jumped, they couldn't see anything. Other students were having the same issue, leading to many asking around about what was happening.

"All right! You two, kneel!" Rouelle said, ordering Finney and Gayne to become her step stool.

"There's nothing 'all right' about that! Are you a queen or something?!" Gayne cried.

Yui calmly looked around. "Hey, over there," she said, pointing at a lesspopulated spot where they might be able to see what was going on.

"Nice one, Yui! Let's go!" Rouelle briskly walked away with Yui, leaving a weary Gayne and a smirking Finney tagging along behind them. The spot they arrived at was relatively empty, so they could finally make out what the other students had been looking at with such great interest.

"You can see well from here," Gayne said. "Whoa, that's one good-looking guy. Who's that?"

The graceful way the young man carried himself was apparent even from a distance. He had vivid green eyes, black hair, and a well-defined nose, and he was overall quite attractive. He was wearing the academy's uniform, so they could tell he was a fellow student, but even though his attire was the same as everyone else's, his figure oozed an unexplainable sense of refinement. Perhaps because of that, everyone around him just looked at him from a set distance away, with no one daring to approach any farther. There was simply an air around him that prevented anyone from doing so.

When Rouelle spotted him, she was surprised. "Hey, isn't that His Highness Prince Filiel? What's he doing here? He's in class A, in the north building."

"Huh, I don't know," Finney said, "but that must be why there are all these people. We're in a different building, so we almost never get a chance to see His Highness."

The second prince of Garlant had been enrolled in the academy for four years, but he was in class A. Everyone in the west building knew of him, but hardly anyone had ever seen him. After hearing rumors that the prince was here, the students had flocked here on the off chance that they might get to see him.

"Whoa, this is the first time I've seen him," Gayne said. "I'm a guy, but even I can tell he's pretty. The girls are staring holes through him."

Finney smirked. "Yeah, their eyes are gonna pop out of their heads."

The boys hanging around him just looked curious, but the girls had set their eyes on the abnormally good-looking Filiel like a pack of wolves that had spotted its prey.

"Of course. He's a prince, he's wealthy and powerful, and with those looks, who wouldn't want to get acquainted with him? Right, Yui?" Rouelle said.

There was a pause, but Yui's only reply was an unclear, distracted "Yeah."

Rouelle turned away from the prince and looked at Yui, but Yui's gaze was fixed on the prince.

Completely unaware, Gayne furrowed his brow. "Still, he's gotta be roasting in that outfit."

It was currently the beginning of summer, and while the season wasn't quite in full swing, it was still warm out, and some of the students had changed to their summer uniforms. However, in addition to his long-sleeved uniform, Filiel was wearing white gloves and covering up as much skin as possible. Any student at the academy should have known that this was to protect him and the people around him, but it didn't seem like Gayne did.

"He has to wear all that," Finney explained. "If by some chance he came into contact with someone, they'd be lucky to just get seriously injured."

Gayne tilted his head in confusion. "Hm? Why's that?"

Rouelle had been watching Yui, but when she heard Gayne, she looked at him in surprise.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you really a student here? This stuff's common knowledge. Are you that stupid?"

"I'm sorry I'm ignorant! Was that really necessary?!"

"All right. Enough, you two," Finney said to intervene. "Those clothes suppress His Highness's magic."

"What's the point of that?" Gayne asked.

"His Highness has been powerful since birth, with stronger magic than anyone else in recorded history. When he was just a baby, he couldn't control himself, so his magic would fly out of control whenever he got worked up. He broke things around him just by crying. He was raised separately from Their Majesties because it was unsafe for them to be near him. You see, he didn't just break things; if someone were to so much as touch him, they would get injured and collapse. Even now that His Highness's magic has stabilized and he's learned to control it, he isn't completely able to suppress it, and it's still dangerous for him to touch others. That's why he wears long sleeves even in summer; they're to protect anyone who might happen to come into contact with him. His Highness's clothes and gloves are special in that they suppress the magic that escapes from his control."

Gayne listened quietly to Finney's explanation, but there was one thing he still didn't get. "But how's that supposed to work? I get that he's old enough to take care of himself now, but a newborn baby would have to rely on someone else to take care of them. Wouldn't that have been impossible if nobody could touch him?"

"Apparently, some people could. The act of touching His Highness isn't dangerous, but the magic overflowing from him is. They could've used magic devices like the gloves His Highness is wearing or wrapped their hands in their own magic, though the latter would only be possible for anyone with a fair bit

of skill and a significant amount of magical power themselves. They say that His Highness's grandfather, the previous king, took care of him along with the commander of the Royal Guard."

"Too much magic, huh? Now that's something to think about... You know quite a bit about His Highness, Finney."

"Hearing about it is unavoidable if you're a student here," Rouelle said. "That magic of his is a pretty well-known subject. Besides that, since His Highness is the second prince, there's apparently a dispute over the royal succession between the faction that supports his older brother, Prince Alexis, and the faction that wants Prince Filiel in power so his magic can keep neighboring countries in check."

Gayne didn't seem to have known that either, as he looked impressed. "Wow, a struggle for succession. Being royalty must be tough."

The decision of who should be the next king was a vital one for both the powerful Garlant and the countries bordering it. Garlant's neighbors were keeping a watchful eye on the situation, knowing that they would have to respond to whoever was chosen. Rouelle looked at Gayne in exasperation at his lack of knowledge about such an important issue.

"By the way, you've been quiet, Yui," Finney remarked.

"You're right," Gayne said.

"Do you feel sick?"

Just then, Filiel's restless gaze, which had been sweeping over the crowd, came to a stop, and he stared in a certain direction. The area he was looking at erupted in shrieks from the female students.

"Eek! He's looking over here!"

"Prince Filiel!"

Unbothered by the commotion, Yui stared at Filiel. Rouelle looked puzzled.

"Is something wrong?"

Yui didn't respond, perhaps because she didn't hear her. Rouelle looked to Gayne and Finney for help, but they only returned her baffled look. Filiel was

looking in their direction. Then two students went up to him, and he left with them. The other students in the area lost interest and suddenly dispersed. It was hard to believe that there'd been a crowd there just moments earlier.

"Are you okay, Yui? What is it?" Rouelle asked.

Finally, Yui responded. "Sorry, it's nothing. Let's go to the classroom."

"Yeah, let's go," Rouelle said.

It hadn't seemed like nothing, but the three of them didn't ask her anything and went with her back to their classroom.

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Cradling the faintest hope that he might catch but a glimpse of her, Filiel accompanied his two guards, who were heading to the west building on an errand. As he let his gaze wander among the crowd, he spotted someone who was staring right at him. Those eyes—the same pale blue as the stone set in the pendant he always wore—captivated him. He wanted to see her so much he could hardly bear it, but due to certain circumstances, his grandfather had forbidden it. The small girl he had last seen four years ago had become much prettier than she was in his memory, and his heart refused to be calm. He wanted to look at her for just a short while longer, but when his two guards returned from their errands, he reluctantly left with them.

Filiel looked over his shoulder back at where the girl had been moments before. "Just a bit longer," he said. "I'll come see you soon, so wait for me until then." His soft murmur disappeared, unheard, into the wind.

## **Chapter Five: Reunion**

"Gah! I can't take it anymore!" Gayne's despairing cries echoed throughout the classroom. Here and there, students giggled at him.

"Get a hold of yourself. It's just a test," Finney said, exasperated.

"You can say that because you're good at studying! If I get a low score this time, I'll have my allowance reduced!"

Gayne was shouting about the end of term tests, which had begun a few days prior. He hated studying and had reached his limit.

I'm impressed he managed to get into this school with that attitude, Yui thought, smiling awkwardly. "That's because you don't pay attention in class. Right, Rouelle?" She looked at her friend, only to see her slumped over her textbook, muttering to herself.

"This is impossible. I can't hold anything else in my head. The words slip away as fast as I memorize them! Maybe if I use magic to blast away the staff room in a single blow, the exams will go away too."

"Aah, that'd be nice," Gayne replied.

"Hold it. You can't do that."

Yui and Finney, both calm, looked at the two and sighed.

As their conversation went on, their homeroom teacher opened the door to the classroom and entered. "Sit down, everyone. We're about to start."

Class H's homeroom teacher, Travis, had untidy black hair that stuck out every which way. He was constantly sluggish, and his appearance was a far cry from one befitting a teacher. Still, he was always helpful, which made him popular among the students. They were even allowed to call him "Trav."

"After today, you'll have the weekend to relax before the last day of exams at the beginning of next week. Keep the fun in moderation." His recommendation, which wasn't to study but to keep things within limits, was very typical of him and was the reason the students liked him. If they had been in the prestigious class A, his remark might have elicited some bad reactions, but in class H, the idea of good grades was so foreign to the students that the word "prestigious" might as well have been a fancy-sounding name for a tasty foreign dish. Travis was a much better fit for this laid-back class than the strict teacher in charge of class A.

"Yes, sir," the students responded. Yui loved the lax atmosphere of class H.

"And Curtis, after today's tests, stop by the staff room before you head home. I have something to talk to you about."

"Yes, sir," Yui replied.

Travis listlessly left the classroom.

"You were called out. Did you do something, Yui?" Gayne asked.

Finney smirked. "Yeah, Gayne wasn't picked on."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Shouldn't you be studying?" Yui said. "The test's about to start."

Reminded of the existence of the test, Gayne swiftly grabbed his textbook. Rouelle had given up on studying and was stealthily creating a cheat sheet when Finney noticed her and promptly tore it to shreds. Apparently, her results were quite miserable.

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"What?! What do you mean?" Yui had come to talk to Travis after the test.

After hearing what he'd said, she was left with a rare expression of surprise on her face.

"I'm saying that it's been decided that you'll participate in the joint training camp this summer break," Travis said.

"Isn't the joint training camp the one where the best and brightest students at Dyne, Celeste, and Luster all get together for special classes they can't normally take at the academies—the training camp important people come to observe?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Why me? I'm in class H, and I'm a Liefe." Almost all of the students who went to the camp were the top students in class A. She had no clue why a class H student had been chosen, especially one who was ridiculed for being unable to use elemental magic.

"That's true, but you made it to the semifinals in the middle school tournament last year, no? That's enough here to get a recommendation."

"Now that you mention it, that's right."

The middle school tournament was a large-scale competition, during which only the winners of the qualifiers held at each school advanced to the main event. It was important enough that members of the royal family and big shots from the army, the church, and the guild came to watch. Those who placed highly obtained recommendations to one or multiple magic academies, just like Yui had, and participation alone could greatly affect one's future career. Besides that, the tournament was an opportunity for participants to be scouted by important people, so every year, there were intense climactic bouts. Yui had made it through the qualifiers and into the main event, but there'd been a catch.

"Generally, the attendees are chosen from class A, but it's also standard for every first-year who placed high in the tournament to go," Travis said.

"But, Trav, I didn't fight in the main event."

Travis was at a loss for words, which made it clear to Yui that he had already known. While she had made it to the semifinals, every single one of her opponents up until then had withdrawn due to sudden illness or surrendered as soon as their match began. She hadn't fought a single time.

The unbroken succession of withdrawals and surrenders had aroused suspicion that there was some kind of backroom dealing going on. Viewing her with mistrust, the tournament administration had called her in for questioning, and people had spread nasty rumors about her. It had been a tough time. Of course, after her opponents were interviewed, the suspicion around her eventually cleared up, but the road to that point left her exhausted; no one believed that a Liefe—a failure—had made it that far, and she had to speak to

many different people before they were satisfied.

Remembering everything she had gone through back then, Yui furrowed her brow. "Please mark me down as absent due to illness, or else there'll be all sorts of people who'll bother me like last time."

"I wish I could, but my hands are tied."

After all, the joint training camp wasn't just an academy event; it was for important figures to gauge the students' strength. She couldn't simply refuse to participate. If anything, most students would ignore an illness to take part even if they had to go crawling. Yui was racking her brains for any way she could get out of it when Travis played his trump card.

"Listen closely, Curtis. The training camp will be held close to Liza Forest, so it won't be far from the town of Bahal. The region is famous for its milk, butter, and fruit, and there are a whole slew of shops in town that sell delicious sweets and pastries. You'll have some free time during the camp, which means you can eat as much as you want!"

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"I'll go."
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"All right, great reply! You'll be there for two weeks, so make the most of it!" "I will!"

Yui left the staff room in a good mood. Travis chuckled to himself as he watched her go.

I'll take a detour and buy a book about Bahal's sweetshops on the way home, Yui thought. As she walked down the hallway, happily imagining what kinds of sweets she'd get to eat, someone spoke to her out of nowhere.

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"Hey, do you have a moment?"
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Yui turned around to see three female students. Their ties, which were the color for class B, had three lines on them, making them third-years. However, Yui didn't know any third-years, so she had no clue why she'd been stopped. "Me?"

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"You're Yui Curtis, right?"
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"Yes."
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"We want to talk. Come with us."

"Right now?" Yui's good mood quickly disappeared. She wanted to buy the book as soon as possible and would rather not waste any time.

"That's right. Just come with us!"

The thought of running away flashed through her mind, but since doing so would probably make things worse later, she reluctantly followed them. *Ugh, my book!* she internally lamented, imaginary tears streaming down her face.

The three girls brought her to the rooftop, glaring at her with unbridled hostility. She checked for the nearest escape route—the door that led off the roof. Things could get dangerous with no one else around except for the four of them. With her back to the door, Yui decided to hear them out. "So, what business do you have with me?"

"It's about Nore!"

"Nore?" Yui asked. She searched her memories, but nothing came up. Who? was all she thought.

The three girls raised their voices and spoke one after the other.

"Nore Burts."

"He asked you out, but you turned him down."

"And you injured him with that flying kick. Just who do you think you are?!"

Yui wanted to cover up her ears from how loud they were. At first, she'd wondered what they were talking about, but the mention of a flying kick triggered her memory. Nore Burts was the guy who'd tried to woo her during class. When she refused, he'd become furious and Rouelle had kicked him. Yui still didn't know why that warranted a summons from these three girls, but then she remembered Finney saying that Nore was somewhat popular. "So you're pissed that the guy you like asked me out."

Her guess had been correct. One of the girls flew into a rage. "What?! Don't get so full of yourself just because he chose you!"

Yui was tired of this. She wanted to turn around and leave right away. "That isn't my intention at all. I'm not interested in him, so I didn't want to go out

with him. Don't worry."

"A girl like you should know her place rather than be so stupid as to reject him!"

Yui paused. "Would it have been better if I'd gone out with him?"

"Absolutely not! The issue is that he was interested in you at all!"

"Then what would you have me do?" Rejecting him had been arrogant, but going out with him was out of the question. If I can't do either without you complaining, then what should I do? she thought.

Rouelle had kicked Nore because he'd tried to grab Yui, but it didn't seem like the girls knew that. The fact that they were trying to pick a fight with her on the basis of such flimsy knowledge was insufferable, but in the end, they were only venting their frustration that Nore didn't care about them.

Stewing in her irritation, Yui let out a small sigh. However, that only made the girls angrier. They must have thought the fragile-looking Yui would fold and burst out crying under the pressure of three third-years. Her unexpectedly calm attitude only spurred them on.

"Are you making fun of us?!"

"No, not at all. I think you ought to ask Nore himsel — Ow!"

As she was about to insist they not bother her, one of the girls grabbed Yui and pushed her. That instant, the pendant she was wearing slipped out from beneath her school uniform. The chain caught on the girl's finger, snapped, and fell to her feet.

"Ah!" Yui exclaimed, flustered. The girls picked up the pendant and smiled nastily at the sudden break in her composure.

"What's the rush? Is this thing that important to you?"

Yui said nothing. Alarms were going off in her head, telling her that a careless reply could prove dangerous.

"I see." The girl holding the pendant walked up to the fence, then flung the pendant off the roof into the air.

Yui froze, momentarily stunned. The next second, she hurried up to the fence and looked down. The pendant had dropped to the ground, but she couldn't see where it had landed.

The three girls laughed, refreshed by Yui's distress. "Aha ha ha, that felt great."

Yui glared at them.

"What's with that look? It's your fault!"

"Now that you've learned your lesson, don't you dare cross us again!"

Yui's anger reached its boiling point, but she cared more about the pendant than the girls. She rushed down from the roof and looked around the area directly under the fence, but she didn't spot anything.

"What do I do? I can't find it."

She spent several more hours with no luck. It was growing dark, so she had no choice but to stop and try again the next day.

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"Hey, Luca."

"Oh, hey, Zeke. What's that you're holding?" Luca asked.

"Here, take a look." Zeke, with his red hair tied back into a ponytail, held up the object in his hand so that Luca, with his shoulder-length, blueish-black hair, could get a good look.

"I see. Why do you have it?"

"I just picked it up off the ground. He must've dropped it."

"Really? Then we should bring it to him at once. It must be important to him, since he's always wearing it."

"Yeah, you're right."

The two of them left the academy together, taking the pendant with them.

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Meanwhile, in the royal palace, the royal audience hall was crowded with

nobles, high-ranking officials, and royal aides. The king of Garlant, Bernard Silva Garlant, was seated on his throne. His reign had been typical compared to that of his predecessor, who had boasted numerous achievements, and he was entirely average-looking compared to his two sons. His ordinariness was what made him stand out as king. Still, he was a man well aware of his own limits, and his innate honesty was reflected in his just rule—he listened carefully to his subjects and was never carried away by the tremendous power his position gave him.

Bernard looked out over the crowd assembled before him, then began to speak about an issue that had been the source of many of his headaches in recent years. "Thank you all for coming. I have asked you all here over a single matter, an issue that has grown in importance over the past few years: the dispute over who will be the next king."

At that, there was a loud stirring among the crowd. Bernard raised a hand, and the hall fell silent.

"First, there is Filiel," he said. "His magic is more potent than any we have ever seen. It would surely prove a great deterrent to any country seeking to harm Garlant."

Some of the nobles' faces lit up with unconcealed joy; these were members of the faction that supported Filiel for the throne. The nobles supporting Alexis looked bitter. However, the king's next words reversed this.

"Nevertheless, that does not mean he must become king. Rather, his power may be more effectively utilized from another position. And above all, Filiel himself has refused the throne, preferring to assume a position where he can support Alexis."

The members of the Filiel faction stiffened.

"From a young age, Alexis learned much of what it takes to be king, and since his graduation, he has been proactively assisting me in my work. His character, his judgment, and his ability are unimpeachable." In the dignified manner of a king, Bernard rose from his seat on the throne and grandly declared, "I, Bernard Silva Garlant, name Alexis the next king of Garlant and appoint him to the position of crown prince effective immediately."

Having assumed that they were in the superior position, every member of the Filiel faction hurried to object to the king's proclamation.

"Please reconsider, sire!"

"Sascha and Flanders have been growing in strength. The strongest son ought to lead so as to contain them!"

"That's exactly right. Please give it more thought!"

"Silence!" Bernard's voice echoed throughout the hall, and the noisy nobles shut their mouths at once. "There is some truth in your words."

"Then—"

"Filiel is a bright young man whose character is without reproach. If he had been the only prince fit for the role of king, I would have chosen him, but I already have Alexis. In the event of an immediate threat from a foreign nation, Filiel will, by necessity, lead the army. He would have quite a burden to bear if the stresses of government were added to that. Therefore, I have judged that it would be best to entrust the affairs of state to Alexis and the military affairs to Filiel."

Most in attendance were convinced, but the nobles supporting Filiel made a last-ditch effort to change the king's mind.

"If the burden were too much for His Highness Prince Filiel, might he not be able to share it?"

"Share it, you say?" Bernard said.

"Indeed. For His Highness's sake, we would offer any assistance we could, to the best of our meager abilities."

"That's quite right," Bernard said. That was why he was saying Filiel could divide the burden with Alexis. The nobles were either too foolish to understand him or were making no effort to do so. They sounded reasonable, but their greedy eyes and unpleasant smiles betrayed their selfish intent. "In other words, you would control the government in Filiel's stead. That seems less like assistance and more like you wish to make him a puppet."

"Not at all! That would be inexcusable!"

"Then what do you want? Alexis is more suited to be king than Filiel is, so why do you insist on Filiel ruling instead?!"

The nobles rushed to defend themselves, but they were silenced by the king's sharp gaze. There had only ever been a small number of nobles arguing over the succession. Alexis and Filiel were on great terms; each had absolutely no desire to compete with the other, and Filiel had already publicly said many times that he would enter the army and support his brother. There shouldn't have been any dispute to begin with.

"Father, isn't it about time we end this farce?" Alexis asked. "We needn't waste any more time on it."

"What?! What do you mean, Your Highness?!"

Alexis had the same green eyes and slightly wavy, navy blue, almost black hair typical of the royal family. Enhanced by his calm, princely air of refinement, his appearance was just as captivating as Filiel's.

Irritated by the long, pointless debate, Alexis tried once again to cut it short. "Isn't this meaningless? My brother has previously said he has no wish to become king. Right, Filiel?"

Filiel stepped forward. "Yes, brother. I do not wish to be king; my utmost desire is to aid my older brother when he ascends the throne. With magic as powerful as my own, I believe that is my duty."

Despite Filiel's proclamation, the nobles supporting him were unperturbed.

"Your Highness is quite kind and, out of discretion toward your brother, must be unable to speak your mind. That is why we are simply offering our help."

The two princes looked at the nobles coldly.

"The scale of your stupidity is almost worthy of respect," Alexis said. "What would you do if, in your selfish quest to push me and my adorable little brother into a dispute, our relationship worsened? Well, I'm sure that's what you wanted. Too bad; the likes of you won't get between us. As they say, go get kicked by a horse." He had ended with a joke, but his eyes were serious, even angry, as he stared at the man with the most influence among the Filiel faction.

"What do you mean, Your Highness?"

"Ever since you've started clamoring about making Filiel king, I've received a number of gifts intended to harm me and experienced frequent suspicious accidents thought to have been assassination attempts. Every one of them could have been deadly. Moreover, those gifts were labeled from Filiel."

Everyone in the hall was stunned by this revelation, especially the last part.

"How outrageous! It is as we thought: His Highness Prince Filiel wishes to become king. Regardless, if His Highness had consulted with us about how pressed he felt, we would have made the utmost effort to assist him."

"After an investigation, it was determined that it wasn't Filiel who sent the gifts, but someone else."

"Well, that is a relief to hear."

Alexis glared at the man. "That's clearly a lie," he spat. "You used Filiel's name knowing that I would notice it was false as soon as the matter was investigated, but by using that name, you hoped to plant a seed of doubt in me and destroy our relationship by making me think that maybe he really does hate me."

"What do you mean, Your Highness?"

"Did you think your plan succeeded? Luckily, I have plenty of skilled people around me, and they soon found out who was really behind this."

The nobles in the hall gulped and listened with bated breath. Anyone who attempted to harm royalty was given the death penalty, even if their attempt was unsuccessful, and it sounded like Alexis already knew who the culprit was. Several nobles who had been playing dumb the entire time steadily paled as Alexis continued. One of them, perhaps too distraught to take it any longer, dug his own grave.

"One of those who supports Your Highness probably slipped in the poison so as to pin the blame on His Highness Prince Filiel and trip him up."

"Oh, that's odd. I never said that someone tried to poison me," Alexis said.

The man noticed his own slipup and fell silent.

"That's not all," Bernard said, continuing from where Alexis left off. "The

investigation also uncovered fraud, misappropriation of tax revenue, human trafficking, and other crimes, committed by many different persons. Guards, seize those whose names I call!"

As he called one name after another, the guards brought the relevant persons before him. Almost all of them were members of the Filiel faction.

"I'm innocent! I've been framed!"

"My king, this must be some sort of mistake!"

"Silence!"

The guards tried to subdue the struggling nobles, but the men were desperately trying to explain themselves and refused to be quiet. Then one man stepped forward. "Oh dear, do you think you'd be arrested without any evidence?"

"It's the Prince of Darkness!" one noble shouted. They looked to be on the edge of despair.

The man they called the Prince of Darkness was the prime minister of Garlant. Though still quite young for the position, he had climbed to where he was now because he possessed a brilliance matched by very few. He had the ingenuity and diplomatic ability to convert even unfavorable situations, both domestic and foreign, to the kingdom's advantage. The king trusted him absolutely.

On the other hand, he displayed a fiendishness untempered by mercy against those who opposed him. Countless nobles and bureaucrats had lost positions and jobs after excessively criticizing him. His ice-cold smile, which struck fear into the hearts of his opponents, and his ruthless behavior toward his enemies contributed to his nickname: the Prince of Darkness. He was the one man the king was afraid of opposing. In Garlant and the surrounding countries, the Prince of Darkness was the reigning champion among terrifying public figures—no one wanted to make an enemy of him.

Even though he had a fearsome reputation, the Prince of Darkness dearly loved his wife and daughter. He was Yui's father, Layce Curtis, and those who knew him as the prime minister would undoubtedly faint at the sight of him doting on her.

The nobles who had been so loud before quieted down instantly when he entered. They looked fearful.

"Why are they more afraid of a prime minister than a king?" Bernard mumbled. Layce's very presence had been enough to scare the nobles.

"Because you all keep fussing, I'll give you some evidence you can't weasel your way out of," Layce said. "The poison used is so potent that even a single drop is fatal, but it is also incredibly rare. I imagine that whoever chose it prioritized its effect without thinking about its scarcity. As a result, I quickly found the culprit once I investigated the poison's distribution network. There were also some hired hands who foolishly made direct attempts on His Highness's life, but they were arrested by the knights before they could lay a finger on him. They were all thugs who worked for money, not out of a sense of loyalty, so they readily admitted who hired them."

Layce then moved past the assassination attempts and listed evidence of fraud, corruption, and other crimes. The sheer volume of definitive evidence made it clear that all this questioning had been an elaborate ruse. These nobles had been allowed to make a huge fuss over the succession crisis for several years without being admonished—this had been a ploy to buy time and gather enough evidence to arrest all of the corrupt nobles in one fell swoop. Unaware of this, the nobles had taken advantage of the king's lack of firm action to engage in all sorts of trickery behind the scenes, all in order to make Filiel the heir. They had been unwittingly cooperating with the prime minister's investigation, and all the while, they'd had no clue that all of their misdeeds had been known to him.

No matter how much they struggled to find an opening, they were up against the Prince of Darkness. He had taken down many nobles who had tried to fight him. They were completely outclassed. With no way out of the evidence against them, they steadily looked more and more resigned to their fates.

Layce then insulted them. "I mean, really, what else is there to say about the stupidity of such a shoddy assassination plot? I suppose that's to be expected from idiots who raised an uproar over something that wasn't an issue in the first place. They never learn."

The nobles' faces twisted in frustration at Layce's insults. However, because they were afraid of what might happen to them, they didn't talk back.

"Of course, even thinking of raising one's hand against royalty is an issue in and of itself. The fact that you truly believed you would succeed while *I'm* the prime minister is evidence of your thoughtlessness," Layce said. His derisive smile and quiet anger made everyone shiver, even those who were innocent.

The nobles who hadn't been involved in the succession dispute were impressed by Layce's devotion to the king. They assumed that his unprecedented rage was directed at those who had tried to harm the royal family. However, those who knew Layce well, including the king, must have wanted to shout, "You're wrong!" They understood that his anger wasn't out of loyalty, but because he had been so busy collecting evidence on the nobles' crimes that he hadn't been able to leave work. And now he was just venting after having needed to reduce the time he spent with his beloved wife and daughter.

"That's enough, Layce. We don't have forever," Bernard said.

"Haaah..." Layce sighed. "Very well. I'll end here." He stepped back, though he still seemed like he had more he wanted to say.

"Take them away," Bernard ordered the soldiers. They exited one by one, nobles in tow. The hall was now completely silent. Everyone held their breath, stunned into silence by how suddenly everything had happened. Then a man's laughter suddenly echoed throughout the hall.

"Ha ha ha, how shameless. There was no way we'd lose against people like them!" one of the nobles in the Alexis faction exclaimed. With much of their opposition under arrest, they all looked joyful and certain of their victory. However, this was an important occasion where the next king had been confirmed. It wasn't the time or place to resolve factional squabbles, and the surrounding nobles looked coldly upon the Alexis faction's tastelessness.

"Hold on, this isn't over yet," Layce said, shattering their celebratory mood.

"Prince Alexis wasn't the only victim of assassination attempts. Prince Filiel also endured a succession of poisoned meals and strange accidents."

Whispers rippled across the hall after Layce acknowledged that there also had

been assassination attempts on Filiel.

"Surely that must have been the work of those who were here a short while ago."

"No, that's impossible," Layce said. "If something had happened to His Highness Prince Filiel, they would have lost any possible benefit they had to gain from making him king. They weren't so foolish that they would make their already poor situation worse." He smiled coolly. "Those who tried to harm His Highness—you, who supported Prince Alexis for the throne—did so because they thought Prince Filiel was in their way."

Realizing that they were also in danger, the nobles in Layce's sight loudly objected.

"I don't know anything!"

"Me neither!"

"Did you learn nothing from those fools who were just taken away? I'd never say something like that in public without any evidence. You've already been thoroughly investigated, and there's enough to prevent your excuses from holding any water."

The nobles who had been making noise now trembled at Layce's forceful speech. They fell to the floor, dejected.

After that, in addition to most of the nobles of the Filiel faction, many nobles in the Alexis faction who had aggressively pushed for him were charged with some crime or another. The remaining nobles who had contributed to the dispute were thoroughly spooked, and none dared to openly oppose the official proclamation of Alexis's promotion to crown prince. At first glance, it appeared to be a victory for the Alexis faction, but because of the fraud and attempted assassinations of Filiel, many of them were arrested. The others were unable to remain close to Alexis, out of fear that they would be suspected of colluding with the criminal nobles.

And so, the yearslong succession issue came to a close. The corrupt nobles were rooted out, and in the end, the nobles of the Alexis faction were not allowed to accrue more influence than absolutely necessary.

"It looks like things will finally be more peaceful now, Filiel," said Alexis.

"Yes, it does," Filiel replied.

The two princes walked side by side down a palace corridor and reflected on everything that had happened.

"It seems there will also be fewer guards following us around everywhere. It's a relief to be able to move freely again," Filiel said.

"You said it. Thanks to those stupid nobles—all their assassins and the suspicious accidents—there was always someone basically right next to me. And on top of the restrictions, it was so suffocating to not even be able to relax and drink a glass of water without worrying about poison being mixed in."

Filiel smiled awkwardly in agreement. He had been dealing with the same things as his brother. "By the way, how is she doing?" he asked.

"Who do you mean?" Alexis asked, tilting his head in confusion.

"The assassin who managed to slip past heavy security and get into your bedroom. She fell in love with you at first sight and switched to our side. We got plenty of valuable information from her after that."

"Ha ha ha." Alexis laughed dryly. "Yeah, back then, I was worried for myself in a different way," he said. He gazed off into the distance as he recalled what had happened. "Apparently, she was quite talented at what she did. And right now, she's enthusiastically working as my guard and servant."

"Will you be okay?" Filiel asked. His question wasn't out of worry that she would betray him; he was concerned about his brother's chastity.

Alexis hesitated. "Probably," he said. He was smiling stiffly.

Just then, someone came along. "Hey, Filiel!" the person shouted, his voice echoing down the corridor.

Filiel glanced over and saw one of his guards, Zeke, waving his hand and walking toward him.

"Oh, my apologies! Your Highness is also here," Zeke said, hurriedly bowing.

Normally, no matter how friendly they were with each other, it was disrespectful for a retainer to address royalty without a title or to call out to them by shouting.

Alexis paid this no mind. He smiled. "Your guards are lively," he remarked.

"My apologies, Alexis," Filiel said, awkwardly smiling. He apologized precisely because he knew his brother wouldn't get angry at something so minor.

If Alexis *had* been the type to take it seriously, Zeke would've been punished for disrespect. The soldiers assigned to guard the princes, who had been following from a short distance behind, furrowed their eyebrows. However, because the princes didn't criticize Zeke, they pretended not to see anything.

"There isn't anyone else besides us around, so it's fine," Alexis replied. "But next time, be more careful. Some in the palace are kind of annoying about formalities."

"Yes, sir!" Zeke said, standing at attention.

Luca, who had been with Zeke, ignored him and properly greeted them, bowing. "Please forgive the impoliteness. And Your Highness, my congratulations."

"Thanks," Alexis said.

"By the way, didn't you have something for me?" Filiel asked, speaking less formally than he had been with his brother. Normally, he spoke somewhat casually, but he couldn't do so in public—he spoke differently depending on who he was with and where he was.

"Yep, I found something you lost, and I'm here to give it to you... Um, I'm here to deliver it, Your Highness," Zeke said. He had begun talking casually, as usual, but remembering he was in Alexis's presence, he quickly corrected himself.

"Pfft, ha ha." Alexis tried to stifle a laugh but failed. "It doesn't look like anybody's coming, so feel free to talk normally."

"Y-Yes, sir! Thank you for your kind consideration!" Zeke stuttered, cold sweat pouring down his back.

Standing behind Zeke, Luca muttered, "This idiot."

"I lost something?" Filiel asked.

"Yeah, this is it," Zeke said, showing him the pendant.

For a split second, Filiel thought it was his, since it was the same design. He checked his neck to make sure he was still wearing it. Noticing that the pendants were the same shape, but that the stone was different from his, his eyes widened in surprise. "Where did you find this?" he asked, his voice trembling slightly.

"The academy. It isn't yours?"

Filiel contemplated something for a moment, then forcefully turned to face Alexis. "Sorry, Alexis. I just remembered I have some business to take care of, so I'll take my leave here." He bowed his head slightly and quickly left.

He walked for a while, and after arriving alone in front of a certain room, he caught his breath and knocked on the door. "It's me, Filiel."

"Enter."

He opened the door and went inside. "Pardon the interruption, grandfather."

Filiel's grandfather and Bernard's father—Theodore, the previous king—was sitting in a chair in the room. His white hair and neatly trimmed beard gave him an air of authority without a hint of uncleanliness. He wasn't a Liefe; the color of his hair was the result of aging. The way he spoke was also typical of an old man. At the same time, in contrast with his hair, he looked young, and he had few wrinkles on his face and hands.

"What is it?" he asked. "You look like you're in quite a hurry."

"I'm sure you know why I've come."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He feigned ignorance, but he was grinning and looked amused.

"Please refrain from joking around. You do know why, yes?" Filiel asked quietly, glaring at Theodore.

"Don't get so angry—it was just a little joke. Girls hate boys without a sense of humor."

At the word "hate," Filiel suppressed his anger at once. Theodore noticed this and laughed. "That girl's always been the only one who could make you this emotional."

Filiel's expression soured. He always maintained a calm attitude to keep his incredibly strong magical energy under control, and he only ever became angry, joyful, or agitated for one person.

"Grandfather, you stopped me from seeing her because you said she would be taken advantage of by those who wished to make me king," he said. "But now Alexis is crown prince, and those who were working behind our backs have been dealt with." He met Theodore's gaze with a serious look. "I can see her now, right?"

"It'll be hard to say it's safe until Alexis is king," Theodore said, still teasing him.

"Grandfather," Filiel said in a low, threatening voice. He had restrained himself for four years, and he had reached his limit.

"All right, all right, do as you please. If I tease you any more, I feel like you'll stare a hole right through me. But it won't be easy. You'll be up against the wicked Prince of Darkness and his twin henchmen."

"I-I know," Filiel said. His face stiffened when he was reminded of those people who he would never, under any circumstances, want to make his enemies. "Then, excuse me."

With their conversation over, Filiel left the room. His face softened, and he couldn't keep himself from smiling. He even had to hide his grin with his hand. Taking out the pendant, he joyfully recalled the face of the girl he'd been apart from for so long.

"Finally, we can see each other again."

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The day after Yui lost her pendant, the academy was on break. Luckily, there were quite a few students who diligently used their free time for their studies, so the campus was open and she was able to enter. However, no matter how much she expanded her search area, her pendant was nowhere to be found.

Disastrously, it even started raining. She searched from early morning until dusk, and by that evening, it was evident that she'd caught a cold. She couldn't afford to miss school though; the next day was the final day of exams.

"Yui, will you be okay?" Rouelle asked.

"I'll manage," Yui replied. She tried to soothe Rouelle's worry, but she felt sluggish and dizzy, and she had a high fever.

"By the way, I heard some upperclassmen summoned you after school on the day Trav called you," Finney said.

Rouelle jumped at Finney's information. "They did?!"

"Why?" Gayne asked, interested.

There shouldn't have been anyone around back then. Yui looked inquisitively at Finney, wondering how he knew, but this was a frequent occurrence with him, so she deliberately didn't ask.

"Some girls who are interested in the guy Rouelle kicked didn't like that I turned him down," Yui said.

"After all that guy's put you through... When will he finally be satisfied? I should've made it so he couldn't walk again!" Rouelle exclaimed with unconcealed rage. She looked almost as if she was ready to go after Nore again.

"So, what were you doing at the academy, on a weekend, in the rain, without an umbrella?" Finney asked Yui. His thorough grasp of her activity made Yui almost think that he had been watching her from somewhere.

"Why do you know that, Finney? Are you a stalker?!" Gayne exclaimed.

Yeah, seriously, where does he get his information from? Yui thought. She had pressed him countless times in the past, but he had never confessed to anything—he always just laughed and evaded the question.

Just then, their homeroom teacher, Travis, entered the classroom, spelling the end of their conversation. After that, they began the last day of testing.

When everyone was finished, Rouelle turned to Yui and said, "It's over. Are you still alive?"

Yui slumped over her desk in exhaustion. "Somehow," she mumbled.

"Seems like only just barely," Finney remarked.

"Should I escort you home?" Rouelle asked.

Yui was moved by Rouelle's kindness, but she still had something she had to do. "No thanks, I can make it home by myself. You can head out before me. I have something to do before I leave."

"Hold it! Don't go stopping off somewhere in your condition," Gayne said, exasperated.

"I'll be fine, really. See you later. Bye."

After parting from her worried-looking friends, she shakily dragged herself back to the task of searching for her pendant.

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When Yui left, Rouelle and Gayne stayed behind to hear Finney talk about what had happened to her.

"So Yui has a fever because of those girls?" Rouelle asked.

"Yeah. She was looking for something in the rain all day yesterday because of them."

"If she was searching all that time, couldn't she have asked us to help?" Gayne wondered aloud. He seemed to take issue with how reserved Yui had been.

"Yeah, but if she wanted us to search with her, she would've said so right away," Rouelle said.

Finney awkwardly smiled. "She's surprisingly stubborn." He understood Yui well.

"Anyway, those girls..." Rouelle had a dangerous gleam in her eyes.

"Absolutely. They'll have to receive a proper punishment..." Finney started cackling. "Mwa ha ha ha."

"I knew you'd say that, oho ho ho." Rouelle laughed along with him.

"Don't take it too far," Gayne cautioned.

The other students hurriedly evacuated the classroom—they were desperately trying to avoid looking at the ominous black aura emanating from that corner of the room.

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Filiel had been in a fidgety mood since the morning. He was in the fourth-year classroom for class A, in the north building. He had wanted to go see her as soon as the testing period ended, but he'd run into some unexpected interference.

"Hey, Fil. The tests are over, so won't you come visit for once?"

"Don't cling onto me, Eliza. It's dangerous," Filiel warned.

Eliza, the girl who had her arm entwined around Filiel's, was the daughter of Duke Favis. The duke was the younger brother of Filiel's father, which made her his cousin. She had distinctive fiery-red hair and eyes, and her flashy beauty wasn't diminished in the slightest by her standing next to Filiel. She called him by the nickname "Fil."

Filiel always wore specially made clothing—whether it was his school uniform or otherwise—that suppressed his magical energy. Still, few could come into contact with him even over his clothes because his magical energy was so powerful that it couldn't be completely insulated against. Eliza was one of those few. She had powerful magic, a trait common to members of the royal family. Still, direct contact was impossible for her—Filiel's magic was unsafe unless she cast defense magic on herself, which meant that she was limited by how long her spell lasted. Because she was around, Filiel was more attentive to his magic than normal, and he couldn't relax.

Eliza didn't let go of him; she paid no mind to his worries. "It's fine, I'm defending myself properly, and I still have plenty of magical energy left, so don't worry about it."

"I will worry about it. If something happens, it'll already be too late," Filiel replied. He was at a loss, and seemed incapable of coldly brushing her off.

That was Luca's cue to speak up. "Lady Eliza, that's enough. Any more and the

burden on Prince Filiel may grow."

Eliza reluctantly let go. "Fine. Drop by today, then."

Filiel shook his head. "I can't, not today. I have some important business to take care of."

"Business? What business?"

"It's nothing much. Zeke, Luca, you two can also go on ahead of me."

"I can't very well let you go alone," Luca objected. The grounds of the academy were secure, but as a guard specially assigned to Filiel, it was his duty to make sure the prince was never alone.

"It won't be an issue. Head back first, all right?"

Filiel immediately left the classroom without letting them get a word in edgewise. From there, he headed to the spot where the pendant had been found, which Zeke had told him about in detail. His heart was pounding. He had waited four long years in anticipation of this reunion.

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After Yui shakily exited her classroom, she went to the staff room to ask whether anything had been turned in, but the pendant wasn't there. She then went to recheck the area where the pendant had been thrown with the faint hope that she had missed it the first time. As she'd feared, it wasn't there either. To anyone else, it was just an ordinary pendant, but to her, it was her only, irreplaceable link to him. The unending search and her poor physical condition added up, and she gradually felt tears welling up in her eyes. At that moment, someone spoke to her.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

Startled, Yui turned around, and when she saw who it was, she momentarily stopped breathing.

They had met for the first time seven years ago at a gathering of nobles she'd been dragged to. Filiel had spoken to her as she'd hidden in a quiet place, far away from her father's insults, softly sobbing. She hadn't known who he was at the time, and she'd almost jumped in surprise when she later learned his

identity. From then on, he would occasionally slip out of the royal palace to meet her at their hideaway. He had encouraged and consoled her whenever she cried or felt depressed, and he'd always listened to her. In the end, he always brought a smile to her face.

Four years ago, he had given her the pendant and promised that he would come see her. Since then, however, he hadn't come—not once. Countless times, Yui had wondered why, but she never arrived at a definitive conclusion. He was a kind person...but what if he didn't want to see her anymore and couldn't bring himself to say so? She considered going to see him herself, but she knew that as a child with no ostensible connection to the royal family, she wouldn't be able to meet a prince, even if Layce was a count. Still, she couldn't give up on him.

And now, the person she had wanted to see for so long was standing in front of her. He had grown; he was no longer a boy, but his kind smile was the same as it had been four years ago. In his hand, he held the pendant that Yui had been searching for.

She stared at Filiel. It felt as if time had stopped.



"Why..."

"Why am I holding the pendant? Or why am I here?" Filiel asked.

"Well..." Yui heard the voices of several people nearby, and she cut her words short. They were getting nearer.

Filiel put the pendant in his breast pocket and knelt down in front of Yui, peering into her eyes. "We won't be able to talk for long here. Can I touch you?"

"Yeah," she replied, still confused.

Without suppressing his magic—and without even wearing his gloves—Filiel caressed Yui's cheek gingerly, with incredible tenderness. She wasn't affected at all. Normally, touching someone like this would've risked a fatality. After confirming that Yui was fine, Filiel smiled, satisfied. Yui was still standing. Filiel put his left hand behind her knees and his right around her back, then lifted her into his arms. He chanted an incantation and a magic circle appeared around his feet. The two of them began to shine, and Yui closed her eyes to shield them from the glare.

When the light faded, she opened her eyes to see that they were on the roof of the academy. She could only assume that Filiel had cast teleportation magic. He let her down from his arms, placed her back against the wall, then sat down opposite her.

Yui was completely bewildered. She just silently observed everything. Why is he here? Why does he have my pendant? Why didn't he come see me until now? Various emotions swirled around within her, from loneliness and sadness that he hadn't come to see her, to joy at his return. She had so much she wanted to ask, but the words just wouldn't come out.

"You wanted to ask me something?" Filiel said.

"El—" As Yui began to speak, she worried that he hadn't actually wanted to see her for all these years. This notion consumed her thoughts, and she stopped herself, thinking that she no longer had the right to say his name as she once had. "Why did Your Highness—?"

Filiel put his hand to her cheek and interrupted her, a dejected look on his face. "Can you call me what you used to?"

Yui cast her eyes downward, not knowing how to answer. Then she finally asked what she had been wondering all this time. "You promised. Why didn't you come see me? Is it because you didn't want to? Do you not like me anymore?"

"No!" Filiel hurriedly denied it. He noticed that he had unconsciously raised his voice, which had startled Yui, and he exhaled, trying to calm himself down. "No, that's not why. I wanted to see you too, but my grandfather told me not to. Some...things got in the way."

Yui raised her face and looked at him. "Things?"

"Yeah. You know about the succession dispute between me and my brother, right?"

Yui nodded slowly. Many of the students at the academy were children of nobles, so naturally, she heard about it often. She could safely say that pretty much every student was aware of it.

"The nobles were doing all sorts of things in secret, and none of them would have hesitated to do whatever it took to succeed—even if it meant committing murder. If I'd met with you and they had learned about you, they would have tried to use you, and you could've been hurt. Cecil and Carlo had their father, a count, to protect them, but you were a commoner without a noble to support you."

Yui knew now, and she understood why he had been worried. But there was one more thing she didn't yet get. "You could've just said something to me."

"They were after me too. If you knew, you would've worried, right? I talked with Cecil and Carlo, then decided that it would be better to stay silent rather than tell you. And my grandfather warned me against it too."

Yui was satisfied. Whenever she had asked her brothers about Filiel, they'd avoided answering her directly. She had assumed the worst, but now she finally knew that their silence had been for her sake.

"Oh, I see. It was for my sake," Yui said. "You never came to see me, so I

thought you didn't care about me anymore." She was filled with relief. She had been imagining the worst-case scenario and had feared Filiel's answer, but his response had assuaged her worries. Her eyes began to water; she couldn't hold back the tears that streamed down her face.

"I could never hate you, Yui. I thought you'd be lonely too, but I didn't know you'd be this sad. I should've said something. I'm sorry." Yui shook her head, and he reached up to wipe away her tears with a finger. "And now that our misunderstanding is cleared up, can you say my name like you used to?"

Yui stared at him. "El," she whispered. She used to say it all the time, without even thinking about it. Filiel smiled broadly, glad to finally hear the nickname that only Yui used for him. "El, El, El," Yui repeated, as if to confirm it.

Filiel hugged her tightly, and they both basked in the joy of their reunion.

Yui was relieved to find out that Filiel had also wanted to see her. As her tears abated, she remembered something else she had been bothered by. "Ah, my pendant!"

"Oh yeah, here," Filiel said, taking the pendant from his breast pocket.

"Why do you have it, EI?"

"My guards found it. It has the same design as mine, so they assumed I'd lost it. I thought you'd be crying over not being able to find it, so I came to deliver it." Filiel smiled mischievously, and Yui blushed. She had been crying, so she couldn't say anything in response. "Ha ha ha, now turn around."

With more than a hint of discontent, Yui turned her back to Filiel, and he draped the pendant around her neck. "Thanks," she said. With the return of her pendant, Yui relaxed, but then she suddenly started to feel ill. At that moment, she remembered—she had a fever. And now that she was aware of it, her poor health returned in force, and she felt shaky.

Filiel noticed her face flush and her breathing quicken. "Yui?"

"I think..." Yui said with difficulty, "I feel dizzy."

Panicking, Filiel put his hand to her forehead. "This is a bad fever! I thought you felt warm earlier. For now, let's go to the school infirmary," he said. He

tried to take her with him, then stopped. "If I take you, it'll cause a commotion later. Can you hold on until Cecil or Carlo get here? If it's too much for you, you can lean on me and sleep." He laid Yui's head on his lap, then took out his magical communicator.

Just then, Yui worriedly tugged on his sleeve. "Will we be able to meet up again?" she asked. Her consciousness was hazy because of the fever, and she was afraid that if she closed her eyes, she would never see him again.

"Don't worry, I'll come see you this time," Filiel replied in a kind voice. "I won't make you wait another four years. Sleep well, Yui."

"You will?"

"Yeah, I definitely will."

Yui smiled contentedly, then slowly closed her eyes. When Filiel was sure that she was asleep, he contacted Cecil.

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The next time Yui opened her eyes, she wasn't on the school rooftop—she was lying in bed. She sat up and looked around. It was her bed, and she was in her room at Layce's house. She tried to recall how she'd gotten there, but she had no memory of anything beyond talking with Filiel on the rooftop. As she reflected, someone entered the room.

"You're already awake? Are you okay?"

"Cecil?" Yui asked. "Why are you here? And why am I?"

"Filiel contacted me and said you had a fever. I was still at the academy, so I had George come pick you up. Grandpa and grandma have their bakery, so we brought you here."

"I see. Thanks, Cecil."

Cecil raised his arm and gently stroked her head. "It seems like you met with Filiel."

"Yeah. Sorry for asking you about him so much. It must've been hard."

"Not at all. I should be sorry for staying quiet. I couldn't meet with him at the

hideaway, but we're in the same class, so I heard pretty early on about what was going on. We agreed not to tell you, for your safety and peace of mind, even though we knew it might be wrong."

Very few knew that Yui and Filiel had sometimes met with each other as children. Not even their parents knew. Cecil and Carlo were aware of it, having been longtime acquaintances and classmates of his. Their first reaction to hearing that Filiel would stop seeing Yui entirely had been to press him with questions. They had been satisfied with his explanation, and they had agreed not to say anything to Yui.

"Apparently, the succession issue is solved, so you'll be able to see him a lot more from now on," Cecil said.

"Yeah." Yui smiled bashfully.

Seeing how cute his sister's smile was, Cecil mumbled, "Hmm. Somehow, this is annoying. Maybe I'll interfere a little bit."

Luckily, Yui didn't hear him.

## **Chapter Six: Questionable Test Scores**

While recovering from her cold, Yui spent her time at Layce's house. She didn't want to be a burden on her grandparents, who also had the bakery to worry about. Yui didn't know who had told him, but on the first day of her illness, Layce returned from work earlier than usual. He fussed over her more than even her mother did, and George had to drive him out of her room because he was in the way. The next morning, he whined about not wanting to go to work, and George had to chase him out the front door. Over the following days, Carlo and Yui's friends, who had heard about her cold from Cecil, came to visit. Eventually, Yui recovered.

Upon arriving at school after her period of absence, Yui saw that the results of the latest tests had been posted. Other students had also come to the bulletin board to search for their names. Some expressed joy that their scores had risen, and others were visibly depressed that theirs had fallen. Yui pushed her way through the crowd to check her own ranking.

"All right! I knew I could do it if I just put my mind to it!" Gayne cheered after seeing his above-average score.

"Quiet, Gayne. Don't shout—it's embarrassing," said Rouelle.

"So what? Now my allowance won't be cut. By the way, how'd you do?"
Rouelle paused. "Let's move on."

Gayne hesitated a moment before muttering, "Okay." He and Yui didn't question Rouelle any further.

They went to look at the top scorers and saw that the list was almost entirely dominated by the names of students in class A. But then the four of them spotted Finney's name second from the top.

"Whoa, Finney. You're in second place!" Gayne exclaimed.

"Oh, he is. Besides him, almost all the other top scores come from students in class A," Rouelle said. Neither she nor Yui were very surprised by Finney's

placement, and Yui acted as if it were only natural.

"I bet everyone in class A is gritting their teeth in frustration at losing to someone in class H who they'd normally look down on," Finney said with a nasty grin.

Even Gayne was put off by this. "Dude, that's a bit much."

As they talked and looked at the results, someone came up behind Yui and spoke.

"Yui."

"Mark. It's been a while," she said. Mark was a student in class I. He was a quiet, timid-looking boy, and he was physically weak. Classes H and I were often combined, and as they were fellow students who often sat out lessons, Yui frequently spoke with him.

"I hear you took some time off because you had a cold. Are you feeling better now?" Mark asked.

"Yeah, I'm right as rain."

"I see. That's good to hear. Anyway, this is incredible. I've never even heard of someone in class H scoring so well."

"Finney's pretty smart."

"I wonder why someone like him is in class H. He could definitely make it in a higher-level class, even with just his written test scores."

"Now that you mention it, you might be right." For the first time, Yui thought that Finney's placement was a bit odd. She wasn't the only one; Gayne put a hand to his chin, pondering something.

"That's true..." Gayne said. "He took the entrance exam like normal, so he should've had good scores, but he's in class H. Yui made it to the semifinals in the tournament and got a recommendation, but she's in class H too. And Rouelle is basically an expert at combining martial arts and magical strengthening. Anyone would say that she's strong enough to make it in class B at least."

"But what about you?" Rouelle retorted. "You're pretty stupid but you're

good at magic, so class B...might be difficult, but class C wouldn't be out of the question."

Yui had heard that class A was fiercely competitive, and if anything, she was glad that she hadn't been placed there. But once she started to really consider it, she couldn't help but think that it was suspicious—they were *all* in class H. And they weren't just flattering each other; every member of their group was skilled enough to make it into one of the high-ranking classes. Sure, class A required excellent scores on both the practical and written tests, but anyone with good results on their practical tests alone could get into class C. With their natural aversion to tests, Rouelle and Gayne would never be able to make it in class A, but Yui thought they were strong enough to slip into class C.

At that moment, as if they'd all hit upon the same idea, Yui, Rouelle, and Gayne looked at Finney.

"You're not pulling something, are you?" Gayne asked, a doubtful look in his eyes.

Finney smiled. After a pause, he said, "No, nothing." He denied it, but his behavior seemed suspicious.

"Why'd you hesitate there?"

"C'mon, Gayne, you can't ask him like that," Rouelle chided. "I'll rephrase it. You threatened someone, didn't you?" Her voice was confident.

"Of course not! Aha ha ha!" Finney grinned. "It wasn't a threat—just a teensy little request."

"I knew you were up to something! Spit it out!" Gayne yelled, grabbing Finney by the collar and shaking him back and forth. "How'd you do it?!"

"Aha ha ha ha!" Finney didn't try to answer him at all.

"A magic academy has a decent amount of influence, right? After all, it's a school for educating talented people who go on to work for the government," Yui said, trying to get some sort of confirmation. She doubted that a single student could affect how classes were divided up, but then an image of Layce's face flashed across her mind. *Hold on, no way.* She shook her head to erase him from her thoughts.

"Haaah..." Rouelle sighed. "So you secretly manipulated something to put us all together in the same class." She gave up on pursuing the issue further.

"If we were in class A, we'd be competing all the time, and we wouldn't be able to have fun like we do now. Don't you want to enjoy your time at the academy?" Finney asked, grinning nastily.

They gave up on convincing Finney otherwise, though not without feeling somewhat complicit themselves. The group turned back to the bulletin board to check Yui's score, and there, Rouelle noticed something.

"You scored better than usual, Yui. Why's that?" she asked.

Finney gazed at the bulletin board and nodded in agreement. "You're right. Her scores are always a bit worse than average."

Yui's face twisted sourly. "I had a fever on the last day, and my mind was hazy, so I don't really remember anything. Judging from my total score, I think my score that day might've been close to perfect."

"You felt hazy, but you scored better?" Mark asked, confused.

"Yui purposefully lowers her scores to get a grade slightly worse than average. She might not look it, but she's the smartest out of any of us," Gayne said.

"Huh? Why do you do that?"

"It's annoying otherwise," Yui flatly stated. Whenever any student from class H scored well, it was basically a guarantee that class A students would bother them. Finney enjoyed it, but Yui very much preferred to spend her unoccupied time, if she had any, in the library doing research. She had limited years at the academy, and she simply wanted to keep anything troublesome to a minimum. That was why she had entered the academy in the first place.

"That's just the kind of person she is," Gayne said, wearily shrugging his shoulders.

"Whenever I had good grades in middle school, there were always a bunch of people who bothered me, complaining that I was only a Liefe. Those people are annoying, so I don't want to stand out. It gets in the way of my reading," Yui explained. Now that she was able to see Filiel again, she was feeling somewhat

rushed. The research she had been doing for him wasn't producing the results she'd expected. Also, being in a class with a laid-back teacher like Travis was perfect for her because she could ditch class to hole herself up in the library, and he never got too angry with her.

Finney looked troubled, as if he was thinking about something. "There might be a problem, then."

"With what?" Yui asked, tilting her head in confusion.

"If a student who's always maintained below-average grades suddenly gets a good score on only the last day of testing, the teachers will probably think it's suspicious," Rouelle explained.

Yui nodded. "Ah, you could be right."

"They might even say you cheated," Rouelle said. By now, everyone had realized what Finney was worried about. Rouelle tried to propose a solution. "Maybe you should say you're good at just *that* subject and tell them you studied hard...?"

Finney shook his head. "She scored below average on the entrance exams and the midterms, so that excuse won't work. The tests this time around were designed to be more difficult than the midterms too. No matter how much you study, you can't improve that much, so it'll be a hard sell."

As they spoke, their homeroom teacher, Travis, came walking toward them. "Hey, Curtis, do you have a moment?" he asked from down the corridor.

Yui had an incredibly reluctant look on her face. "Can I run?" she murmured.

"If you want them to be even more suspicious of you," Rouelle replied.

Yui felt deflated.

Travis reached them and began speaking to Yui. It sounded like he was forcing the words out. "There's something I want to talk to you about. Can you come to the student guidance office for a bit?"

Yui paused for a moment, then said, "Yes, I can."

Everyone could guess that this was about her test scores.

"Okay, take this," Finney said, handing Yui a small object and smiling like he was plotting something.

"What is it?" She examined the object and saw that it was an egg-shaped magic device, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. With the knowledge she had gained from researching magic, she instantly knew exactly what it did.

"Just in case. At a time like this, I just know he'll try to butt in. Make sure you press the button—right here. It's configured to forward everything to me, so even if something goes wrong, you won't have to worry."

Seeing that Finney had the same device, Yui understood what he was getting at. She nodded but hoped that she wouldn't need to use it.

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Yui followed Travis to the student guidance office. She was let inside the room, which contained only a large, rectangular desk and enough chairs to seat everyone.

"Take a seat," Travis said, and Yui sank down onto a chair.

Besides herself and Travis, her assistant homeroom teacher, the student guidance counselor, and the magic history teacher were there. Her assistant homeroom teacher, Seyla, was stern-looking and strict, but she was reliable. She got angry at her students when they deserved it but lauded them in equal measure whenever they did something worthy of praise. The student guidance counselor, Berg, was also the homeroom teacher for class A. He had a large build, and his frightening face made Yui think of some sort of criminal. He was difficult to approach, but his mild-mannered, obliging personality had earned him unexpected popularity among the students.

The third teacher was the real problem. Grott, the ill-natured magic history teacher, loved to see others fail; he took great pleasure in asking his classes questions that he knew students hadn't studied and then insulting whoever couldn't answer. Many students—and more than a few teachers—often spoke among themselves about him with incredulity, wondering how such a person had become an educator. Grott was quick to resort to waving his noble authority around, which prevented any commoner teachers from reprimanding him too harshly. It was also rumored that his noble father had twisted a few

arms to get him his job.

Whenever a student messed up or caused problems and was called to the student guidance office, Grott was happy to waltz in and meddle, even if he wasn't their homeroom teacher. This was exactly what Finney had worried about. When Yui saw that Grott was present, she frowned, surreptitiously put her hand in her pocket, and then activated the magic item Finney had given her.

"Do you know why we called you here?" Berg asked, scrutinizing her.

"No, not at all," Yui replied. She wasn't going to give him an opening. And because she had always been relatively expressionless, reading her emotions was near impossible.

"It's about the recent tests. Something minor caught my eye."

"Your test scores on only the last day were almost perfect," Seyla explained. "Considering your previous scores, it's hard to imagine that you earned such high marks all of a sudden."

"It's not that we think you'd do anything untoward," Travis said, "but we're just checking, okay?"

The scene was playing out exactly as Finney had predicted it would—they suspected her of academic dishonesty.

"I didn't cheat. My scores just happened to be good," Yui insisted.

This was the truth, but their doubtful expressions remained unchanged. Suddenly, Grott raised his voice and energetically denounced her, spittle almost flying from his mouth. "Don't play dumb! There's no way you could get this score after your previous tests!" he yelled. "Instead of wasting time talking to her, we should just deal with her quickly."

"Grott, don't be too hasty," Berg said. His cool composure was exactly what made him fit to be the student guidance counselor.

Despite this, Grott just heaped on more pressure. "You're too soft! A class H failure could never get a score like that. She *had* to have cheated. It'd be stranger if she didn't!"

He was determined to pin this cheating accusation on her. Yui hadn't had any

run-ins with him before, but every student had heard the rumors about him. Judging from his nasty personality, he probably just wanted to feel superior by antagonizing the diligent, weak-looking Yui until she broke down into tears and begged for forgiveness. Quite a few students had been on the receiving end of his abuse, but he never bothered those who were attractive or whose families were more powerful than his. He only ever tormented those beneath him.

I'm surprised someone like him has been employed here for so long, Yui thought, her gaze becoming colder. "Do you have any evidence?" she asked Grott. He seemed frustrated that she was still calm. She hadn't cheated, so of course there was no evidence. "I don't want you to assume that I'm guilty without any evidence. I haven't done anything wrong."

Grott slapped the desk. "Confess already!" he shouted, trying to intimidate her.

Yui didn't budge. She grew angrier at his unwillingness to listen, though she didn't let it show on her face. *Just who exactly decided to hire a guy like this?* she wondered. "If you think that I'll listen to you because you're yelling at me, you're dead wrong," she said with a glacial look.

Grott momentarily flinched, but he was ultimately confident in his own superiority. Unable to hide his irritation, he raised his voice even further. "Do you think you can take that kind of attitude with a teacher?! You're just a Liefe, but I hear that you made it to the semifinals last year. You did something there too, didn't you?! I can't trust someone like you. You must've cheated!" In the process of repeating his previous allegations, he even shoehorned in an incident from her past.

Yui felt like sighing deeply, but before she could, the other teachers stepped in to mediate.

"Hey, this and that are two separate things," Travis told him.

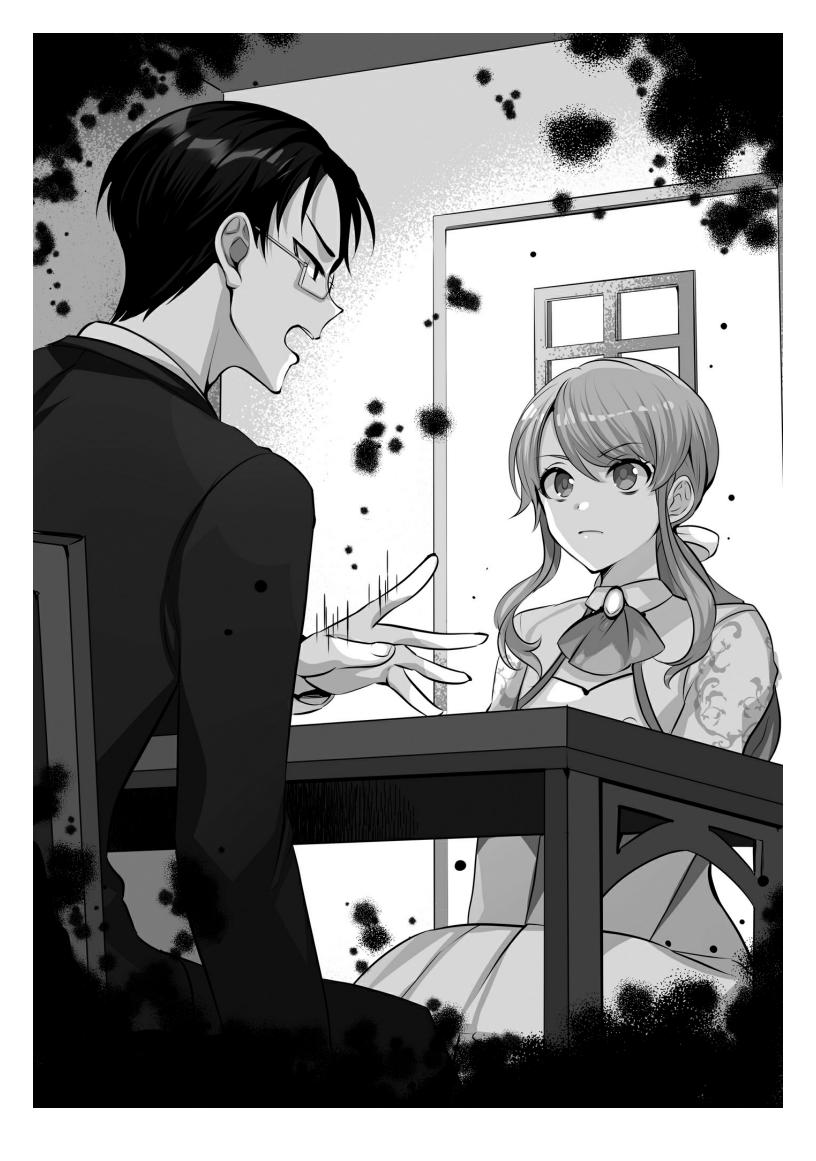
"Cut it out, Grott!" Berg said sharply. "We called this meeting so we could hear her out."

"He's right, and it's true that we don't have any evidence," Seyla added.

Grott butted in again. "What are you saying? She has to have done it. Who

needs evidence? That will take care of itself. I *know* she cheated!" He just kept repeating his talking points in a parrotlike manner.

So much for their backup, Yui thought. Grott was even recklessly declaring that he didn't need any evidence—he'd already decided that she had cheated.



At that, the other teachers hurriedly scolded Grott.

"We do need evidence," Travis asserted.

Berg looked even angrier, and he was rubbing his temples. "I'm asking you to just shut up for a bit."

"Please calm down," Seyla said.

My condolences that you have to deal with this problem child as your colleague, Yui thought, feeling some pity for the other teachers.

"Shut up! Don't order me around!" Grott yelled.

I'd rather you fought each other someplace else. Yui had a distant look in her eyes as she observed the argument escalating in front of her. This is so annoying. I want to go home. I think it's time I get him to destroy himself. She checked the item in her pocket and then spoke. "So, Mr. Grott, you're saying you'll lie in order to get charges to stick to an innocent person without any evidence against them?"

Grott lost his temper, all without knowing that Yui had him right where she wanted him. "Yeah, I will! No matter how much you protest, if a noble like me says so, it is so. If you cry and apologize now, I might think about not expelling you. If not, then I'll show you what happens when you stand up to a noble."

Yui frowned. "Do you think you'll get away with that? Don't tell me that you've done the same thing to others."

"Ha ha ha!" Grott began to talk cheerfully. "There were a few stupid, impertinent brats like you who defied me, but in the end, they all came crying to me for forgiveness. If only commoners knew that they should be happily obeying us." He smiled crudely.

You're the stupid one here, Yui thought, dumbfounded. He wasn't the only teacher there. If the trusted Berg, Travis, and Seyla denied that she cheated, Grott shouting about it wouldn't change a thing. And if even the teachers disliked him, who would actually listen?

He was using his nobility as a cudgel against her, but Yui was the daughter of a count—though not many people knew that about her. Him repeating "noble,

noble" over and over again was a good sign that he didn't know about her background. Then again, his ignorance couldn't be held against him. Only a few noble children were in the classes he labeled as failures. Since nobles benefited from receiving an elite education starting at an early age, almost all noble students had been placed in class C or higher, in the north building. Grott might not have known about her upbringing, but he had taken things way too far. Yui had heard that his victims had all been in lower-level classes, so their only option might've been to give up and meekly accept his abuse.

Grott didn't even seem to care whether Yui had cheated or not. He only wanted to make her submit. He was either quite furious, or he simply didn't know just how much of a slipup he had just made. His smirk told her what he really thought—that if he continued to threaten her, she would eventually beg him for forgiveness.

But now she had some evidence of her own. Contrary to his expectations, Yui smiled and chuckled slightly, glad to finally be putting an end to this. Everyone in the room looked at her suspiciously.

"What, have you finally noticed how foolish you've been?" Grott asked.

What type of misunderstanding is that? It's about time for him to exit stage left, Yui thought. "No, I'm just laughing at how stupid you are."

"What?!"

Yui took Finney's device out of her pocket and placed it on the desk.

"What's that?"

"It's a magic device that records sound."

Everyone gulped, surprised by what Yui had said.

"I've recorded the entire conversation up until now," Yui continued. "You said that, without any evidence, you'd frame me for cheating. And you happily told me about the times you've done it in the past. Just who do you think will be the one charged after I publicly release this?"

Grott must have realized that what he'd said could be an issue for him because he leaped at the device on the desk, dropped it on the floor, and then

stomped on it with a magically charged foot. The device shattered.

"What are you doing?!" Travis shouted hoarsely. But it was too late; the device was already broken beyond repair.

Grott sneered at Yui. "Now you have no evidence."

"Unfortunately, that was a waste of your time," Yui said matter-of-factly, persistently indifferent to Grott's demeanor. "The recording has already been forwarded to another device, which my friend has possession of. Even if you destroy this one, the evidence remains."

Grott quickly recovered from the realization that destroying the evidence had been useless, and he returned to flaunting his authority. "Hmph. And what about it? My family is nobility. I can just suppress any evidence you have!"

The other teachers looked at him with frustrated contempt, but they were unable to do anything, since they weren't nobles themselves. Yui would be the one to bring him down.

"I'm impressed that a teacher like you can say such things and ignore your own flaws," she said, clapping sarcastically.

"What about it?!"

Yui's voice rang out in the tense room. "Suppressing the evidence won't be possible."

"Oh, it will! I became a teacher because of my status. All I have to do is call upon my family once again!" It seemed like the rumor was true—he had gotten his job because of his family's influence.

"Do you know the name of the prime minister of Garlant?" Yui asked.

"Huh? What about him?" Grott snapped, a foolish look on his face. He hadn't understood what Yui was implying.

The other teachers were taken aback by the sudden change in topic. Travis turned to Yui in confusion. "What's this about all of a sudden, Curtis?"

Yui remained silent, but then Berg spoke, realization dawning on his face. "If I remember correctly, it's Sir Layce Curtis."

"That's right. Now, I have a question. What's my name?" Yui asked.

"Huh? You're Yui..." Travis trailed off for a moment. "Ah!" he exclaimed, finally understanding what Yui was trying to say. Berg and Seyla couldn't hide their astonishment either. When Grott realized the predicament he was in, he instantly paled.

"The current prime minister is my father," Yui said. "So, it'll be impossible for you to use your authority to suppress evidence." If anything, Grott would be the one being suppressed by authority.

Grott's face had gone past pale and was now a pure, chalky white. By trying to frame the daughter of the feared Prince of Darkness, Grott had made an enemy of someone powerful.

Yui had always hated those who flaunted their authority, but it was most effective to oppose those types of people with authority of her own, so Layce had given her the okay to use his name if necessary. She was up against Grott, so she had used it without any reserve. "I'm not in the wrong here," she said. "And since you're using your authority, I'm merely using mine."

"You cheated, and now you're trying to force me to give in?!" Grott shouted.

"You can't say that after you just tried to coerce me into silence. Besides, how many times did you repeat that you don't have any evidence? And yet you're still trying to say that I cheated."

Grott trembled, looking quite afraid. After all, he had just picked a fight with the daughter of a man who absolutely no one in the kingdom would want to go up against. Layce dearly loved Yui, so it was impossible to say what might happen to Grott.

"I-I don't know anything!" Grott cried out. "Someone asked me to be here. I have nothing to do with this!" He hurriedly got up and left the room, bumping into his chair and the door on the way out.

"Hey!" Travis yelled, but Grott had already disappeared.

Now that Grott was gone, the room was silent, so Yui could finally speak. "That's what he says, but did you really want him to be here?" she quietly inquired.

"No, he just tagged along without asking," Travis replied.

The teachers sighed deeply, looking drained, which made Yui instinctively say, "Thanks."

"I can't believe this..." Travis muttered. Yui felt a renewed sense of pity for him—he had to deal with Grott as a coworker.

Berg looked at her sternly. "What will you do with the recording?"

"That was just a threat. If he doesn't do anything, I won't either."

The teachers sighed with relief. They had, at the very least, avoided summoning the Prince of Darkness.

"I see. Then, to return to our original topic, why did you score so well only on the last day of testing?"

He hasn't forgotten about that yet? Yui thought. She clenched her fist, impressed by how serious Berg was. "I just had the guts to do well!"

Berg paused, then asked, "Did you really think that would convince us?"

"No, I didn't," Yui answered nonchalantly.

Travis hung his head. "Curtis...because of that idiot, I'm tired. Talk, so we can end this already."

"I wasn't the one who made you all tired. But I agree with you, Trav. I'm tired too." Yui decided it was time to stop playing around and tell the truth. "My scores on the last day weren't beyond my capabilities; up until now, I've been intentionally making sure my scores weren't too high."

As she expected, the teachers listened to her. Berg took her seriously and didn't assume that she was lying. "In other words, you could score well if you wanted to, but you're purposefully not doing so? Then why did you do so well on the last day?"

Yui answered without missing a beat. "I had a cold and a fever that day, so my mind was hazy, and I forgot to answer some questions incorrectly."

"Hmm, so for the other tests, you deliberately answered questions incorrectly. This is rather sudden, and it's hard to swallow, but..."

"If you still don't think I'm telling the truth, please quiz me. You'll believe me if I answer correctly, right?"

The still-incredulous teachers gave her a sequence of problems that were more difficult than those on the test, and when she answered all of them correctly, they had no choice but to accept what she'd said.

"If you can answer all of those, then take the tests normally," Travis said, exasperated.

"I don't want to. If I score better than class A, people will come pick fights with me to preserve their egos."

When they heard this, the teachers looked like they didn't know how to respond.

"Anyway, sorry for doubting you," said Berg. "You can go now."

"Then, excuse me," Yui said. She left the room and found her friends waiting for her outside.

"How'd it go?" Rouelle asked. "I think I saw Grott burst out of the room earlier."

"It turned out fine."

"That's good to hear, Yui," said Mark. "I was worried when I heard that Grott was in there with you." He looked sincerely relieved. Grott was truly infamous.

"Thanks for being concerned about me. The device Finney gave me was a real help, so also, thanks for that."

"Not at all," Finney said with a refreshed smile. "If anything, I should be thanking you. I've always wanted some dirt on Grott. We don't have him as a teacher, so it was pretty hard to come by." Everyone else's faces looked stiff.

"Don't take it too far," Gayne said.

"Of course not. It's my policy to squeeze every last drop from them, keeping them alive and tormenting them as much as possible. Ha ha ha!"

Rouelle raised her hand and looked like she was having difficulty speaking. "Sorry, but he might be gone before you've had the chance to squeeze anything

out of him."

"Why's that?"

"Well, uh, when I thought Yui was in trouble, I ended up reporting it to Lord Layce. Whoops." Rouelle laughed awkwardly. Hearing that, everyone looked uneasy—everyone except for Mark, who didn't know Layce.

"Wh-What have you done?!" Gayne exclaimed.

Yui's expression was tense. "Did papa say anything?"

"He's coming right away," Rouelle replied.

"He is?!" That was a problem. His pathing was akin to that of a hurricane. And she'd also *just* told the teachers that she wouldn't do anything.

"Then it doesn't look like I'll get much use out of this," Finney said, disappointedly putting his magic device back in his pocket.

Gayne looked afraid. "You've summoned a terror upon them."

"How sad..." Yui remarked. She wasn't talking about Grott, but about the other teachers who would inevitably get wrapped up in the whole mess.

"Well, is it really all that bad?" Rouelle was beside herself trying to justify her actions. "Grott has hurt a bunch of people."

They continued to chat as they returned to their classroom. Suddenly Yui stopped walking and looked outside.

"What is it?" Rouelle asked.

"You can go on ahead," Yui replied.

Gayne was confused. "Huh? Class is just about to start."

"I'm skipping, so make up some excuse for me." At that, Yui parted from her friends and ran to the school roof, which she had just been staring at. She had seen someone she recognized up there.

She opened the door to the roof and glanced around. The person she had expected to see was there. "I knew it was you, El."

"What is it, Yui?" Filiel asked, surprised by his friend's sudden appearance.

"I saw someone on the roof, and I had a feeling it was you, so I came to check." She sat down next to him. "Do you always come up here when you skip class?"

"Yeah, if I'm cutting class, I'm generally here."

There were issues with a prince saying something like "cutting class," but it was tolerated in Filiel's case. It was mentally draining for him to be on constant alert in a crowded place like the academy's campus. If he got too tired, he had problems manipulating magic, so he had tacit approval to skip class and go be by himself for a while. This was the only time the two guards who were always attached to him ever left him alone—on the off chance that he lost control of his magic, being assured that he wouldn't hurt anyone.

"Maybe I'll start cutting class to come here now and then," Yui said.

"Is that okay? Class is about to start."

"I'm in class H, so it's no problem if I miss some." Yui could say that precisely because she had the confidence that she wouldn't fall behind in her studies if she skipped a class or two. Besides, she regularly cut class to do research in the library. She sighed loudly, prompting a question from Filiel.

"What's wrong? You seem pretty tired."

"Yeah, a few things happened just now." She spoke about the meeting she'd been forced to attend, and Filiel's shoulders shook with laughter, which annoyed her. "I'm not joking. It was a real pain."

"Sorry. Grott, you say? I know that teacher well. Back when I had just enrolled, he tried to pick a fight with Cecil."

Yui shuddered. "With Cecil, of all people?! I thought he only targeted students weaker than him."

"Well, Cecil is a quiet, gentle-looking honor student, so Grott probably didn't think he'd fight back. After Cecil beat him until he couldn't walk, he used some fangirls of his to embarrass Grott in front of a crowd of students. Since then, Grott runs away whenever he even sees Cecil..." Filiel had a distant look in his eyes. "Back then, I made extra sure to never get on Cecil's bad side."

In contrast to his appearance, Cecil was truly frightening whenever someone made him angry. He was incredibly smart, and he used his intelligence to pinpoint and utterly obliterate his opponent where it hurt them the most.

Filiel continued. "Next time, you can just say you're Cecil's sister. But with the Prince of Darkness as your father, I can't imagine he'll bother you again anyway."

"Papa said he was coming right away after he heard what happened."

"So is he?"

"Yeah."

Filiel's face froze, and he went silent.

"Why are you cutting class on this specific rooftop, El?" Yui asked. "It's a bit of a walk from the north building."

Filiel seemed like he was having trouble speaking.

"EI?"

He covered his face with a hand. "How do I put it? I thought I might be able to see you if I was here," he said with some difficulty. He was blushing faintly. Secretly gazing at her from afar, hoping to catch even a single glimpse of her—there was only one word to describe that behavior.

"They call that being a stalker, El."

He groaned in dismay. Yui giggled, thinking that he looked funny, but she was also happy to learn again that he wanted to see her just as much as she wanted to see him.

She lay down on her side on the roof, and Filiel watched her, calmly smiling.

"It's almost summer break," Yui remarked.

"Yeah."

Yui seemed lonely. "We won't be able to see each other like this during summer."

"Not at school. We should go somewhere once the break starts," Filiel suggested, smiling at her.

"This time, it's a promise." Yui didn't think that he'd make her wait another four years, but she still held a bit of a grudge against him.

With that in mind, Filiel spoke confidently. "Absolutely. You're going to the joint training camp, right? I'm going too, so we can be together then."

Yui excitedly sat up. "You're going too?"

"Yeah."

"Then we should go to Bahal and check out the town together."

"I'd love to, but crowded places are difficult for me, remember?"

"Don't worry. I'll think of something."

"That'd be great, but if you're too close with me, people around you might raise a fuss." If it became known that Yui was on good terms with Filiel, a bunch of people might approach her looking to make connections with the royal family.

"I don't like it when people pester me, but I'm not doing anything wrong. And Rouelle and Finney will drive them away, so no worries!" The reason she hadn't included Gayne wasn't because she thought he was useless, but because he was a bit unreliable.

As they spent time idly chatting, they saw a carriage racing through the school gate. Yui groaned. "Ah, that might be papa."

"Terrifying."

"Later, El. I'll go meet with him. I don't think he'll stop if I don't."

Filiel smiled awkwardly. "Yeah, good luck." He saw her off as she left the roof.

Yui headed straight to the staff room, and when she got there, the Prince of Darkness had already arrived. Layce regained his composure after she mediated the situation, though a short time later, a single teacher departed from the academy. Yui felt horribly apologetic for causing the teachers so much trouble; it would be a digression to add that many teachers thanked her for making Grott quit.

## **Chapter Seven: Potential Fiancées**

It was the weekend, and since there was no school, Filiel was home at the royal palace. He felt depressed. Several hours earlier, his brother, Alexis, had called for him and asked that he keep the company of Charlotte, the daughter of the visiting Marquess Chamberly, while Alexis and the marquess were in a meeting. Filiel had tried wordlessly signaling with his eyes that he absolutely couldn't do it, but Alexis had just smiled and ignored his protests.

So far, Filiel had shown Charlotte the garden. He had no clue what else to do; Alexis was normally the one who entertained guests. Filiel's powerful magical energy had an effect on people and things around him, so he kept the time he spent with others to an absolute minimum. As royalty, he had been educated on how to properly socialize from an early age, but he rarely attended parties. And though he could effortlessly smile around others, he was running on all cylinders trying to keep his conversation with Charlotte from growing awkward —a far cry from his brother, who was a wonderful conversationalist. The garden had seemed like it would stimulate conversation, but it was taking everything he had to keep his smile from looking stiff.

"My apologies," Filiel said. "I'm poor at speaking. Your time here would be much more enjoyable if my brother were available to show you around."

"Not at all!" Charlotte countered vehemently. "Your Highness is incredibly kind, and I'm pleased to be able to converse with you like this."

"Thank you. It's a relief to hear that." He offered Charlotte a manufactured smile, and she blushed.

They continued their inconsequential conversation until finally, at long last, Alexis and Marquess Chamberly showed up.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I hope my daughter wasn't too much of a bother," said the marquess.

"Not a bit. I had a wonderful time," Filiel replied.

"Ha ha ha, that is good to hear. If there happens to be another opportunity, I hope my daughter will be able to meet with you again, Your Highness. Now, it is time for us to take our leave."

"Your Highnesses, Crown Prince Alexis and Prince Filiel, goodbye." Charlotte bowed elegantly and then left with her father.

Filiel smiled as he saw them off, but as soon as they disappeared from sight, he put his hand on a pillar and exhaled deeply. "Haaaah."

"Mwa ha ha, good work. Now that you've had a chance to talk with her, what do you think?" Alexis asked.

"I don't know what to tell you. Nothing in particular, I suppose." He didn't know why Alexis was asking him this.

Charlotte's respectful replies and courteous demeanor had seemed very practiced, perhaps because of her diligent father. She had left a good impression on Filiel—despite his powerful magical energy, she hadn't shown any timidity around him. Other nobles often looked at him fearfully or flattered him more than would be called for by his position as prince, but Charlotte didn't do any of that. Still, that was all. Besides that, she'd acted just like any other ordinary lady.

"Wouldn't it have been better if someone else had shown her around?" Filiel asked.

"What are you saying? There'd be no point to that. Your meeting with her was to arrange your marriage."

Filiel was shocked. "Huh, marriage?!"

"What, you didn't know?"

"I didn't. This is the first time I'm hearing about it. What is the meaning of this?!"

"Apparently, it was uncle's suggestion. He told father that your fiancée could either be a lady of the Chamberly family or Eliza. Today you met with Charlotte, and at dinner tonight, uncle plans to bring it up with Eliza. I guess you didn't hear about it."

"Not at all," Filiel said, still reeling from the surprise.

"Well, you can just ask father about the details at dinner."

Filiel seemed almost in a trance. "Fiancée..." he whispered.

Alexis smiled awkwardly and muttered to himself, "I guess Charlotte won't work out." Then he said to Filiel, "They want to prioritize your choice in the matter, so there's no stress."

"That's easier said than done," Filiel replied. They could've at least told me first, he thought as he walked down a corridor with his brother.

"So are you not interested in Eliza? She's been working really hard to be able to touch you."

Judging by his words, Filiel could tell that Alexis knew about Eliza's feelings. Not that they were hard to figure out; Eliza's obvious advances had already turned her love for Filiel into common knowledge among the royal family.

"I've noticed her feelings, but honestly, she's like a sister to me," Filiel said. He wasn't interested in Eliza or anyone else his family might present to him; there was only one person he wanted by his side for the rest of his life. He hadn't yet conveyed his feelings to her, but even if she felt the same, the dreadful Prince of Darkness was lurking behind her. And for royalty, marriage was another aspect of politics, so he would have to abide by whatever the king ordered of him. Honestly, he was so depressed that he wanted to run away from it all. But he wouldn't give up so easily. For now, he was hesitating and wondering how best to persuade his father and his uncle.

Filiel and Alexis entered the room. Inside, their grandfather Theodore, their father Bernard and his wife Alicia, and their uncle Gerard and his daughter Eliza had already taken their seats.

"Apologies for being late," said Filiel.

"Fil, over here." Eliza offered him the seat next to her. He sat down.

As soon as he was seated, his mother, the queen consort Alicia, asked, "So, how was it, Filiel?" She looked cute, almost like a young girl, and she hardly seemed like a woman who had two grown-up children. Her gentle manner of

speaking matched her appearance.

"I have nothing to remark upon. However..." Filiel turned and looked at Bernard questioningly. "Father, I hadn't heard anything about me getting engaged."

"I thought I'd make it a surprise," Bernard said with a hearty laugh.

Filiel lost all desire to be angry. "I certainly was surprised..."

"So, how was she? She's still only sixteen, but she'll be quite a beauty in the future."

Before Filiel could answer, Alexis explained the situation to Bernard. "He wasn't all that impressed, father."

"Hmm, I see. Then I suppose we should go with Eliza after all," Bernard said.

So Eliza was father's first choice too, Filiel thought uneasily. His expression turned serious. "Before we decide anything, can I ask you a question, father?"

Bernard turned to face him. In contrast to how jovial he'd looked earlier, the king was now serious as well.

"Is this a political marriage?" Filiel asked.

Bernard paused for a moment. "What would you do if I said it was?"

"I am royalty. If you said this arrangement was politically necessary, I would obey."

Bernard smiled awkwardly at Filiel's unflinching gaze. "Don't worry," he said. His tone shifted, and he now sounded like a kind father. "This isn't about politics. I was just hoping to do something for you."

"For me?"

"That's right," his uncle Gerard said.

"I've made you endure a great deal during your life," Bernard said. "You're my child, but my father was the one who raised you. I can't even hug you because I don't have enough magical energy." Alicia looked gloomy. "But Eliza can touch you. In the future, you two might even be able to have children together. We don't want you to give up on the happiness of having a family."

Filiel was grateful that his father and his uncle were showing consideration in regard to his future. But he was simultaneously relieved that it was no longer necessary to convince them to let him marry as he pleased. "Thank you. If I'm allowed to marry as I wish, and not for political reasons, then I have no intention of getting engaged to the Chamberly lady or Eliza."

Eliza stood up and shouted, "Why not?!"

"Eliza, be quiet for a moment," Gerard said reprovingly. "Can I ask you why, Filiel?"

After making sure that Eliza sat down, Filiel put his honest feelings into words. "I can only see Eliza as a little sister, so I can't imagine marrying her." *I have to firmly refuse*, he thought. If he didn't, Gerard, who wanted him and Eliza to get married, would gradually wear him down until he agreed.

"Well, it is what it is. Filiel's been in love with another girl for a long time now," Theodore said, breaking his silence with an explosive revelation. The mood of the room abruptly shifted.

"Wh-What are you saying?!" Filiel exclaimed, seeming shaken. What do you think you're doing, you old geezer?! How could you reveal my secret like that? Filiel couldn't help but internally scream at him.

Bernard bent forward, looking surprised. "Father, does Filiel really have someone like that in his life?"

Theodore grinned. "Yes. She's a cute girl, and I'm sure Alicia will love her."

Filiel wanted to stuff a piece of bread into that chatty, smug mouth of his, but unfortunately, their seats were too far apart.

"Oh my! Is that true, father?" Alicia asked happily, raising her voice. "I'd love to meet her."

"J-Just hold on," Filiel protested. "She and I aren't yet—"

"Oh? So there really is a girl?"

"Ah..." Filiel's shoulders slumped when he noticed his slipup.

"Give it up, Filiel. You'll never win against mother."

"Alexis..."

"I had no idea you liked a girl," Alexis continued. "When did it start?"

"When did it start? Well, we first met when I was twelve," Filiel answered meekly. There was no changing what had already happened, but when he glanced over at his parents, he saw that they were deeply engrossed in what he was saying. Their eyes sparkled.

"Oh really?" Alexis turned to look at their father and uncle, who had set up the meeting between Filiel and Charlotte. "If he's cared about someone for that long, then it seems like this whole engagement talk was unnecessary."

Gerard crossed his arms. "Hmmm, I guess so. If Filiel has someone like that in his life, then I suppose I'll have to give up." He sounded disappointed.

"Just wha—?! Father! We don't even know who this woman is!" Eliza exclaimed.

Filiel internally pumped his fist when he heard Gerard say the words "give up," but Eliza looked dissatisfied. She was right—it certainly wouldn't do for the spouse of royalty to be just any ordinary nobody. Luckily, Theodore helped Filiel out.

"There's no need to be worried on that front. She has a solid background that I don't think anyone will object to."

Filiel and Theodore were both thinking of the man who had just become Yui's adoptive father. He would be able to silence any dissenters. If anything, he himself was going to be the real issue.

Alicia smiled. "Well then, there's no problem."

"You know quite a lot about her, father," Bernard said. He was probably frustrated that Theodore knew everything already, while he'd had no idea that Filiel was even interested in anyone. He looked enviously at Theodore, as if to say, "But I'm Filiel's father!"

"Ho ho ho." Theodore laughed. "I happened to tag along when Filiel slipped out of the castle to meet her once."

"No, no, please don't do that. It's dangerous!" Bernard exclaimed. That was a

natural response; it would be quite an issue if something unexpected happened while they were secretly away.

"Don't worry, I always properly assigned a guard to shadow him."

"Oh, then I suppose that makes it all right," Alicia said. "So Filiel has been sneaking out of the castle for one secret tryst after another with the girl he loves. How wonderful!" She sounded spellbound, as if she were reading a story. Filiel disliked that.

"Anyway, what about the engagement?" Alexis asked leisurely, returning the topic of conversation to where it had been before they'd gotten sidetracked.

"Hmm." Bernard pondered for a moment. "I thought of the engagement as something we were doing for Filiel's sake, but if there's a woman he likes, then I don't want to force him into anything."

"Well, it sounds like they aren't dating, so how about we table the matter for now?" asked Alexis. "If she dumps him, we can discuss it again, right, father?"

Filiel was quietly hurt when his brother said the word "dump."

"Hm, is that all right with both of you, Filiel, Gerard?" Bernard asked.

Filiel nodded. "Yes."

"It's disappointing, but I suppose I have no other choice," said Gerard.

The two of them agreed, but Eliza was still dissatisfied.

Theodore laughed. "Ha ha ha, make sure you win her over, Filiel."

Filiel was relieved that the engagement talk had been put on hold for the time being, but as the conversation came to an end, he bitterly glared at Theodore for exposing his secret to everyone.

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"Why did you give up so easily, father?! Didn't you say that you wanted me and Fil to get married?!" Eliza asked forcefully. She and her father were returning from dinner.

"There was nothing I could do. I know you're fond of him, and I understand that you're frustrated, but there's no point if he doesn't have feelings for you,"

Gerard chastised.

"No! If it was a political marriage, then Fil would agree, right? Talk to them, father!"

"I can't do that either."

"Why not?!"

"Father apparently knows the girl Filiel is interested in, and he seems to have taken quite a liking to her."

"That's only grandfather, though. So what?"

"He might just be your grandfather, Eliza, but from the country's point of view, my father is the previous king. Which means that father...no, *His Majesty* approves of her. Sorry, but you have to accept it."



Eliza was taken aback. She bit her lip and finally seemed to understand the situation she was in.

During his reign, King Theodore had been widely considered worthy of the title "the Wise." He'd been so adored that when he abdicated the throne to Bernard, many people had spent days on end trying to persuade him that it was still too early for him to step down. Their efforts had failed, and Bernard had become king, but Theodore still had untold influence and authority, even after his abdication.

With their exchange over, Gerard walked ahead.

"I've worked hard up until now for Fil. I won't give up," Eliza murmured to herself. She felt a jealousy so strong it bordered on hatred for a woman she had never even seen.

## **Chapter Eight: Practical Test**

A few days after the results of the written exams had been posted, the practical tests began. The students in Yui's classroom couldn't calm down—it was their first practical test at the academy—and everyone everywhere was discussing the contents of the test.

"Be quiet, everyone! I'm going to explain the practical test," Travis said. The noisy classroom fell silent. "This will be a one-on-one match against one of your fellow students. Your opponent will be randomly selected from any class, A through I. Even the teachers don't know who will go up against whom."

One student raised a hand. "So that means we might go up against someone from class A?"

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"Yes," Travis replied.

"What?! No way!"

"I'll be killed!"
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Critical and pessimistic comments could be heard here and there throughout the classroom. The students weren't expecting much of themselves, but they did think that they might have been able to beat someone from one class above them. However, there was no chance of victory against an opponent from class A, no matter how good a student's luck was. Class H students had enough dignity to not want to be utterly destroyed in front of a large audience.

"Quiet down! It'd be best if you did win, but if you lose, don't fret. Your fighting style and ability to think on your feet will also be considered when the judges appraise your abilities."

"But what if I'm instantly defeated before I have any chance to distinguish myself?" asked one student.

Travis paused. "Curse your own bad luck."

The students feverishly prayed that they wouldn't be matched up with

someone from class A.

"All right, come on up and take a number," Travis said. At his prompting, each student went to the front of the class and selected a slip of paper with a number written on it. "Everyone has a number? Summer break starts as soon as this test is over, so give it your all, and go kill 'em out there!"

Hold on, we can't kill them... the students mentally quipped.

When Travis was done speaking, Yui and her friends left the classroom and went to the bulletin board to see who their opponents were. Rouelle was up against someone from class B, and Gayne was up against a class E student.

"Hey, what about you two?" Rouelle asked Finney and Yui. Finney was smiling boldly, but Yui looked grim.

"What's wrong?" Gayne asked.

Finney was delighted. "Both of our opponents are in class A."

"What?! Really?!" Gayne exclaimed. He and Rouelle looked at Yui's and Finney's numbers, then at the board. Finney was telling the truth. "What will you do?"

"What'll I do? Isn't it obvious?" Finney grinned. "I'll snap them in two and crush their pride. I can already feel myself itching to get started."

"Scary..." Gayne mumbled. He and Rouelle silently prayed for the safety of whoever was unlucky enough to go up against Finney.

"What will you do, Yui?" Rouelle asked.

"I..." Memories flashed through Yui's mind.

"You're useless."

"Show your power. If you do..."

That voice and that face wouldn't disappear from her mind, no matter how much she wanted them to. She slowly blinked, shaking them off, and then gave her usual answer. "Don't worry. I'll surrender right after the match begins."

"At least fight a little bit," Gayne said.

Yui instantly replied, "I don't want to."

Gayne's shoulders slumped in disappointment. "I shouldn't have bothered worrying about these two."

"Isn't it fine?" Rouelle asked. "Yui's allowed to surrender."

On top of there being few offensive nonelemental spells, there were no classes on nonelemental magic for first-years, so any Liefe was allowed to withdraw so long as they took supplementary classes afterward. Of course, if they could fight, they did, but hardly any of them took that option.

The venue where matches took place was partitioned into four squares—each square was thirty meters long and thirty meters wide. Since there were a large number of students, there were matches going on inside each of the four squares at the same time.

Gayne's match began right away. After skillfully displaying his magic, he ended up being victorious against his class E opponent. The next match, Rouelle's, would take place in the second half of the morning, so they all decided to go watch the fourth-years' matches. They were quite popular—everyone from first-years to fifth-years were watching—and excitement filled the air. This was hardly what they had expected a test to be like.

"There are a lot of people here," Gayne remarked. He was looking all around with an expression of wonder on his face, like he was a country bumpkin visiting a big city for the first time.

"I think it makes sense. Prince Filiel is a fourth-year, and so are the O'Brian twins," Finney explained. As usual, he had some information at the ready. "I hear that the twins' fan club was desperate to find a good spot where they could watch the matches. And besides those three, there are a bunch of other skilled fourth-years too."

The unusually high skill level of the fourth-year students drew more spectators, and their matches were exciting.

As the group walked looking for a place where they could watch the match, there was a sudden, high-pitched "Eek!" that echoed all around them. Gayne was thrown off-balance; Yui and Rouelle covered their ears.

"Look," Finney said, pointing at the ring, where a male student had appeared

to cheers from the female spectators. "Speaking of the twins, there's one of them now."

After a signal, the match began, but before even ten seconds had elapsed, the O'Brian twin's opponent had collapsed to the ground. Another wave of shrieks and cheers washed over them.

"Wow, that was practically instantaneous! He's crazy strong," Gayne exclaimed, elated.

Next to Gayne's immature excitement, Finney continued his calm commentary. "The O'Brian twins are exceptionally skilled, even among fourth-years, and it seems that they're already being scouted by many different places. It's even rumored that, after Prince Filiel takes over leading the army, they're prime candidates to be the prince's aides."

Yui watched the match with a gleam in her eyes. "My brother is awesome..." she mumbled to herself.

Gayne froze. "What?! Huh?!"

"Yui, you have siblings?!" Rouelle exclaimed, just as surprised as Gayne.

"And did you just say that he's your brother?!"

"He's your brother?!"

Yui stared blankly at Gayne and Rouelle as they bombarded her with questions. "Oh, I didn't tell you guys?"

They both vigorously shook their heads. Finney seemed to have already known, however. He was still smiling.

"Umm, you know my mama got remarried to my current papa, right? During my mama's last marriage, she had me and my brothers. When she got divorced, she took me with her."

"No way." Gayne was still in shock.

"I knew you were the daughter of a count, but this is the first time I've heard that you used to be part of the O'Brian family," Rouelle said. "So, what're your brothers like, Yui?"

"Hmm, they're normal, kind older brothers. But they might be even more overprotective of me than my papa is."

Rouelle and Gayne instantly stiffened. They knew from Yui how doting Layce was.

"Meeting your brothers might end up being another nightmare," Finney remarked. Somehow, his smile seemed forced.

Yui's friends, especially Gayne and Finney, looked rattled—they remembered meeting Layce for the first time. Sherina had intervened back then, but they had no clue whether anyone would be there to help them this time. They felt like they were in imminent danger.

"Do you want to go meet Cecil?" Yui asked. "He's done with his match, so he's free now."

Gayne and Finney looked even more shaken up now.

"J-Just hold on. Don't be hasty," Gayne stammered. "We can go some other time! R-Right, Finney?"

"Yeah! You're right," Finney said, unnerved. "Rouelle's match is coming up, so we should get going soon. Right away."

Rouelle shrugged. "I don't care either way."

"You be quiet!" Gayne exclaimed. He and Finney hurriedly tried to usher Yui and Rouelle away.

However, they were just a moment too late. Yui spotted a young man who resembled Cecil; in contrast to Cecil's kindly air, however, he gave off an impression of vigor. If Cecil was stillness, then he was motion.

"Ah, Carlo," Yui said.

Carlo looked over, and when he noticed Yui, he instantly broke into a loving smile. He approached them, called out, "Yui!" and spread his arms wide. Yui walked up to him and they hugged. "Yui, it's been so long! You must've been lonely."

"We saw each other a few days ago, Carlo."

"Even a few days is a long time for me."

Carlo squeezed her.

"They're so lovey-dovey," Finney remarked.

"You can tell how much he dotes on her," said Rouelle. "He's acting almost exactly like Lord Layce does when he sees Yui."

They hugged each other like a pair of lovers in a long-distance relationship who'd been reunited at last. It was enough to make one doubt whether they were really siblings. Yui's friends weren't the only ones watching either; the hug was causing a bit of a stir among the surrounding students who looked like they were part of Carlo's fan club.

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"Hey, isn't that Carlo?"

"No way! He and that girl are hugging!"

"Why? Just who is she?!"
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Yui noticed this and tried to separate from Carlo, but he prevented her. He sat her on his arm and lifted her up. Some students around them shrieked.

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"Eek!"

"Stop it, Carlo!"

"C-Carlo," Yui said, flustered.
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"All of you, quiet!" Carlo shouted in anger. The force of his voice instantly silenced the noisy students. "Don't bother me when I'm spending time with my Yui!"

He wasn't *technically* incorrect. He really wasn't—but his words were liable to cause a misunderstanding. Sure enough, their surroundings once again erupted with noise.

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"Eeek!"

"Carlo!"
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Soon, Cecil caught wind of the commotion and walked over. "What's with all the racket, Carlo?" He quickly grasped the situation when he saw the female students shooting bloodthirsty looks at Yui as Carlo held her. He turned to the

crowd and said, "She's our precious little sister. You'll startle her, so can you all calm down?"

"S-Sister?"

"Now that he mentions it, they do look a bit alike."

The female students breathed a collective sigh of relief that Yui wasn't Carlo's girlfriend, and they gradually settled down. However, Yui still caught multiple envious looks directed at her as Carlo carried her around.

"I get that Yui's cute, Carlo, but can you put her down now?" Cecil asked.

"No. I don't know when I'll be able to see her next."

"Carlo..." Cecil murmured. "I'll get angry."

Carlo recoiled at Cecil's words, and he promptly set Yui down. Cecil looked and sounded peaceful, but he exerted a pressure that somehow sent chills running down one's spine. Like Layce, he was ruthless to anyone who made him angry; Carlo, who had been with him since before they were born, knew this better than anyone. Yui would occasionally get angry at Carlo, but Cecil was the only person he knew not to annoy.

"Yui are you okay?" Cecil asked. "At times like this, just say, 'I'll hate you forever,' and he'll calm down."

Yui nodded. "Okay." She knew as well as Carlo that it was unwise to oppose Cecil.

"Hate...?!" Carlo exclaimed. "Do you want to kill me?!"

"Rather than bothering Yui, wouldn't that be better?" Cecil said coldly. Carlo slumped his shoulders, depressed.

"Carlo, Cecil, my friends are here too," Yui said.

"Your friends?" Cecil asked with interest. "Can you introduce us?"

"Sure." Yui waved her friends over. She was excited to introduce them to her brothers, but since their nightmarish meeting with Layce was still fresh in their minds, they were trembling with fear.

"I-It's n-nice to meet you. My n-name is Gayne C-Clay..." Gayne spoke through

chattering teeth. Finney's face was stiff with terror.

Rouelle spoke, unable to just stand by and watch. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Rouelle Eden. I'm so sorry about these two. Meeting Lord Layce was traumatic for them, and they're a bit nervous."



Hearing Layce's name, Cecil could guess what had happened. He looked apologetically at the two victims. "I see. That's unfortunate. He isn't a bad person—just a bit intense in how he expresses his love for our mom and Yui."

"His reaction was way more than just 'a bit intense'!" Rouelle unconsciously retorted.

Cecil turned to her. "Well, don't worry. We're aware that we're overprotective of Yui, but we have the common sense not to go as far as he does, so there's no need to be nervous." In other words, he readily admitted that Layce had no common sense.

"Really? Are you sure? I remember that demonic look on his face when he asked if I was Yui's boyfriend, then he talked at length about why she was cute, and when I replied to him just to be kind he said, 'I knew you liked Yui!' and started firing magic..." Gayne rattled off a long string of words, and it was hard to tell where he took a breath.

Cecil looked uncomfortable. Finally, he said, "Sorry. I'll apologize on his behalf. It must've been tough. Dad's just really overprotective."

"You're one to talk," Carlo grumbled.

They weren't getting anywhere, so Yui decided to step in. "Anyway, this is Gayne and Finney."

"Take care of Yui," Cecil said.

Yui's friends said, "Okay," and nodded firmly.

Satisfied, Cecil looked at Yui. "So, what will you guys do now?"

"My match is coming up soon. You'll watch, right?" Carlo asked, his eyes sparkling.

"Sorry," Yui said apologetically. "Rouelle's match is in a few minutes, so we have to get back."

"What?!" Carlo exclaimed, aghast, but he knew there wasn't anything he could do.

"Too bad," Cecil said. "When's your match, Yui?"

"Finney and I are in the afternoon."

"All right. We'll come to see you, so let's have lunch together."

"Can my friends come to lunch too?" she asked, unsure.

Cecil smiled and nodded. "Of course." Yui was relieved. "Then, when you're done, can you come to the cafeteria in the north building?"

Gayne tilted his head, looking confused. "Huh? I thought only people in classes A through C could eat there."

"If you're with someone who's in a class in the north building, it won't be an issue. Since I'll be accompanying you, let's all eat there."

"Awesome!" Gayne said, and everyone was delighted along with him. The inside of the north building cafeteria was luxurious, and the food was extravagant. However, only people who had classes in that building were allowed to enter. Students in other classes could only dream of going. There was only one cafeteria for students in both the east and west buildings, and it was basically a normal dining hall, in both menu and design.

"All right, see you later," Cecil said.

"Yeah, bye," Yui replied. The group parted ways with Yui's brothers and returned to their ring.

There, Rouelle's match began. Her opponent was in a higher class—class B—and they were skilled at magically strengthened martial arts, just like her. The fight began and instantly transformed into a fierce struggle. Rouelle gradually lost ground. Gayne looked visibly restless just from watching. However, Rouelle managed to cast a difficult-to-handle, nonelemental amplification spell, and she knocked down her opponent. She had learned how to use the spell from Yui; if she hadn't, it would have been harder for her to win. Cheers erupted from the crowd when they saw a class H student bring down a student from class B.

Their morning matches had ended without incident, so Yui and her friends excitedly headed to the north building for lunch. They were amazed when they saw the inside of the cafeteria for the first time.

"Whoa!" Gayne exclaimed.

"I'd heard about it, but I had no idea it was this incredible," Rouelle remarked.

"It makes sense," said Finney. "Royal and noble students have received topclass education from an early age, so most of them take classes here in the north building."

Gayne scoffed. "Still, that's just discrimination!" And he had every reason to say that. The interior of the cafeteria was luxurious—there was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and the fancy tables were surrounded by comfortable-looking chairs—it was like a high-class hotel.

On the other hand, the east and west buildings had only a single cafeteria between them. It had to accommodate more people, so it was large, the interior was plain, and there were only folding tables and chairs for students to use. There was a world of difference between the two dining halls; it was enough to make them suspect that the budget for theirs was being used on this one.

As they waited for Cecil and Carlo, feeling increasingly depressed by the gap between the cafeterias, Yui spotted some students she had seen before.

"Ah!" she exclaimed.

One of the girls noticed her and shrieked, "Aah!"

They were the three female students who had called Yui to the roof and thrown her pendant. Yui steeled herself, ready for them to come up to her and say something, but unexpectedly, all three looked like they had seen a ghost, and they were even shaking. They weren't looking at her; oddly enough, they were staring at Rouelle and Finney.

Rouelle stepped forward. "Oh, hello there."

"Hello," one replied mechanically. They said nothing else before quickly fleeing.

Finney smiled diabolically. "It seems like they've learned their lesson."

"Of course they have," Rouelle said, proudly puffing out her chest. "We made sure that they'll never think about calling out Yui again."

Hearing that, Yui guessed that her two friends had found out about the

confrontation those girls had started. She also guessed that they had inflicted some sort of retribution on the girls. And judging from how the girls reacted, it hadn't been any ordinary payback.

"What did you do?" Yui asked stiffly. Rouelle and Finney just smiled without answering. Yui looked at Gayne, and he avoided meeting her gaze. She finally gave up trying to find out more and internally put her hands together in prayer for the girls.

Then Gayne noticed something. "Hey, who's that guy? I think he's glaring at us. Do any of you know him?"

They looked to where he indicated, and sure enough, a first-year male student was shooting them a hateful look.

"Who's that? Do either of you know him?" Rouelle asked.

Yui shook her head.

Gayne looked at Finney. "Not you, Finney? I bet a lot of people have a grudge against you."

Finney paused before vaguely replying, "I don't think so...?"

Suddenly a nearby voice called out to them. "Deny it! I was joking."

As they were speaking, the boy had come right up to them. Specifically, he was standing right in front of Yui.

"You're Yui Curtis," he said.

"Oh, you knew him, Yui?" Gayne asked.

"No, I don't."

Sensing danger, Rouelle stepped forward to protect Yui. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I'm Gauseth, your opponent," the boy said to Yui. "I thought I'd come to warn you. Know your place."

Rouelle flared up at him. "Huh?! What'd you say?!" Gayne joined too, glaring at Gauseth.

However, it was like Gauseth didn't even see them. He continued to angrily

insult Yui. "You might've been lucky enough to make it to the semifinals in the tournament last year, but it won't be so easy for you this time. And besides, an incompetent like you participating in the summer joint training camp without fighting even once is ridiculous. Do you think everyone else is beneath you?!"

"Hey, don't make weird false accusations," Rouelle said.

"False?! She advanced past the quarterfinals without fighting, then in the semifinals, she lost by default. She must've run, knowing that she couldn't win. The camp is for people with bright futures ahead of them. It isn't a place for failures like you," he said, indignantly berating Yui, who remained silent.

Finney butted in. "You sound quite conceited. Are you sure you aren't just resentful of her for some stupid reason?"

"What'd you say?!"

"If I remember correctly, you weren't selected to go to the training camp. You're just frustrated that she's going and you aren't, right?"

Finney's guess must have been on the mark, because Gauseth's face turned bright red from anger and embarrassment, and he was momentarily unable to reply. Gayne and Rouelle's gazes turned cold.

"That's it? He resents her for that?"

"Don't drag Yui into whatever you have going on."

But Gauseth was not deterred. "Even if that's true, it's a fact that she's a coward who ran away. And I'm not the only one who objects to her participation in the camp!" He turned to Yui. "You pulled something, didn't you?!"

The atmosphere around them was quickly turning tense. He was quite heated, but then again, so was Rouelle. "You can whine all you want, but it doesn't change the fact that you're a sore loser!" she shouted. "And the management of the tournament proved that there was no fraud!"

"That doesn't mean anything."

"What did you say?!"

"Finney Barcas over there must've had some dirt on a bunch of people, and

you all threatened them. Ugh, this is why weaklings are such a pain." He sarcastically sighed, then continued. "You played dirty to win, but all that got you was a spot in the class second from the bottom. Again, know your place."

Yui was watching from the side, but she couldn't help but react when Gauseth insulted Finney. While Finney certainly knew all sorts of things that many might not want him to, he used the information to avoid danger, not to rig matches. There was no reason to call him a coward without any evidence. People criticized and insulted her for being a Liefe practically every day, and she never paid it any mind, but she wouldn't stand for anyone insulting her friends.

Yui stepped out from behind Rouelle, then angrily stared at Gauseth. He flinched, momentarily surprised by Yui's abrupt entrance and withering gaze, but he quickly recovered and glared right back at her. "What?"

"AllII right, that's enough," someone interjected.

These words suddenly defused the nearly explosive situation. Everyone was taken aback, and they all turned to look at the new arrival.

"What do you think you're doing, Camus?" Gauseth asked.

The student called Camus had brown hair braided on one side, a defined nose, and a charming appearance. He stood out somewhat among the rest of the nobles around them; they all properly wore their school uniforms, whereas he wore his more casually. But his style didn't feel out of place at all, and in fact, it fit him well.

"I'm not doing anything," Camus replied cheekily. "Some guy was picking on a girl, so I came to help her!"

"This has nothing to do with you," Gauseth said, his voice laced with irritation. "First of all, I'm not picking on her. I'm teaching her where she belongs."

Camus continued on in a cheery tone. "Uh-huh, uh-huh. Anyone who's rude to girls is my enemy. You should get lost, before I get angry."

"I said this has nothing—"

"Did you hear me? I said *go*." In an instant, Camus's voice had become low and threatening. All traces of his lackadaisical expression disappeared, and he

was staring daggers at Gauseth.

"Dammit," Gauseth muttered, his previous vigor gone. He turned around on the spot and left.

"Are you okay, Yui?" Camus asked with a jovial smile.

"Thanks, Lyle," Yui replied warmly. Her expression seemed softer somehow too.

The new arrival's name was Lyle Camus. He'd gone to the same middle school as Yui and was a close friend of hers. He was also strong, having gotten second place in the middle school tournament. Lyle was in class A, so he and Yui hadn't gotten many opportunities to see each other recently—this was the first time they had spoken in a while.

"It's been so long since we last saw each other! I was sooo lonely."

"You say that, but I'm sure you've been spending all your time hanging out with girls, right?" Yui asked.

"Lyle's just a regular playboy," said Rouelle.

"Harsh as always, Rouelle." Lyle remained lighthearted and unaffected by her contemptuous gaze. "I'm not a playboy—call me a *gentleman*."

"Anyway, you were a great help. Thanks to that idiot, things were pretty touch and go." Finney smiled awkwardly and walked up to Lyle. "Even though not being selected for the camp just means he's weak."

"WellII, I don't think that's the only reason he's upset."

Yui cocked her head to the side, confused. "What do you mean?" she asked. She didn't remember anything she might've done.

"At the tournament last year, Gauseth had to win just one more round to get to the quarterfinals, but he was utterly beaten. And then his opponent surrendered the next match as soon as it began, without even fighting. The other person in that match was you, Yui. It seems like he holds a grudge against you because of that."

Yui felt deflated. So he was bothering her for an entirely absurd, unjustifiable reason after all. If he had to hold a grudge against someone, it should've been

the person who had surrendered to Yui without fighting.

"So he was just taking it out on Yui!" Rouelle exclaimed, flaring up with anger again.

"You're exactly right, Rouelle, but why did he suddenly pick a fight with her?" Lyle asked. "She's in class H, so she shouldn't ever come into contact with him."

"She's going up against him in her match," Finney said.

"Aah, my condolences," Lyle said sympathetically. They couldn't tell who his comment was directed toward.

Just as there was a break in their conversation, a girl called out, "Lyle, are you done yet?" She was part of a group of several girls standing some distance away.

"Whoops, they're waiting on me. See you laaater! And let's meet at camp, Yui," Lyle said. Then, with light footsteps, he went away to join the girls.

Gayne watched Lyle leave. "There he goes, creating a harem again. It has to be some sort of trick—a shallow guy like him being as strong as he is." Gayne sounded rather fed up.

Rouelle nodded. "You said it. Everyone who's lost to him must find it hard to handle."

"But he's pretty popular," Yui pointed out, candidly praising Lyle.

"His face is the only thing good about him," Finney said. There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice somehow.

As they spoke, they began to hear excited voices near the entrance to the cafeteria, and when they turned to look, they saw that Cecil and Carlo had arrived. The two of them were pelted with invitations to eat lunch—from male and female students alike—but they smoothly rejected each one as they headed to where Yui and her friends were.

"Sorry about the wait," Cecil said.

"Not at all," Finney replied. "Actually...how should I put this? I'm surprised. Is it always like this?"

The people who had tried to invite Cecil and Carlo were watching them from a distance, like they weren't quite ready to give up.

Cecil smiled, seeming a bit troubled. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Cecil and I have promising futures. After all, we're candidates to be close aides to royalty," Carlo added.

Expectations for them were high. They were nobles, and very skilled, and they were close with a prince—Filiel. Many wanted to make connections with the twins while they were all still students. Several even wanted to secure a spot as a future wife to one of them. And the best way to begin working on these goals was to invite Cecil and Carlo to lunch.

"Anyway, let's eat," said Carlo. "What do you want, Yui?"

"I'll have combo A."

"All right." Carlo turned to the others. "Hurry up and decide, you three." He shrewdly secured the seat next to Yui, then called over a server. That was another difference between the two cafeterias—Yui and her friends normally had to go get their own food.

"You guys even have servers?" Gayne asked. Rather than looking angry at the almost discriminatory difference compared to what he was used to, he seemed downright depressed.

"Apparently, we originally had to go get our own food, same as the other cafeteria, but with all the nobles and wealthy students here, there were many who made commoner students fetch their food for them. That was an issue, so they hired waitstaff to fix it," Cecil explained.

Everyone was satisfied with that explanation. Not all children of nobles and the wealthy were like that, but there were a significant number who were arrogant and misappropriated their parents' power as their own.

They were finished ordering and waiting for their food to arrive when Carlo asked, unprompted, "So, do any of you like Yui?" He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, and it was obvious that he was trying to tease them.

Gayne and Finney went pale and vigorously shook their heads. Carlo had

asked them the same thing Layce had; it was like a recurring nightmare.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Carlo?" Gayne asked, almost in retaliation. The moment he asked the question, even the surrounding tables fell strangely still. The female students nearby stopped talking and were secretly listening in, eager to hear something about the twins' elusive love lives. The odd mood was further enhanced when even the male students quieted down, pressured by the change in atmosphere around them.

"Heh heh heh... Aha ha ha!" Carlo started laughing. The girls waited for his answer with bated breath. Then, he said, "There's no way I'd tell you!" and chopped Gayne's head with his hand. "That's what you ask me about?"

"And you, Cecil?" Gayne asked.

Cecil beamed. "It's a secret," he said without any hesitation. "All right, let's eat."

"Yeah," Yui said.

Everyone listening in was disappointed by the twins' tough guard. The odd atmosphere abated, and the cafeteria returned to its usual, noisy self.

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With lunch over, they all went to the first-years' testing hall together, and the afternoon matches began. Eventually, it came time for Finney's match.

"Don't lose, Finney!" Rouelle shouted.

"If anything, don't take things too far!" Gayne yelled. He knew Finney well enough to have a feeling that something bad might happen.

Yui put some distance between herself and her two friends, who were focused on the match, and furtively spoke with Cecil and Carlo. "Hey, what about El?" she asked.

She had gone to the fourth-years' testing hall, thinking she might be able to see his match, but in the end, she hadn't been able to find him. He was a prince, so she had assumed that she would quickly know where he was from the commotion that always accompanied him. Unfortunately, her search had ended in disappointment.

"It seems he's taking some time off," Carlo said.

"Really?"

"I thought he was bound to come see your match, but I guess I was wrong."

Yui was dejected. She hadn't even considered the possibility that Filiel wasn't at the academy.

"I don't know why, but he's been gone for the last three days or so," Cecil said.

"Did something happen? Is he sick?" Yui asked.

Carlo shook his head. "I don't know. I tried to contact him with my magic communicator multiple times, but he won't answer." Like Cecil, he had a magic communicator.

Hearing that troubled Yui.

Cecil patted her on the head and smiled. "I'm sure he's busy with his royal duties. He is a prince, after all. Don't worry—he'll be okay."

"Yeah..." Yui tried to tell herself that Filiel would be fine, but she couldn't shake off the vague, hard-to-describe worry she felt for him. She didn't have a magic communicator, so with no way to contact Filiel, she decided to turn her attention to Finney's match for the time being.

Everyone watching was struck speechless.

"Ooh, brutal," Gayne mumbled, speaking the words that were on everyone's mind.

At the start of the match, Finney's opponent had shot off numerous orbs of fire at him. He was in class A, and quite powerful on top of that, so the number and sheer power of the orbs was quite a sight. However, Finney had cast the exact same spell as his opponent, blasting through the orbs of fire with ones of his own. Finney's opponent was shocked, since he'd looked down on Finney for being a class H student. This shock was also felt by Travis, who had been sitting as a judge for the afternoon matches, and by the audience in general.

"What?! My spell was defeated?" the student exclaimed, momentarily dumbfounded.

Finney watched him and offered a delighted smile. "Too bad."

"Dammit! I was just going easy on you!" the student said, biting his lip in frustration. He instantly fired his next spell, but Finney nullified that one too.

Finney's spells were faster and more powerful than the class A student's, and it took Finney less time to go from incantation to activation. Finney continually countered his opponent's spells like it was nothing, landing a few attacks in the meantime, and the class A student began to look increasingly exhausted. However, that wasn't what was hurting him the most. No, the real issue was that Finney was flaunting the difference in their respective strengths by turning back every single one of his opponent's spells with the exact same one, except more powerful. The humiliation Finney inflicted wounded the student's pride, and that was more mentally damaging than any spell.

Finally, the class A student collapsed to his knees, but his dignity wouldn't let him give up—he tried to rise to his feet.

"Surrender already. You can't keep going," Travis urged, unable to keep himself from intervening to stop the physically and mentally fatigued student.

"Yeah, that's right," Finney said, grinning. "You should throw away your pride and admit that you're weak."

"Barcas, don't provoke him."

"Gaaah!" The class A student screamed, obstinately wringing out his last shred of energy to rise to his feet. However, just as he stood up, Finney mercilessly shot him with a bullet of wind.

That ended the match. The unconscious student was promptly carried off to the school infirmary, and all of the students watching seemed to share a single thought: I'm glad I wasn't up against him.

When Finney returned, Gayne immediately grabbed him. "You went way too far!" he yelled. Gayne wasn't the only one thinking that; the people around them were looking at Finney like he was a barrel of pure nitroglycerin, and they were making sure not to get too close.

"Hey, isn't this a practical test? I just did the best I could," Finney said.

"You call that doing your best?! You were just playing around!" Gayne shouted, shaking Finney back and forth.

"Haaah." Yui sighed abruptly.

"What is it, Yui?" Finney asked.

"She must be fed up with you too, Finney," Gayne said.

"How cruel."

"No, not that." Yui pointed. "Look."

They all looked over to where Yui was pointing, and they saw Gauseth glaring hatefully at her. He had been staring for so long that she was starting to get tired of it.

"I guess he hasn't reformed his attitude yet," Rouelle remarked. She, too, wasn't so much angry at Gauseth as she was sick of him.

"Do you know him?" Carlo asked.

Rouelle tattled on Gauseth. "He tried to pick a fight with Yui in the cafeteria earlier!"

"Really?"

"With Yui, huh?" Cecil said. "How brave of him."

There was a dangerous gleam in both brothers' eyes. Win or lose, Gauseth's fate had just taken a turn for the worse.

"You're up soon, Yui. What will you do?" Rouelle asked.

"I'm going to withdraw right before the match starts."

"Will he really accept that?"

"He'll probably be satisfied as long as I lose, and he's in class A, so we won't see each other that much anyway." Yui was feeling increasingly annoyed. She just wanted to get it over with as soon as possible.

"I understand, but it's still annoying. I just know he'll call you a coward afterward!" Rouelle was shaking with rage just thinking about it.

"Don't worry. We're here if that ever happens," Cecil said.

"Yeah, if he does, we'll hold his head to the ground until he apologizes," Carlo added. He and Cecil were both smiling, but they were clearly angry at the idea of Yui being insulted.

"Is it just me, or did a cold breeze blow through here just now?" Gayne asked.

"They sure are scary when it comes to Yui," Rouelle remarked. In contrast to her words, she was transparently rooting for the brothers.

Eventually, Yui's turn came up.

"I'll be right back. Bye." As she walked to the ring, she decided that she would end things quickly. She stood at her designated position facing Gauseth, and sure enough, he was glaring at her.

Perhaps sensing the foreboding atmosphere, Travis spoke apprehensively to Yui. "Hey, Curtis, will you be okay? You're a Liefe, so you can withdraw from the match so long as you just take supplementary lessons later."

Yui had exactly that idea in mind, and she was just about to tell Travis. But before she could...

"Are you gonna run?" Gauseth spat, smiling as he tried to provoke her. "I know you pulled something back then. That's right—you're the sister of the O'Brian twins. I thought it was Barcas, but they must've been the ones who pulled some strings at the tournament. They're friendly with a prince, so it was probably a piece of cake for them."

Yui squeezed her fist, suppressing her overflowing rage. Travis had no clue what was going on, but he still tried to admonish Gauseth for saying something about royalty that might be taken as impolite. However, before he could say anything, Yui spoke. "Hurry up with the starting signal, Trav."

"Huh? You aren't withdrawing?" Travis reflexively replied out of disbelief.

"I'm not." Yui knew that Gauseth was trying to provoke her, but she couldn't just meekly accept him constantly insulting the people she cared about.

"Hey, will you really be okay?" Travis asked. He was clearly worried, though that concern was only natural. Gauseth was in class A, and he had placed highly in the previous year's tournament—not to mention the abnormal hostility he

held toward her. A Liefe like Yui couldn't win against him.

"What an idiot," Gayne remarked.

"You said it," Rouelle agreed. She knew that Gayne's comment wasn't directed at Yui, but at Gauseth. "Yui was going to withdraw, and he just had to make her angry. He would've won by default if he'd just kept his mouth shut."

Unaware of this conversation on the sidelines, Gauseth smiled nastily and licked his lips, already savoring the victory he was sure would follow.

"Will you really be all right, Curtis?" Travis asked once again.

Without breaking her determined gaze, Yui nodded.

"Haaah, very well..." Travis was ready to instantly stop the match if anything happened. "Then, begin!"

An instant passed.

"Huh?" Travis exclaimed.

"Eh?"

"Uh..."

Almost everyone watching the match, including Travis, couldn't believe their eyes. Yui had voiced an incantation as soon as the match had begun, but that incantation had been shorter than a normal one. She'd finished speaking before Gauseth could do anything, and her spell had activated, sending him flying and knocking him out in the first few seconds of the match.

Many were frozen in shock. They had all thought that Yui was sure to lose, but she had knocked the powerful Gauseth to the ground in the blink of an eye.

"Your decision, Trav," Yui said. Travis was no exception—he was frozen too. However, he came to his senses when Yui spoke to him.

"Ah, yeah. The victory goes to Curtis..."

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Yui's friends, who had been watching the match, looked coldly at the collapsed Gauseth.

"He really was an idiot," Rouelle said. "Picking a fight with Yui when he's that weak; I wonder who really doesn't know their place."

Finney nodded. "He was all bark and no bite."

As they spoke, Travis noticed that they seemed to have expected Yui to win. He came up to them, seeking an explanation.

"You've gotta be kidding me... What's happening here? Why are students like Curtis and Barcas in *my* class? Curtis even voided her incantation."

In order to cast a spell, one had to first focus their magical energy, complete an incantation, then fire it off. There were other methods, but that was the standard chain of action. Incantation voidation was when a person could cast a spell with a shorter than normal incantation or even silently, without one at all. It was incredibly difficult, and even at a magic academy, one had to be a fifth-year student to learn how to do it—it was hardly something a first-year should have been able to pull off. All of this meant that Yui was strong enough to easily succeed in class A. She wasn't someone who should've been languishing in class H.

"It's nothing to be surprised about, Trav," Rouelle said, "I'm sure you know that Yui made it to the semifinals in the middle school tournament."

"But wasn't that because her opponents withdrew or felt sick? I heard that she didn't fight at all..."

"Think about it. Normally, something like that would never happen, right?"

Travis didn't know how to respond. "So what do you mean?" He looked deep in thought, and doubt was written all over his face.

"You just saw it. Yui's really strong. I've never seen her lose. She floored everyone she fought in the first few seconds in the qualifiers too."

Finney chimed in. "She was famous for a while. Her opponents withdrew one by one. People who only cared about their image preferred to quit and take the loss. They realized that they wouldn't even be able to get off a single spell against her, and they didn't want to show how pathetic they were by losing to someone they saw as inferior, especially in front of a large crowd of spectators."

That had led to suspicion falling on Yui, but luckily, once the tournament management discovered the shameful reason for the withdrawals, the matter had ended without incident. However, the losers had been unable to say publicly why they'd withdrawn, so people who didn't know the full story—like Gauseth—often falsely accused Yui of wrongdoing.

Travis found all of this hard to swallow so suddenly, but he had seen Yui win from up close, so he had no choice except to believe them. However, there was still something that didn't sit right with him. "Hold on, but Curtis lost by default in the semifinals. What happened there?"

Yui's friends looked like they couldn't figure out how best to answer him. Gayne seemed like he didn't know what to say, and he averted his gaze, so Rouelle stepped in.

"Her match was at 1 p.m. You know, 13:00."

Travis looked confused. "What does the time have to do with this?"

"She heard 13:00 and thought it meant three o'clock, so she went off to leisurely eat some cake. Everyone went out to search for her, and when we found her and brought her back, it was long past the start time for her match—even the championship match was over."

Travis was at a loss for words.

There was a café near the tournament venue that Yui had been wanting to go to for a while. When she'd learned that she had some time before the semifinals, she had happily gone there alone without telling anyone, which meant that there had been no one to correct her misunderstanding. After hunting high and low, her friends found her just as she was happily ordering her fifth piece of cake. By then, Yui had already been disqualified. If Gauseth ever learned of this, he would undoubtedly explode again, this time from rage.

"She's so careless sometimes," Finney muttered.

Everyone quietly nodded.

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When Yui rejoined them, Rouelle greeted her. "Welcome back, Yui."

"Hi, everyone," Yui said. They all congratulated her.

"It was over too quickly," Rouelle complained. "Kinda unsatisfying to watch."

Finney had the opposite opinion. "Would it have been better if, like me, she'd slowly tormented him and torn his ego to shreds?"

"You went too far!" Gayne retorted.

"I considered it," Yui said. "But remember, this wasn't a duel, but a test. It hurts more that he lost without being able to cast a single spell."

"I see. He can't get any points if there's nothing to judge him on. I bet his score was horrible." Finney grinned nastily. Yui had a satisfied smile on her face too, like she was proud of a job well done.

Gayne rubbed his head, which was starting to hurt. "This is why I hate smart people. They always know where it hurts the most..."

Next, Yui happily went to see her brothers.

"Well done, Yui," Cecil said.

"I knew you could do it!" Carlo exclaimed. "You're our sister, after all."

Yui smiled broadly, happy to be praised.

"Unfortunately, the tests are about to end, so we have to get back," Cecil said.

"Okay. Thanks for coming."

"See you guys later too."

Gayne said, "Bye," and Finney offered his own goodbye.

After parting from Cecil and Carlo, they also went back to their own years' arena.

When all the tests were over, the student body gathered in the auditorium for the end-of-term ceremony, then embarked on their summer vacation.

Yui was excited and looking forward to it. She had the joint training camp, but she saw it as basically an all-you-can-eat vacation. Any of the students who were staking their futures on the camp would have reprimanded her if they'd

known. She had originally felt indifferent about the camp, but now that she knew it was a trip to the town of sweets—and that she could go with Filiel—her anticipation only grew larger.

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Deep in a remote part of the royal palace that contained the royal living quarters, the sound of someone repeatedly knocking on a door echoed down a deserted corridor.

"Open up, Fil! I'm begging you, please open the door!" Eliza called, ignoring her increasingly sore hand.

However, there was no reply from inside.

## **Chapter Nine: The Royal Palace**

Now that summer vacation had begun, Yui could hole herself up in her room and devote all her free time to research. Well, she *could've*, if she hadn't needed to help out at her grandparents' bakery. She would've loved to just stay in her room or hang out in the study at Layce's house. He knew how much she adored reading, and with his personal connections and a heavy dose of persistence, he had collected all sorts of valuable research materials and magic books for her. He had probably done this to get her to stay at his house, and his strategy had been a mild success; the number of times she'd visited his house had increased dramatically since the beginning of summer vacation.

However, she couldn't just think about herself. Now that she had more free time, she knew she ought to use it to help out her grandparents—after all, they were letting her live at their house. They'd said that she could spend her time as she pleased, but since she intended to take over the bakery, she couldn't afford to be negligent when it came to lending them a hand. So, beginning early in the morning, Yui took on the responsibility of serving customers.

"Welcome," she said to a customer. By now, she was quite familiar with providing this type of service, and the day went by without any issues.

"Feel free to have lunch soon, Yui," her grandmother said once the lunchhour rush had passed.

"Okay."

With some of the bakery's products in hand—a fruit danish, a cornet, and some cream-filled bread—Yui entered the back of the house. First she took a bite of the danish. The pastry flaked apart in her mouth and melded with the cream and fruit topping. The flavor was absolutely perfect.

"Haaah, I'm so happy," she said to herself. There was nothing better than a reward after a hard day's work. She knew that Layce wanted her to live with him and her mother, but she could never abandon these pastries. While mentally apologizing to Layce, she took a bite out of her bread.

In a certain room in the royal palace, a discussion was taking place. Everyone present looked grave. King Bernard and Theodore were there, along with Captain Gaius of the Royal Guard—he was one of the people who had helped take care of Filiel when the prince had been young. After a knock on the door, Eliza and Filiel's two guards, Zeke and Luca, entered.

"Eliza, how's Filiel?" Bernard asked.

With a gloomy expression, Eliza shook her head. "I called out to him many times, but he never responded."

Bernard and Gaius were disappointed. "I see," Bernard said.

"It's already been a week since His Highness locked himself in his quarters. We must take measures quickly," Gaius said.

"What measures?" Bernard asked.

Gaius was unable to answer, and the room fell silent.

Over the past few days, those close to Filiel had gone in turns to try talking to him, but it had been as good as useless. If they were being honest, they were almost ready to give up.

"We always have the option of breaking down the door and forcing our way in," said Gaius, "but I can't in good conscience recommend it."

Bernard nodded. "You're right. We don't want to make him more agitated than he already is." If they pushed him too hard and he lost control of his magic, he might not recover completely.

"How is Alexis? Is he all right?" Eliza asked.

"Yeah, it was nothing truly serious. He'll be able to get out of bed soon," Bernard replied.

Eliza sighed with relief.

"This is the second time it's happened," Gaius said. He looked thoughtful, like he was remembering something. "Last time, it was the attendant he was attached to, and this time it was the brother he adores. Why must Filiel be

burdened with hurting the ones he loves?" There was a pained look on his face. He and Theodore could be considered Filiel's guardians since they'd raised him together, and both of them loved him like a son. The most recent incident had been horribly distressing. The others felt the same, and their expressions were clouded over.

"Breaking down the door can be our last resort," Bernard said, "but is there any peaceful way to get him to open it?"

As they all racked their brains for a solution, the deathly silence was broken by a quiet voice.

"There is one way," Theodore said.

Bernard bent forward, his eyes filled with anticipation. "Really, father?!"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you bring it up earlier?!"

"Ah, well, it will definitely cause trouble, so I thought it'd be best to save it for last," Theodore said evasively.

Bernard tilted his head, confused about what exactly his father was saying.

"Very well." Theodore turned to the guards. "Zeke, Luca."

"Sir!" they said in unison, hastily correcting their posture after Theodore unexpectedly addressed them.

"There's a bakery in town. I can give you the details. Can you go there and fetch a girl named Yui? Bring her here as soon as possible."

"A girl from a bakery?" Zeke asked. Nobody besides Theodore had a clue why it was necessary to bring a commoner girl, but if it was for their master's sake, Zeke and Luca would do anything without complaint. The two of them hurriedly exited the room and headed to the bakery.

They took a carriage through town, and finally, they arrived at the address Theodore had given them. This wasn't a wealthy area, but it wasn't poor either; this district was completely average, so their fancy carriage and refined appearance made them stand out. Some passersby came near to catch a glimpse of them. Others averted their gazes and hurriedly left the area, trying

to avoid getting involved. The two guards felt quite out of place.

"Hey, is this really the bakery?" Zeke asked.

"No question—this is it," Luca replied.

"Then let's hurry up. We stick out like a couple of sore thumbs here."

Unable to bear being gawked at like a pair of exotic animals, they wanted to quickly finish up and get back. They made the carriage wait outside and then entered the bakery.

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"Ah, welcome! Is there anything specific you're looking for today?" Yui's grandmother, Maria, looked timid when the two well-dressed young men entered. She even paid special care to the wording of her greeting.

The guards surveyed the bakery, then looked at each other and nodded. "You own this establishment?" asked Luca.

"Yes, do you have a request?"

"No, we're not customers."

"Huh?"

"Is there a girl named Yui here?"

"Yes, there is. Do you have some business with her?" Maria asked. In the midst of her confusion, she looked increasingly wary.

"Just call her here."

Maria was put off by the forceful way Luca spoke, and her apprehension was visible in her expression. Just then, noticing the commotion out front, Orso came out of the kitchen.

"Call Yui here," he said.

"But..." Maria protested. She couldn't help but be concerned. The memory of her daughter suddenly being spirited away by a noble was still fresh in her mind. If, like Sherina, Yui was also taken, Maria didn't know what she would do.

When Orso spoke again, his voice was determined. "Don't worry. I won't let it

happen this time. So go get her."

Maria reluctantly went inside to get Yui.

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Back in the house, Yui was relaxing and eating her lunch. But when she was told that a customer was asking for her and that she should come to the shop, her mood immediately soured. *Just who is this person? Who thinks they can interrupt the most blissful time of the day?* she thought as she returned to the bakery. However, her irritation turned to confusion when she arrived—she wondered why two students she had only seen from afar at the academy were there.

"Are you Yui?" Luca asked.

Yui nodded. "Yes, I am."

"We'd like for you to come with us right away."

"To where?" Yui asked after a pause. "And why?"

Luca was at a loss for words. Yui could tell that something had happened, but she suspected that he wasn't at liberty to disclose it. He wouldn't have come here otherwise.

"We need you to come to the royal palace," he finally said. "But I can't say why. Not here."

Yui knew it would be reckless to just go with him based on that vague response, but it was all she needed to hear. "Understood."

The two men were guards for the royal family—they were trustworthy. Yui judged that there wouldn't be an issue if she went with them. After all, even if something happened, Yui could be safe in knowing that Layce was at the royal palace.

Still, there were a couple of problems: first was her worried-looking grandparents observing them from a short distance away, and second was the group of regular customers and neighbors who had gathered around the bakery. They knew that Sherina had been forcefully taken away by a noble in the past, so they were standing outside with axes, sickles, rods, and other things

—it looked like they had brought them from their homes. All seemed fully prepared to help Yui if anyone tried anything. One person even had a pot full of boiling water, and another was holding a live chicken. Yui had no clue how those were supposed to be of use.

Yui turned to her grandparents and spoke in a voice that the people watching from outside could hear. "Grandma, these people are papa's subordinates."

When she mentioned Layce, Maria's stiff expression immediately softened. "Oh, Layce's?"

"Yeah. It seems that they're here because he asked them to come pick me up, so I'll be going with them for a bit."

"Oh, okay. Well, there's no way around it, then. Take care, Yui."

Both of her grandparents looked relieved to hear that the two guards were under Layce's direction. Layce was famous among the people in the neighborhood and the bakery's regular customers as the man who had visited the bakery every day and completely won Sherina's heart. Many knew he was the prime minister, so they were satisfied with the explanation that the well-dressed Zeke and Luca were his messengers. The crowd soon left.

Still wearing casual clothes, Yui got into the carriage. There, Luca raised a doubt that was nagging at him.

"You sure came along without a fuss," he remarked.

Yui wasn't so naive to danger that she would follow a complete stranger without any explanation, no matter how well-dressed he was. She had readily agreed to go with them because she *knew* them.

"I'm a student at Luster," she explained.

"I see." Luca seemed like he understood. Just about every student at the academy knew that the two of them were Filiel's guards. He seemed satisfied with her answer, assuming she was going along with them because his request was connected with royalty.

Zeke had a different question. "You said something about your father earlier, and everyone seemed satisfied with that explanation. Does he work at the royal

palace?"

"Yes, he's the prime minister," Yui replied.

"Huh?" Zeke said. After some hesitation, he continued, "So he's the Prince of Dar—?" He corrected himself. "I mean, he's Count Curtis?"

His and Luca's faces turned pale, and they both froze.

Yui gazed outside the now-silent carriage and wondered why she had been summoned. Considering how Zeke and Luca were acting, they hadn't been looking for her because she was the prime minister's daughter. No, they were *Filiel's* guards, so it was likely that she had been called for something related to him. However, Filiel wouldn't go to the trouble of summoning her like this; he would come see her himself, or he would go through her brothers. Besides, there weren't many who knew that she and Filiel were acquainted. She hadn't even told her mother about it because she didn't want her real father, Count O'Brian, finding out and trying to use her to get a connection with the royal family. Only her brothers knew, and Filiel hadn't told anyone either. Besides them, there was only one other person who knew about Filiel and Yui, and he was close to Filiel.

"Was it His Majesty, the former king, who called for me?"

"Ah, yeah, that's right," Zeke said.

"Good guess," Luca remarked.

She felt reassured by the knowledge that she knew the person who had asked for her. Theodore wouldn't put her in danger. Still, she didn't know why he had summoned her all the way to the royal palace, or why he had done it in a manner that had drawn so much attention—even if the summons had been unofficial.

"We're here," Luca said.

His words broke her out of her deep deliberation. The door to the carriage opened, and Yui stepped outside. The first thing she saw was a large gate. However, there was no one else around, so she guessed that they had not entered through the front but through a rear entrance.

"Over here," Luca said to her.

Yui followed the two into the royal palace. Seeing the numerous dazzling decorations and ornaments for the first time blew her away, though she made sure not to gawk too openly. She glanced around the splendid interior while making sure Zeke and Luca didn't notice her staring; she didn't want anyone to think of her as just another simple, easily impressed commoner.

As they walked, their surroundings gradually changed. The palace grew quieter, more solemn, and fewer people passed by them. She only saw the occasional lady's maid or soldier, and the soldiers all wore the white military uniforms of the Royal Guard, who were tasked with protecting the royal family. With that clue, she gathered that they were in the innermost part of the palace where the private living quarters of the royal family were situated.

Finally Zeke and Luca stopped in front of a certain door.

"This is it," Luca said.

"Are you ready?" Zeke asked.

She knew where she was. She also knew it was possible that there would be royalty besides Theodore beyond the door. She had noticed this rather late, and her nerves were starting to thrum, but she understood that she couldn't run away now.

She steeled herself and then stepped through the door into the room. There, she saw Theodore. He looked exactly as he had four years ago.

"It's been a while, Yui," he said.

Yui instantly lowered her face, scraped together her memories of noble etiquette, and bowed. "I am pleased to see Your Majesty once again." Theodore would likely overlook a small degree of impoliteness, but she had also fleetingly seen several others in the room who looked like members of the royal family. She knew she couldn't mess up.

The rest of the royal family—aside from Filiel—were in the room with Theodore. This included Alexis and Alicia, who were worried about Filiel and had come to ask about him. Yui desperately kept her wits about her, knowing that if she lost focus, her face would grow stiff. Internally, she shivered,

wondering whether she had made a mistake in her etiquette. She bitterly regretted not changing into a nicer outfit than the one she'd worn to work at the bakery.

"Oho," Theodore said.

Yui had been raised in the O'Brian household, so she had been drilled in basic etiquette. Additionally, Layce had gotten her a tutor who occasionally taught her according to a noble curriculum, so there shouldn't have been any issue with how she carried herself. Nobody besides Theodore knew that though, and they were stunned that a simple commoner girl could conduct herself exactly as a noble would.

"Come closer. There's no need to be so stiff," Theodore said, and Yui timidly walked up to him. "Hmm, you've grown quite a bit in such a short time. And you've gotten prettier too." He spoke kindly, and he looked happy—exactly how a grandfather seeing his granddaughter for the first time in a while would look.

Yui breathed a sigh of relief. She felt much more relaxed now.

"Can we get to the main issue already, father?" Bernard asked, throwing cold water on their joyous reunion.

Theodore furrowed his eyebrows. "You're so hasty, boy. What's wrong with taking a bit of time?"

"This isn't the time for that, father! Filiel is in trouble."

Yui instantly grew tense. She looked at Theodore, entreating him to explain.

Theodore smiled awkwardly. "Don't look so worried, Yui. We're just in a bit of a fix, that's all, which is why I called you here." He patted her on the shoulder, trying to reassure her, then began to explain. "A few days ago, an assassin entered the royal palace and—"

"Please refrain from speaking any further!" Gaius interrupted. "Should we really tell an outsider—?"

"Hold your tongue. I have to explain the situation. So, for Filiel's sake, just be quiet for a bit."

Unable to respond, Gaius closed his mouth and stepped back.

"An assassin..." Yui murmured, shaken. "Was anyone hurt?" She unconsciously squeezed the pendant necklace hidden under her clothes as unpleasant thoughts crossed her mind.

"Don't worry. Filiel wasn't hurt," Theodore said. "If anything, the assassin is in a worse spot. They were defeated without being able to lay a finger on him."

Yui was relieved to hear that Filiel was okay, but that only raised another question: why had she been called here? Also she found it hard to imagine that an assassin had been able to sneak into the quarters of the royal family, which was the most well-guarded part of the palace. It was staffed by the army's elite—the Royal Guard—and a failure like that would be quite a disgrace. Depending on who was responsible, it wouldn't be odd for the captain of the guard to be replaced.

"An assassin managed to sneak this deeply into the royal palace?" Yui asked.

At her simple question, Gaius's expression turned sour. He was the captain of the royal guard and responsible for the personal security of the royal family.

"You know about the recent dispute over the royal succession among some of the nobility, right?" Theodore asked.

"Yes, though I don't know all of the details." It was the reason Filiel hadn't been able to come see her.

"It ended with quite a few nobles being purged. At the time, there were many who voiced objections to that punishment. Of course, those objections were dismissed as selfish because those who objected all had something to lose if the nobles got charged."

The evidence against those nobles had been flawless. And it had needed to be —among those accused were high-ranking nobles and even families that past princesses had married into. The royals had needed to make sure that the accused were unable to weasel out of the charges, even if there happened to be some deficiency. In the end, the evidence had been enough to easily disprove anyone who'd tried to argue in favor of the accused, so the nobles' supporters had all kept quiet and withdrawn their objections.

But that hadn't been the end.

"There was enough evidence against the nobles, so most of those who objected simply gave up," Theodore explained, "but one noble owed a great debt of gratitude to one of the accused, and he foolishly tried to repay that debt by killing off one of us royals."

"But that isn't something you can easily do, is it?"

The palace, especially the section where royalty lived, had around-the-clock security.

"He was a higher-up in the army, and he knew the number of guards, their posts, and even when they changed shifts. He sent in the assassin by exploiting the gaps in our security. Luckily, the other royal guards quickly noticed something was wrong and captured the assassin. The ringleader was also arrested, and he is currently in jail."

A delay in the guards' response might've been unavoidable if it was a crime committed by someone on the inside. But that only made Yui more confused about why she had been called. Both criminals were in jail, and Filiel was unharmed. That should've been the end of things. And besides, the assassin and the succession dispute had nothing to do with her.

"Um, it seems to me that the problem has been solved," she pointed out. "So why have I been called?"

"The culprit was apprehended, but you see, there was some trouble. Before the royal guards could rush to their aid, Filiel and Alexis fought the assassin. The assassin fired a spell at Alexis, and when Filiel tried to cover his brother, he accidentally touched him. The princes were fighting for their lives, so Filiel wasn't suppressing his magical energy at all."

Yui jerked back in surprise. She knew just how dangerous that could be. Filiel's magical energy was truly powerful, even when compared to history's most famous conjurers. Coming into contact with him while he wasn't suppressing his magic could be fatal.

"Then, is His Highness all right?" Yui asked with a hoarse voice. It might've been just an accident, but the second prince killing the crown prince would be liable to cause quite a stir.

"Alexis is fine. He instantly defended himself, so it wasn't a big deal at all. Look, he's right over there." Theodore pointed to a young man sitting in a chair. Alexis looked similar to his brother, and he had the same beautiful, androgynous features.

"Not a big deal? Just sitting here is about as much as I can take. I almost died, you know, so maybe take a bit more pity on me..." Alexis said jokingly.

Yui stared at him. It might've been disrespectful, but she was nowhere near composed enough to pay attention to a minor slip in etiquette. Still, she was relieved. Though she didn't know his actual condition, as far as she could tell, Alexis was on the mend. He was well enough to sit in a chair normally, even if he did look a bit pale.

"Then, what about El?" she asked. Every member of the royal family was present in the room except for him.

"That's why I called you, Yui." She must have looked quite troubled because Theodore spoke soothingly, trying to calm her down. "Hey, c'mon, there's no need to get anxious again. He isn't hurt or bedridden. And I know that if he sees you, he'll be better. Filiel is physically fine; however, he injured Alexis, and he isn't taking it well. He's shut himself up in his room, and he won't come out, no matter who tries to talk to him."

Along with Theodore, everyone else in the room had sad, pained looks on their faces.

Yui finally understood why she had been summoned. "Please take me to where El is," she requested. She wanted to see him right away and check on him to make sure he was all right. Theodore looked relieved to hear her reply, but Gaius quickly interrupted them.

"P-Please wait! Even if she is able to meet with His Highness, what if she comes into contact with him and gets injured? His Highness might get even worse."

Bernard had caught on to the same possibility, and he joined in protest. "He's right, father. Even if Filiel comes out of his room, it would be terrible if his magic went on a rampage."

"She will be fine," Theodore said, turning to her. "Right, Yui?"

Yui nodded vigorously. "Yes, I will."

Theodore was the former king, the father of the current king, and a deeply trusted figure—there was no use arguing with him. Without consulting any who were dissatisfied, he continued. "Zeke, Luca, take Yui to Filiel. After that, Zeke, get Layce, and Luca, get Eliza. Both of you, bring them to this room."

As Theodore was talking, the two guards suddenly looked spooked. They wanted to object and ask why, of all people, they had to bring *those two*. But of course, any objection was forbidden, so they just bowed wordlessly.

Then Bernard apprehensively interjected. "Will she really be fine on her own, father? Will he really open the door for her when he hasn't opened it for any of us?"

"Yes, it'll be fine. You can be sure of that," Theodore said. "Once he knows it's Yui there, he'll open that door in three seconds flat."

Everyone besides Yui and Theodore was thinking the same thing: *That's ridiculous*. He didn't open the door when his parents or grandfather spoke to him. There's no way it'll be that simple.

"Yui, Filiel is in your care," said Theodore.

"Yes, sir." Yui bowed, then exited the room with the two guards.

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There was a custom within the royal family that had been passed down for generation after generation—it dictated that princes and princesses were to be assigned two guards of the same gender and age as them. This was in addition to the Royal Guard, which was already tasked with protecting the royal family as a whole. There were several reasons why they maintained this tradition. First, young royals were constantly surrounded by adults, and they had to withstand stiff lives full of ceremony—under those conditions, they needed someone to confide in. Next, the guards would be present for their protection at a magic academy. The academies didn't permit any outsiders on campus, and there were no exceptions for royalty. Of course, schools had top-class security that rivaled even the royal palace's, and they had always defended against any

possible incursion. However, on the off chance that something happened, it was necessary to have guards of the same age who could be on campus and ready to protect their charges.

The guards themselves never had any living relatives, and they were always adopted as newborns. Their education was carried out by tutors who were assigned to them while they grew up in the royal palace. Sons and daughters of nobles were expressly not chosen to guard royalty because they were inevitably influenced by political and factional considerations. If a child involved in an allied faction were assigned as a guard, it could cause unnecessary quarrels and confusion, and enemy factions would complain. In the end, the guard would become unable to protect their royal charges, and the whole system would lose all meaning.

Using children with no relatives avoided politics and the disorder that came with them. Newborn babies were pure, unblemished, and easy to educate and raise while cultivating a sense of loyalty. They would grow up to be more trustworthy than any noble child, with the added benefit of not having to worry about which noble child to select. Of course, they weren't slaves, so they had a right to choose. After they became adults, the guards were asked whether they wished to continue in their roles, and if they refused, they were given compensation for all the time they had spent as guards. And afterward, they were permitted to leave the palace and live their lives as they wished. Having said that, the guards spent so much time with the royals they served that they were trusted more than anyone else. They grew to be close friends with their masters from an early age, and the royals placed full trust in their guards, so there were rarely any guards who abandoned their posts to run away and embark on new lives.

Filiel's guards, Luca and Zeke, had also been taken into the care of the royal palace as infants and educated for their roles. They, however, were a little different from past guards—Filiel's magic was too strong for everything to remain normal. When he'd been young and unable to suppress his magical energy, he'd sometimes broken things and harmed the people around him. Thus, few had been able to be close to him. Luca and Zeke, who would've normally been assigned as his conversation partners by the time they were five,

only ever saw him a few times during their youth, and they'd been forbidden from officially serving at his side. So they'd eagerly awaited the day when they could truly serve Filiel; after all, they had no other family, and they felt that their entire purpose in the palace was to guard him. However, that wish had gone unfulfilled for a long time, and some inconsiderate people had even insulted them, saying that they were useless wastes of resources.

Filiel had learned to control his magic at age twelve, and at long last, the two were granted permission to serve at the prince's side. That day, they were released from their uncertain positions, and they felt that there was finally a meaning to what they were doing. They had vowed to serve their master to the best of their abilities—in turn, Filiel treated them as friends and was kind to them, even though they didn't have any social status.

However, after the most recent incident, they felt pathetic and powerless. They'd only been able to watch, and they couldn't have done anything to prevent it.

With those thoughts in their heads, Luca and Zeke's footsteps were heavy as they led Yui through the palace. Their gloomy moods had been exacerbated by Theodore's request that they fetch those two specific people. With Layce, it went without saying—Zeke hardly wanted to have anything to do with the widely feared Prince of Darkness. Luca, on the other hand, had to get Eliza, who had been standing in front of Filiel's quarters and endlessly calling out to him. Her love for Filiel was common knowledge, and it didn't seem that she had any intention of hiding her feelings for him. She could be quite intense and a bit selfish at times, especially when it came to Filiel.

Luca was apprehensive about whether it would be fine to take Yui to where Eliza was. And he was especially dreading the task of taking Eliza back with him once he dropped off Yui. It hardly seemed likely that Eliza would meekly come with him and leave Filiel alone with a girl she didn't know. His biggest worry was whether this girl named Yui would be able to open Filiel's door. The two people who had basically been Filiel's foster parents—Theodore and Gaius—had tried and failed to get Filiel to come out, so what could one girl do? In the end, however, both Luca and Zeke sincerely hoped that she would help Filiel, if she was able to.

Yui, Luca, and Zeke arrived in front of Filiel's quarters and Eliza was standing there. When she noticed them, she turned away from the door and stared at them with an intense gaze. Specifically, she was staring piercingly at the unknown Yui.

"Lady Eliza—His Majesty Theodore has sent me to ask you to return to the room," Luca said.

"Hey, is she the girl my grandfather mentioned?" Eliza asked.

Luca furrowed his eyebrows at Eliza's feigned ignorance of his message. Still, rather than poorly hide it, he decided to answer her honestly. "Yes, she is."

"Really? So it's her." Eliza's staring turned into a glare.

Luca stepped between the girls, judging that it would be better if Eliza saw Yui as little as possible. "Lady Eliza, please return quickly."

"No, I'm not moving until Fil comes out."

"Please, come with us," Zeke pleaded.

Eliza turned her face away and said, "I don't want to!"

I knew she wouldn't listen, Luca and Zeke thought. Eliza's firm refusals to their repeated requests began to give both of them a headache.

"His Majesty has commanded us to entrust this task to her," Zeke explained, referring to Yui.

"And I'm saying no! Why do I, Fil's fiancée, have to leave while some girl I've never seen gets to stay?!" At the word "fiancée," Yui reacted slightly, and Eliza gloated. "That's right! Fiancée. So can an outsider like you leave already?"

Both Luca and Zeke were startled by Eliza's outburst, and they quickly corrected her.

"Wait, just one second," Luca said.

"Lady Eliza, you aren't His Highness's fiancée. I believe he turned you down," Zeke chastised.

"Shut up, both of you!" Eliza shouted, her face turning red as she aimed her anger at Luca and Zeke.

Yui was more worried about Filiel than anything else, and she interrupted them. "Um, is El—? Is His Highness behind this door?" she asked.

"This has nothing to do with you!" Eliza yelled, trying to keep Yui away at all costs.

Luca ignored her persistent effort and led Yui to the door. "Yes, these are Lord Filiel's quarters."

"Hey!" Eliza exclaimed.

"Lady Eliza, His Majesty has ordered me to bring her to Lord Filiel's room. If you're dissatisfied, I would ask that you please bring it up with His Majesty."

Unable to argue with an order any further, Eliza stayed silent, looking frustrated. At Luca's insistence, she stepped back, and Yui stepped forward, right up to the door. Luca and Zeke watched with bated breath.

Yui knocked on the door. "El, it's me, Yui. Open the door, okay?"

If anything, her voice had been quiet. Nevertheless, immediately after she spoke, she could hear something dropping to the floor, a dull bump, and then the sound of something breaking behind the door. Just as she was thinking, What just happ—?, the door swung open. The time between Yui speaking and the door opening had been about three seconds.

Zeke paused for a moment, then muttered, "He really did come out in three seconds."

"Yeah," Luca said. They both had distant looks on their faces, and they felt a combination of relief and exasperation—after all that, just as Theodore had predicted, the locked door had abruptly opened. It was enough to make them question why they had spent all that time racking their brains for a solution.

Filiel looked at Yui with a visible expression of shock on his face. "Are you really Yui?" he asked hesitantly.

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"Yeah."
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"Why are you—?"

"Grandpa Theo brought me. There's a lot of things I want to talk about, so can you let me in?"

"Ah, yeah," Filiel said, still surprised and taken aback by Yui's arrival. But, at Yui's prompting, he let her in. He was about to close the door when Eliza tried to get closer. However, Luca stood in her way and prevented her from entering.

"Hey, don't get in my way!" she yelled. "The door just closed!"

"As I said previously, you will be returning with us, Lady Eliza," Luca said, not paying any mind to Eliza's naked rage.

"I said I don't want to!"

"Your selfishness will not be permitted."

"Just who do you think you're talking to?! I'm—"

"This is His Majesty's order! You may be his granddaughter, and the daughter of a duke, but that means nothing," Luca rebuked her as forcefully as possible, and Eliza finally obeyed, growing quiet.

"All right. I'll go to His Excellency the Prime Minister now," Zeke said.

"Yeah, be careful," Luca advised. Offhandedly, he added, "Of all sorts of things."

"Pray that I make it back alive," Zeke muttered grimly.

Luca parted from Zeke and headed back to where Theodore was. Eliza gazed at Filiel's quarters one last time, then faced forward and began walking with Luca.

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As soon as Yui entered, her eyebrows furrowed. The pressure of the magical energy that permeated the room was palpable. The sensation of overflowing magic made one thing clear: Filiel, who had trained so hard from a young age to control his magic like it was second nature—so hard that he had once even vomited blood—was extremely agitated, and he could no longer control himself. Yui now understood why he hadn't let his family in. If anyone besides her had gotten inside, they would've instantly lost consciousness—if they were lucky. From that perspective, the barrier on the door holding in all that magic must have been quite precise.

The sight of Filiel suffering so much that he couldn't control his magic was

hard to bear. She peered at him closely. His movements seemed normal, but he also looked sick and quite tired.

"Are you all right, El?" Yui asked, extending her arm. Filiel wasn't wearing his usual gloves, and when she tried to touch his hand, he flinched and jerked his arm away, brushing her off. This surprised her somewhat—he usually never tried to avoid her. Still, she was unperturbed. She took a step forward, closing the distance between them. "Don't be afraid," she said in a gentle voice. "El, you know better than anyone that I won't get hurt just from touching you, right?" She slowly placed her fingers on his hand, then smiled. "See? It's fine."

When Filiel saw that she was smiling even after touching him, the tension in his shoulders disappeared, and his gaze, which had looked fearful, melted in relief. Then his expression twisted, as if he were crying tears of joy—he pulled Yui's arm close and hugged her tightly. Coming into contact with him in this state would normally have been impossible, even for someone like Theodore. But that was less about the magic and more because Filiel would prevent himself from touching others; he was too afraid of hurting people. This was especially true now, just after he had harmed his brother. However, he could touch Yui without fear because she wasn't affected at all by his magic. Theodore had called her because he knew this.

Yui was about to complain that Filiel was hugging her too tightly, but when she felt his shoulders trembling, she swallowed her words. No matter how much his family must have told him that Alexis was okay, Filiel was certainly still afraid. He'd had to endure every bit of it alone—all the guilt and fear that came from having hurt his brother and making everyone around him worry—and he'd had to do it while being unable to control his magic.

"You aren't alone. I'm here now," Yui murmured. To better convey those thoughts, she put her arms around him and hugged him back, though he was bigger than her.

After staying like that for a while, Filiel calmed down, and his arms relaxed. Yui then told him about Alexis, who Filiel was surely still worried about. "I met His Highness Prince Alexis, and he seemed well enough to be up and moving around. He'll be fine."

"Really?" Filiel replied, looking relieved. "I'm glad to hear that..."

In response to Filiel growing calmer, the flow of magical energy that had been spilling out of him abated somewhat. However, the room was still not safe for anyone else yet.

"More importantly, I'm worried about you, El. You look worse than His Highness."

Alexis had been bedridden from the effects of Filiel's magic, but Filiel looked even paler than his brother, and he seemed exhausted enough to collapse at any moment. Since he must have been constantly straining himself trying to contain his magic, Yui figured that he'd gotten hardly any sleep lately. If she had come a bit later, he might have even fainted. Frankly, it was impressive that he had held out for an entire week.

Yui looked around for a place where he could rest, but she could only see a table, a couch, and some other furniture in the room. There was no bed in sight. Investigating further, she noticed multiple doors leading out of the room to what she guessed were adjoining chambers. One of them, she assumed, led to his bedroom. As she would have expected from royal housing, the rooms were large, and especially for Filiel, there were enough accommodations to ensure that he could get by without too much contact with others. The other doors led to a reception room, a walk-in closet, a bathroom, and a small kitchen. She saw that there was some food, so it didn't seem like Filiel had gone the whole week with absolutely nothing to eat. The room they were currently in must have normally been used as something like a lounge where he could relax.

When Yui found the bedroom, she led Filiel by the hand to his bed. She urged him to lie down, then sat in a chair next to his bed and held his hand.

"Sleep well. When you wake up, you'll have to go say sorry to His Highness. You haven't apologized yet, have you?"

Filiel hesitated. "Will he forgive me?" He was afraid of Alexis's response—he looked pained and worried. Would Alexis be fearful of him, like so many others were, and put distance between them? Their relationship might never be the close, brotherly bond it had once been.

"It'll be fine. He's your brother, after all. And if he doesn't forgive you, I'll

apologize along with you until he does, so don't worry," Yui said cheerfully, puffing out her chest.

"That's reassuring." Filiel let out a chuckle. He was finally smiling again.

Despite all of Filiel's worrying, Yui thought that Alexis had probably already forgiven him. Actually, Alexis might not have even been angry at him in the first place. She remembered how he had seemed earlier. Alexis was going to be fine, but not all that much time had passed since the incident. He looked sick, and being up and about had to have been painful. Yui knew that, despite his condition, he had assembled with the rest of his family because he was worried about his younger brother.

"You can sleep soundly. I'll be here when you wake up."

"Thanks, Yui," Filiel said. He suddenly stared at Yui's hand, and when Yui noticed this, she tilted her head in confusion.



"What is it?"

"No, I was just thinking about how nostalgic this is. You held my hand like this while I slept once before."

"Before?" Yui asked. She pondered for a second, then remembered. "Now that you mention it, that did happen." Several years ago, she had held Filiel's hand as he'd slept, just like she was doing now.

"Whether in the past or present, I only ever show you the most pathetic side of myself. But I'm glad you're here. You truly saved me. I was honestly afraid that my magic might go on a rampage if I continued like that." Filiel slowly shut his eyes. He must have been quite exhausted, because only a short time passed before he was breathing regularly—his chest slowly rose and fell in the calm rhythm of sleep.

Yui sighed, relieved that he was getting some rest. "I've never thought you were pathetic," she whispered after a pause. "And I'm the one who's always being saved by you."

You've always been the one who's saved me, ever since we first met... I was the one who needed your help. So if things are ever difficult for you, El, I'll do everything in my power to help you. I'll be by your side, Yui swore to herself. She stared at the soundly sleeping Filiel and thought, If I was able to help you by coming here, even if just a bit, then I'm glad.

Then she held her hand out over his chest and began to chant an incantation. A shining magic circle appeared above him. When her incantation was complete, the light was absorbed into Filiel's body, and it disappeared. The magical energy that had been overflowing out of his control calmed down, and the pressure in the room instantly vanished.

I can finally be helpful to him, she thought. The time had come for her research to be of use. However, it still wasn't complete. I have to hurry for his sake too, she thought, and determination quietly welled up within her chest.

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Eliza returned, just as Theodore had asked, but she was still annoyed. The moment she entered the room, she angrily pressed Theodore. "Grandfather,

why does that girl get to be with Fil, and I have to come back here?!"

Ignoring Eliza, Theodore looked at Luca, who walked into the room right after her. "Did Filiel come out?" he asked.

"Yes, His Highness opened the door as soon as she called for him. It was basically instantaneous," Luca replied. "He didn't look well, but he had enough energy to rush out of his room."

"Ha ha ha, is that so?" Theodore asked. "That's good to hear. We can finally rest easy now. I'm sure he was quite surprised to see Yui there."

"Instantaneous..." Bernard repeated.

"Yes, instantaneous," Luca hesitantly confirmed.

Theodore sounded overjoyed, like he was gloating after a successful prank, but Bernard and the others looked like they had mixed feelings about everything. That was only natural. On the one hand, they were happy that Filiel had shown himself and that he was okay, but on the other hand, the situation wasn't easy for them to accept—while he hadn't opened the door for them, his relatives, he had readily responded to Yui.

Eliza was frustrated that Theodore had ignored her, and she raised her voice even further. "Grandfather!" she yelled, flaring with rage.

"Calm down. I understand your feelings, but you just won't cut it. Filiel isn't stable right now, and he'll only accept Yui. No matter how much you tried to call out to him, he didn't come out, remember?" Theodore asked. Bernard looked at his father reproachfully, thinking that he had been too harsh, but Theodore ignored him.

Theodore understood Eliza's feelings—she just wished to be next to Filiel as he suffered—and he was aware that what he'd said had been cruel. However, Filiel could be unstable, even during the best of times. Eliza barging into his room now could make his emotional pain even worse, and that could prevent him from ever recovering. But Theodore also knew that if he just said no, Eliza wouldn't be satisfied. He didn't want to say anything that would hurt his cute granddaughter, but he had to make things clear. Besides, no matter how things turned out, Filiel would never love Eliza romantically. Theodore secretly hoped

that after this incident, Eliza would be able to give up on Filiel and move on without any regrets.

"That was just a coincidence! Fil only opened the door because he was surprised that she was there. And if he's unstable, then that's all the more reason someone like me, who's been by his side longer than others, should be there to help him calm down! I've known Fil forever, and I've never seen that girl."

Eliza and Filiel were the same age and in the same class. She took pride in being closer to him than anyone else—close enough to know everyone he knew. She couldn't accept that she hadn't known about Yui.

"No, Eliza. You might've been with him for a while, but it can't be anyone else. It has to be Yui."

"No way!"

"Eliza, listen closely," Theodore said calmly. Eliza opened her mouth to protest, but there was an authoritativeness to the former king's voice that sapped her momentum, and she closed her mouth. "I'll say this right off the bat, but you know that I'm not trying to be mean, right? You're my precious granddaughter, after all." Theodore's voice was kind. Perhaps because his gentle words calmed her down, Eliza nodded wordlessly. He continued. "I'm sure everyone here knows about an incident similar to this one that happened several years ago."

"This is about Lord Filiel's attendant, yes?" Gaius replied first. He was referring to an affair that neither he nor any of the others could ever forget. Everyone in the room fell silent as they remembered that tragic time.

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At the time, Gaius and Theodore were raising the magically strong infant Filiel. They determined that a woman's help was necessary, so they assigned a female attendant to Filiel, one who was the best at defensive magic out of all the women working in the palace. However, even *she* needed to take various precautions while caring for baby Filiel because he was unable to control his own magic.

At present, Filiel's mother, Alicia, lived a normal life. But back then, she was so weakened by the ordeal of giving birth to Filiel that she wasn't able to step foot outside her room for several years. Because of that, she was hardly ever able to see her own son, and both she and Bernard were prevented from even hugging Filiel because neither of them was as magically strong as Theodore. On top of that, most were afraid to get close to the young Filiel because he couldn't yet control his magic. The prince's early years were thus lonely, with little human contact.

Filiel naturally came to love his attendant like a mother, since she was the one who could be by his side. But when Filiel was thirteen, the attendant died. In the middle of his training, several assassins suddenly attacked him. Present-day Filiel would have been able to fight them off, but thirteen-year-old Filiel didn't possess that kind of power. With only a few attendants and guards present, they were at a disadvantage against the large number of assassins. One of his assailants tried to directly attack him with magic, and in response, the attendant flung herself on top of Filiel to protect him. Her defense spell blocked the attack, Filiel was unharmed, and some knights came rushing in to quickly capture the assassins. However, the moment everyone had space to breathe freely, the attendant suddenly started to writhe in agony. She'd been preoccupied by the assassin, so she had cast a spell to protect from his attack, but she hadn't done anything to protect herself against *Filiel*. His control over his magic was still weak, and her body was unable to handle direct contact with him.

She screamed in agony and bled out until she died.

Filiel was in shock. He watched all of this happen right before his eyes. Those around him had often said that his power was dangerous, but he had never truly understood what they'd meant. But this incident taught him that he could actually kill someone.

From then on, he grew terrified of himself. After all, he'd witnessed the death of someone close to him—a death that his own power had caused—while still only a child. It was truly emotionally scarring.

A heavy mood filled the room. Theodore spoke, drawing everyone back from their memories. "After that, he spent his days with a gloomy expression on his face, grieving over her death and afraid of himself. He was so scared of hurting people that he avoided being near others at all costs."

"Now that you mention it, Your Majesty, I remember that you left the palace for a few days and took Lord Filiel with you," said Gaius.

"I was taking him to see Yui."

"Her?" Gaius asked. Everyone was surprised. None of them had known.

"Filiel never said anything. Whether he was sad or having a hard time, he never even cried. I didn't have the first idea about how to speak with him about it. You all were the same, right?"

They all had to agree with that—they had only been able to watch as Filiel suffered.

"I knew things would only get worse if they went on like that, so I decided to bring him to see Yui," Theodore explained. "I thought that out of anyone, she might be able to do something. And just as I thought, Filiel, who never spoke about his feelings with anyone, cried in front of her. He said that he was sad—that he was afraid of his own power. And then, thanks to him being able to vent about everything, he was able to sort through his feelings."

Theodore couldn't forget the way Filiel had sobbed. Even though he had said that he wasn't afraid of Filiel's magic, Filiel didn't believe him. After all, no one had dared to come in contact with Filiel while his magic was unstable. Theodore had never felt as powerless as he had back then. But because Yui had been there for Filiel, the boy had been able to express his sadness and sort through his feelings. Theodore knew he couldn't ever be grateful enough for the sheer miracle that someone like Yui had been there.

He continued. "Eliza, nobody is saying that you can't ever see him again. But I'm asking you to leave him alone until he calms down."

Eliza said nothing in reply. She bit her lip and lowered her head.

Silence reigned for a while. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. After being invited in, a person stepped into the room. Their entrance wiped away

the gloomy mood in an instant, and everyone's faces went stiff.

The Prince of Darkness had arrived. Layce wasn't even trying to hide his irritation; an icy smile was plastered on his face. As he looked around at the people in the room, his chilling smile widened, and he launched into a long tirade.

"Oh, is everyone having a fun time chatting together? I've been sacrificing my sleep for this past week so I can do nothing but work since a certain overly attached father abandoned his duties because he was worried for his son, who shut himself up in his room. And now I haven't been able to see my beloved wife and daughter for a week, and I haven't been able to sleep, and I'm only getting more and more annoyed. Because *someone* won't do his job! So what could possibly be the ever so important reason that justifies tearing me away from my numerous duties to come here?"

The time Layce spent with his wife and daughter was the happiest and most important part of his day. Without that time, his bad mood had reached its peak. Behind Layce stood the poor, miserable human sacrifice that had been necessary to summon the Prince of Darkness—Zeke. He looked horrible, probably because he had borne the brunt of Layce's verbal barrage on the way.

Layce's tone was quite harsh for someone speaking with royalty, but no one had the guts to warn him about it. Bernard, whom he had called an "overly attached father," felt incredibly guilty for pushing all his work onto Layce, so he couldn't say anything either. He turned to look at Theodore, who had called Layce there, as if to say, "Please do something about this."

"Of course it's important," Theodore said. "Actually, I'd like to keep your daughter here at the palace for a few days. Can you say something to her mother and grandparents for me?"

Layce furrowed his eyebrows. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a word, Bernard stood up from his chair, his eyes wide in astonishment.

"Father, she's Layce's daughter?!" he exclaimed.

"That's right."

No one could hide their surprise at that revelation. When Bernard had first heard that Layce had gotten married—and learned that it was a marriage of love—he had thought, quite rudely, So the Prince of Darkness has a heart like everyone else after all! He'd been sure that Layce had hidden some sort of ulterior motive, but Layce's love for his wife had been immediately evident from his words. By now, his infatuation for his wife and child was famous among the higher-ups.

With that in mind, Bernard was almost hysterical. Layce was already annoyed at him for not doing his job, and now they had dragged his daughter into the whole mess. He was terrified just thinking about what Layce might do if he found out that his daughter was currently alone with a boy in that boy's room. For the sake of the kingdom, should I throw away my pride as king, prostrate myself on the ground in front of him, and beg for his forgiveness? No, this is Layce. I just know he'll flatly dismiss something like that as worthless, Bernard thought, feeling truly worried.

Ignoring Bernard's confusion, Layce pressed Theodore. "What do you mean? You couldn't be referring to my cute daughter Yui, could you?" His voice was frightening and infused with forcefully suppressed rage.

"I am indeed talking about Yui," Theodore said. Layce's smile completely disappeared, leaving him expressionless. They were an inch away from disaster. With no one willing to speak, and everyone afraid to anger Layce any further, Theodore said nonchalantly, "Don't be so grumpy about it. Yui'll say, 'Papa, you're scaryyy!' Oho ho ho."

Theodore hadn't been the previous king for nothing. He had struggled through numerous truly ghastly scenes, and he was probably the only person who could take such a teasing tone with Layce at that moment.

Layce turned his quiet, intensifying anger toward Theodore. "The ridicule is all well and good, but would you mind telling me right away exactly why Yui is in the palace and why she must stay for several days? I'm not feeling particularly patient right now."

"Don't be so angry. She's known Filiel since they were both small. I'm sure you know about what happened recently with him, and I called her here

because of it. I want her to be with him until he calms down."

Layce's eyes glinted menacingly. "And you would have me accept that?"

"You're free to take her home, but I don't think she'll go," Theodore said, reacting calmly to Layce's murderous gaze. "It's obvious how Filiel sees her, and she holds him dear too."

Layce averted his eyes and lowered his face, pondering something. Then he fixed his eyes once more on Theodore. "No harm will befall Yui, and there'll be nothing that leaves her at a disadvantage, yes?"

"Of course not. On my word, I promise I won't let anything happen to her. Luckily, very few people know about the recent incident beyond the fact that an assassin entered the palace. We've simply said that Filiel and Alexis have both come down with a cold, and the only people who know why Yui is here at the palace are in this room. We'll just say that the prime minister's daughter is here for a few days to be Alicia's conversation partner. I can't imagine any fool would think to suggest something nefarious about that."

"Very well," Layce said after a pause. "I'll speak about it with Yui's grandparents and my wife."

Yui had been called to see Filiel, who was not yet betrothed, and she'd been summoned by the still highly influential former king. If this information got out, it was possible that some might set their eyes on her and try to contact her. Yui was already liable to draw unwanted attention just because she was the daughter of the prime minister—Layce wanted as much as possible to keep her from getting entangled in noble power struggles, so he had refrained from sending her to parties and other events that a daughter of nobility would attend. However, it was common for a wife or daughter of a noble or high-ranking official to be called to serve as a conversation partner for the queen. If they left it at that, no one would think it strange that Yui was at the palace. Finally, Theodore had sworn that Yui would be all right, and there was no better guarantee than that. So, while Layce had been hesitant to accept the situation, he'd ended up coming around.

"So, where's my cute Yui now?" Layce asked. His anger had subsided, and everyone in the room who had been listening to him and Theodore speak had

felt relieved. Unfortunately, this statement rekindled their nervousness.

"Yui's alone with Filiel in his room," Theodore replied.

A wave of cold air flowed out of Layce. This was no metaphor—as rage radiated out of Layce's body, his magic energy overflowed, and now he really was emitting cold air. Zeke, who had been standing behind him, instantly leaped backward, his face stiff.

"Ha ha, ha ha ha ha. Well, fine. I'll always have an opportunity," Layce said.

What kind of opportunity?! everyone wanted to ask, but they had a feeling they wouldn't like Layce's answer.

Layce cut off the stream of cold air and, as if everything were normal, turned to Bernard. "For now, I'd like Your Majesty to finish up the work that's been piling up."

"Ah, okay."

"And, if anything happens to my cute daughter, I won't show any mercy—not even against royalty. I'm prepared to resign at any time and throw the palace into a state of chaos. Be aware."

Layce had no attachment to his position as prime minister, and he wouldn't be inconvenienced at all by quitting. He already had enough savings to live the rest of his life without any worries, provided he didn't spend it wastefully, and he would happily choose to spend every day with his beloved wife and daughter. However, they all knew that if he did resign now, the country would descend into mayhem—his position was *that* important. He was so powerful that, even in foreign diplomacy, the moniker "Prince of Darkness" was known among many in neighboring countries.

Bernard, who knew best just how important Layce was, nodded and said, "Very well." He looked a bit shaken up.

"Then I'll return to my work. Goodbye," Layce said. Having finally agreed, he turned on his heel and swiftly left the room.

After his exit, everyone seemed to relax, especially Bernard. Even Eliza, who had just been angry at Theodore, seemed to have been afraid of Layce's bad

mood. She sighed, relieved.

"What a muck. It's summer, but thanks to him, the room's all chilly," Theodore joked.

Bernard felt something close to respect for his father, who could make jokes right after facing down an enraged Layce. "I don't know how you can tease Layce like that, father."

"Now just what are you saying? You're the king, son, so why don't you start acting like one? You should have him dancing in the palm of your hand."

Bernard tried to reflect on his actions, but he was a far cry from the renowned Theodore the Wise. If he was being honest with himself, he was average, perhaps even mediocre. Bernard was an earnest man, and with his hard work and education from an early age, combined with his brilliant retainers, he had no issues serving as king. Still, he could hardly be compared to his father. He was painfully aware that he lacked the ability to argue down someone like Layce, to say nothing of the quick wit necessary to skillfully manipulate him.

"It's impossible," Bernard lamented.

"Haaah, what a shameful son," Theodore said flatly, without any hesitation.

"It's lucky that Prime Minister Curtis isn't the type to be obsessed with power. If he were, he might've already usurped the kingdom by now," Alexis remarked.

Alexis had been lightheartedly joking, but Bernard could easily imagine that happening, and he found it hard to laugh. I'm truly glad that Layce doesn't want power, he thought.

"All right, it's been some time by now. Should we check on how they're doing?" Theodore asked, getting up from his chair.

Bernard stood up after him. "I'll go too, father."

Since the king was now standing and ready to depart, Gaius, the captain of the royal guard, had to go as well. Alexis also stood up to join them, but Alicia stopped him.

"You can't, Alexis. You aren't fully well yet, so get back to your room and rest."

"Your mother is right," Theodore said. "Go to your room."

Bernard nodded. "Do as they say."

With each one of them telling him to go rest, Alexis complied, though not without some dissatisfaction. "Very well. Mother, please go with them for me and tell me how Filiel is doing."

"All right," Alicia replied with a smile.

"You too, Eliza. For today, at least, go home to the duke's residence," Theodore said.

Eliza also looked dissatisfied, but she said, "Okay," and meekly obeyed.

Leaving behind Luca and Zeke to see off Alexis and Eliza, the four headed to Filiel's quarters.

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It had happened on a certain day when Yui had still been living in the O'Brian household. At that point, some time had passed since she'd begun to frequently meet with Filiel.

That day, she was informed that a messenger from a viscount had come to see her, though she had no memory of having any noble acquaintances. Cecil and Carlo had been with her then, so the two of them accompanied her to the reception room to meet this new guest.

He was a man who looked to be in his early twenties, and he was wearing all-black clothing from head to toe. When he saw Yui enter, he stood up from the couch and bowed. He slipped his hand into an inside pocket of his jacket, removed something that he concealed in a tight fist, and then approached Yui. He knelt, and only when his gaze was level with Yui's did he open his hand. Resting on his palm was a ring engraved with a unicorn coat of arms. The man quickly returned the ring to the same pocket he had taken it from.

Yui had no clue what this was supposed to mean and tilted her head in confusion. However, when her brothers saw the ring, they both reacted. Cecil opened the door and checked to see if anyone was nearby before shutting and locking it; Carlo drew all of the room's curtains closed. She watched all of this in

blank amazement.

"What's going on?" Yui asked her brothers.

"Yui, that's Grandpa Theo's ring," said Cecil. That was the name they used for Theodore whenever they didn't want his true name exposed or when they went incognito to secretly see him.

Yui was surprised, and she turned to the man.

"Lady Yui, my master has dispatched me to bring you to him, so if you would, please accompany me," the man said.

With how sudden this was, Yui was at a loss for how to answer, and her brothers interjected. "Can we come with?" Cecil asked.

"Yes, he has informed me that that would not be an issue."

"She's never been called so suddenly before. Did something happen?" Carlo asked. He seemed to have the same question as Yui.

"I am not at liberty to answer that," the man replied.

Cecil and Carlo questioned the man further, and when they ended the conversation, they turned to Yui, who still didn't understand the situation.

"Apparently, Grandpa Theo has come close by to meet you. Shall we go?" Carlo asked.

This was an unprecedentedly sudden invitation. Judging by how her brothers and the man were behaving, even Yui could tell that he didn't want to see her for any ordinary reason. "Did something happen?" she asked hesitantly.

"My deepest apologies, but I cannot say. I believe that my master may be able to shed light on the situation."

Just as Yui had feared, she wasn't able to learn anything more from the man. She turned to Cecil and Carlo, worried.

Carlo patted her head, and Cecil spoke to her kindly. "It'll be okay. What do you want to do, Yui? If you go, we'll go with you."

"I'll go. I want to go," Yui said.

"All right, then. Carlo, let's get ready quickly," Cecil said, meeting his brother's

eyes.

With that, Carlo understood what his brother wanted to say. "Yeah! I'll be right back. I'll make up something to tell mother and the servants." He rushed out of the room.

Cecil succinctly informed the man that they would be right back, then went with Yui to their rooms and quickly got ready. Once they were prepared, Yui and her brothers got on a carriage with the man. Finally, after traveling a while, they arrived at the inn in the capital where Theodore was staying. It was a completely average, middle-class inn; it was by no means cheap, but it was certainly not the type of high-class accommodations where one might expect royalty to stay. Theodore used it whenever he went into the city in disguise, and the three siblings had been there before. They were shown to the best room in the building, and when they stepped inside, they found Theodore waiting for them.

"Hello, Yui. Sorry about calling you out of nowhere," Theodore said, smiling and walking up to them. He looked vaguely tired, and it wasn't just Yui's imagination.

"Hello, Grandpa Theo. What did you want to talk about so suddenly?"

"Yeah..." he began. "You must be surprised by how abruptly I'm asking you this, but I called you because I want you to meet with Filiel."

Yui restlessly looked around the room. "Where's El?" Theodore had said he wanted her to see him, but she couldn't spot Filiel anywhere.

"Filiel's behind that door. Can you go in and see him?"

"Okay!" Yui said. She happily opened the door and entered the room where Filiel was. She didn't notice the sorrowful way Theodore watched over her.

As she stepped into the room, she wondered why Theodore had gone to the trouble of checking whether she wanted to see Filiel. After all, she had already met with him plenty of times before. Inside the room, the lights were off, and she saw Filiel sitting on the couch with his arms wrapped around his legs. His face was buried in his knees.

"EI?" she asked. She walked up to him, thinking it strange that Filiel was

hiding his face and not moving. When she reached out to touch him, he raised his voice.

"Don't touch me!" he yelled angrily. His shout echoed throughout the room.

With a start, Yui instantly noticed something was off. "What's wrong, EI?"

"It doesn't matter! Just get out!" he replied, meeting her hesitant words with a furious rejection.

He had always been kind and peaceful, and it was a shock for him to speak to her like that. He stood up and looked at her—she could see the sheer terror in his eyes. She had initially frozen, but now that she could tell that there was some reason for his actions, she approached him again. He shrunk back in fear. She didn't know why, but something inside her was telling her that she absolutely had to stay with him.

She instantly closed the distance between them and hugged him. Filiel quickly struggled to tear her off, but she desperately held on. "Yui, let go!" he shouted.

"No!"

After a prolonged struggle, Filiel realized his efforts were pointless, so he gave up and stopped moving. In the now-silent room, he muttered, "You aren't afraid of me?"

Yui fervently shook her head. She didn't know why he'd said that, or what he was thinking, but she could confidently say that she had never once been afraid of him. Perhaps those thoughts had been conveyed to him because he looked somewhere far away. Then, he began to speak. At first, his words came out in twos and threes, and he spoke almost in a whisper, but his voice steadily changed into something more intense as he went on.

"Why...? Why am I the only one like this? I'm afraid, Yui, and it isn't just me. Everyone around me is afraid of my power. I didn't want this either! And because of it, she—" His voice momentarily broke off. "No, if I had been able to control myself more... It's my fault."

"It isn't your fault, El. I'm not afraid of you," Yui said. She didn't know what he was talking about or whether her words had any meaning to him, but it was heartbreaking to watch him in pain as he spat out curses at himself. He even

forgot to wipe away the tears that streamed down his cheeks.

He'd been silently crying at first, but then he began to sob. In the end, the two of them cried together until they both fell asleep, exhausted. When they woke up, the sad look on Filiel's face hadn't gone away, but Yui was relieved to see that he looked refreshed, somehow. They looked at each other's red, swollen eyelids and smiled.

"You look horrible, El."

"You're one to talk, Yui," Filiel muttered, touching the area under her eyes.

This time, he was unafraid, and with his usual placid expression, he stroked her cheek. "I'm sorry I raised my voice. You must've been afraid."

"No, not at all. I was just surprised. I could never be afraid of you, El."

"Thanks."

Holding hands, the two of them returned to the room where Theodore was waiting. Cecil and Carlo were there too, lounging around as if it were their own bedroom.

"Oh, you're finally out. You two look incredible. Your eyes are as red as a white rabbit's," Cecil remarked.

"You didn't do anything to Yui, did you?" Carlo asked. "Well, you're a wimp, so I bet you couldn't, aha ha ha."

"You..." Filiel grabbed a nearby cushion and threw it at Carlo.

As Yui watched her brothers and Filiel horse around like usual, she spotted Theodore moving out of the corner of her eye. He went into an adjoining room, and she followed after him. "Grandpa Theo," she said.

"Oh, what is it?" Theodore said.

"Um, well, I want to know... Did something happen to El?" It had been bothering Yui the entire time, but it was too difficult to ask Filiel directly, so she instead asked Theodore, who seemed like he'd know. However, the moment she asked, Theodore's face twisted with sorrow, and she regretted ever bringing it up.

Theodore knelt so his eyes were level with Yui's. He hugged her tightly.

"What's wrong?" Yui asked.

"I'm sorry. You've really helped him. Truly, thank you..." His voice broke off.

"Grandpa Theo?" Yui asked. Theodore repeatedly thanked her. She was confused at first by his out-of-character behavior, but she was finally able to hear what had happened. As Theodore told her about the attendant who had passed away, his story overlapped in her mind with the image of Filiel in pain and wondering why he had his power. She recalled Filiel blaming himself, and now that she knew the true meaning behind his words, her eyes began to overflow with tears. She kept imagining the anguish Filiel must've been feeling after losing someone so important to him and thinking that it was his fault. The thought was too much for her to handle.

When she returned to where Filiel was, she clung to him and quietly cried again, and this threw everyone around her into quite a panic.

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Yui thought about what had happened back then, and a smile crept onto her face.

Filiel and her brothers had been quite flustered when she'd abruptly burst into tears, and they had gone through quite the ordeal trying to get her to stop crying. After she had cried to her heart's content, she and her brothers stayed the night at the inn. She had played card games with Filiel, who was feeling a bit better—they had talked, had fun, and generally made a racket until the sun came up. All the while, Theodore had been watching over them with a smile on his face. When it had come time to go back home, she was momentarily flustered after realizing that she hadn't told her mother she would be staying the night. She hadn't needed to worry though because apparently, Carlo had spun some sort of story beforehand. Yui had been impressed by his quick thinking.

And now, as she stayed with Filiel once again, she wondered if they could have a fun time like they had back then. She knew Filiel would feel better if they could.

Just as she was thinking that, there was a knock on the door and Theodore entered. Bernard, Alicia, and Gaius came in after him. Yui was about to stand up

from her chair and bow in greeting when Theodore stopped her and told her that she was fine as she was.

The four visitors approached the bed, and when they spotted her and Filiel holding hands tightly, everyone except Theodore looked like they couldn't believe their eyes.

Theodore got even closer and peered at Filiel's sleeping face. The fact that Filiel was still sleeping when his grandfather was that close must have meant he was truly exhausted. Theodore turned to Yui and murmured, "Hrm, he looks a bit pale. How was he?"

"His magic energy was a bit overexcited, and he couldn't fully control it. It seems that that was why he couldn't leave his room," she replied.

"Despite all that, it doesn't look to me like any of his magic energy is escaping," Theodore said. He looked around the room, but he couldn't feel any trace of the overflowing magic that should've been there.

"I restrained his runaway magic, and I also got rid of the energy in the room."

"By restrained it, you mean you did it yourself?"

"Yes."

Even Theodore didn't seem to have expected that answer, and his eyes went wide with surprise. "You can do something like that?" he asked.

Filiel normally had checks in place to block his magic, like his gloves and the barrier on the door. After years of various efforts undertaken by the country's top researchers, they had succeeded in creating numerous new spells, but they had yet to create any item or spell that could restrain the magic energy within a person's body. Because of that, if Filiel ever lost control, it was up to him to suppress his own magic. Yui was speaking incredibly matter-of-factly about what she had done, as if it were nothing special at all. Along with Theodore, the rest who were listening were all unable to hide their surprise.

"I wasn't able to see El for four years, but I was always thinking about what I might be able to do for him. I've been researching the entire time," Yui muttered, a quiet resolve in her voice.

Theodore smiled, as if he had remembered what Yui was best at. "Back then, and now today, we've done nothing but put ourselves in your debt."

Normally, this problem would have to be solved within the family, but Theodore had been unable to think of anything except asking Yui for help. Four years was a long time for a teenager. He wouldn't have been surprised if she'd treated her time with Filiel as something in the past, but instead she had spent their years apart tirelessly working for his sake.

Conveying as much gratitude as he could muster, Theodore took Yui's hand and put his forehead against hers. "Yui, my thanks to you, from the bottom of my heart." He continued softly. "Now, I have one more request for you."

"A request?"

"Yes. Filiel still won't be feeling well after everything, so I'd like you to stay at the palace for a few days. I'd be glad to have you stay here too. And if you can restrain his magic energy if it goes wild, then that's all the more reason I'd like to have you here."

Yui was surprised by this unexpected proposal, but she was just as worried about Filiel as he was, and she was ready to stay. Still, there was one massive concern that she needed to resolve first.

"I don't mind at all—I'm worried about Filiel too. But what will my dad say?" Her voice was unsure. She knew Layce wanted to keep her away from noble society, and she had followed his lead—she didn't want anything much to do with nobles herself. However, she could easily guess that he would be particularly resistant to her staying at the palace.

"There's no need to be bothered about that. I've already got his permission, and he's even going to talk to your mother and grandparents for you."

Yui's eyes widened. She had been certain that he would be against it. "I was sure that he'd get angry."

"He did, a bit. But he agreed in the end, so all's well that ends well."

Bernard and the others questioned whether Layce's reaction could have been described as only "a bit" angry, but they said nothing. However, Yui could tell from the looks on their faces roughly what had occurred. But no matter how

they had gotten there, if Layce wasn't against it, she had no reason to refuse.

"Then, thank you for having me for the next few days," Yui said, bowing her head.

Theodore smiled awkwardly and lowered his head. "If anything, we're the ones thankful to have you. Make yourself at home."

Bernard stepped forward. "Yui, was it?" he asked.

"Yes," Yui replied, nervously straightening her posture. She was on good terms with Filiel and Theodore, but even so, she had only ever thought of the king as someone a world away from her.

"From the bottom of my heart, thank you for what you've done for my son," Bernard said.

"Thank you for helping Filiel," Alicia added after him.

Yui was delighted to meet Filiel's parents, but at the same time, she was at a loss. How should she respond to two of the most powerful people in the country thanking her? This wasn't something that would normally ever happen. "Ah, no, not at all," she managed to say.

"Ha ha ha, there's no need to be so stiff. We'll be seeing a lot of each other for a while, so take it easy," Bernard said.

"Yes, feel free to relax," Alicia said.

They really are El and Grandpa Theo's family, Yui thought. Though both of them held positions of utmost authority, they were kindly smiling and speaking in a friendly manner to her, which instantly gave her a positive impression of them.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then. For the rest of today, make sure you get some rest," Theodore said, tactfully leaving Yui in the room and exiting along with the others before they woke up Filiel.

Right after Yui watched them go, her nervousness faded away and the tension disappeared from her shoulders. She suddenly noticed something.

"I haven't had anything to eat."

She'd been interrupted in the middle of her lunch and had been taken to the palace immediately, so she hadn't eaten a proper meal. Not only that, but she had been absorbed in conversation for the entirety of her time at the palace, and it was already pitch-black outside. It was almost a new day, and she hadn't even noticed. Theodore had told her to rest, which meant that it was incredibly unlikely that anyone was going to bring them food. Still, she waited anyway, unable to shake the feeling that someone might come...but they never did. After a while, Yui lay down next to Filiel in a huff, but the more she thought of it, the more hungry she felt. Her stomach's sorrowful rumbling echoed in vain throughout the still room.

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When Bernard left Filiel's room, he pressed Theodore for an explanation about what he had just seen.

"Father!"

"What's with all the ruckus? It's already the middle of the night," Theodore said.

"Don't 'what' me! That girl was touching Filiel, and he didn't even have his gloves on. And she was able to suppress another person's magic energy, something countless researchers haven't been able to do. Just who is she?!"

Alicia and Gaius were also curious. They stared intently at Theodore and waited for him to answer.

Theodore continued walking and said, "She's just Layce's beloved daughter. And she's unaffected probably because she's strong, and she has the capacity for it."

"Capacity?" Bernard said.

"Everyone's magic energy leaks out a bit if they don't consciously contain it. So why can't people touch Filiel specifically?" Theodore paused. "It's because his magic energy is too great, and people who touch him can't handle it all. To give an example, it's like pouring hot lava into a weak glass container—it'll shatter as soon as you try. That's why Gaius and I have to use our own magic to prevent his magic from flooding our bodies whenever we touch him." The

others listened quietly and intently. "Yui's got the capacity to accept massive amounts of magic energy, so she can touch him without needing to defend against it like we have to."

"I see; so that's the logic behind it," Bernard said. "Still, there's something I can't quite wrap my head around... But anyway, she's the girl you said was Filiel's first love, isn't she?"

"That's right."

Bernard sighed, looking troubled. "Why, of all people, did she have to be Layce's daughter...?" Alicia and Gaius both looked as if they didn't know what to think of it.

"Strange how life is. Layce only got married to her mother half a year ago. Of course, Filiel didn't expect it, but even I didn't think that she'd end up as Layce's daughter. I was just going to get some high-ranking noble to adopt her, which would've easily shut the rest of those nobles up, but it won't go so easily now, not when we have to defeat the Prince of Darkness."

Yui had been the daughter of Count O'Brian, but after her parents' divorce, her mother had taken her, and she had become an ordinary commoner. There would have doubtlessly been some objections if she'd gotten married to Filiel. Theodore had planned to silence any complaints from nobles who were too picky about status by adopting her into a high-ranking noble, and if she and Filiel had gotten along well, he had been ready to instantly put his plan into action. But now that Layce was her father, all his hard work had been for nothing.

"Layce certainly was doting on her. I can't imagine that he'll agree to her marrying that easily," Bernard said. Yui was the prime minister's daughter, so while the issue of status had been resolved, the task before them had gotten much more difficult than convincing a crowd of nobles would have been.

As Bernard worried himself about the trouble that was sure to befall his son, Alicia hesitantly said, "Um... We left Yui in the room, but is that all right? If Prime Minister Curtis finds out that his daughter spent the night together with a boy, won't he fly into a rage?"

Alicia's words clued Bernard into the possibility, and he began panicking.

"No problem," Theodore said. "You know, Filiel's a wimp, so I bet nothing'll happen."

"But still..." Bernard said. The person Filiel loved was alone with him in his room. Bernard knew there was no guarantee he wouldn't make a move.

Theodore playfully grinned, indifferent to Bernard's concerns. "If anything, I'd be the first to welcome it if something *did* happen. If we can solidify their relationship, even Layce might accept defeat, and things could continue without a hitch. Oho ho ho."

"Oh, and I might get that girl I've always wanted," Alicia added.

"I'm more worried about Filiel getting assassinated before that happens," Bernard said. In contrast to Alicia's joyful ignorance of the crisis Filiel was in, Bernard was deeply concerned about his son's future, and Gaius felt much the same toward the boy he had raised.

## **Chapter Ten: A Mother's Love and Hope**

Filiel awoke in a bed large enough to comfortably fit several adults. His vision was blurry, but since he was able to make out the light filtering through the curtains, he could tell that it was morning. He had slept soundly for the first time in days. Though he had just woken up and was still lethargic, he also felt somewhat refreshed. As his thoughts began to come into focus, he noticed that something unusual had happened to him.

"My magic energy has settled down? How did that happen?"

His magic energy had been about to boil over before he'd gone to sleep, but now, it was back to normal. Wondering what in the world had occurred, Filiel rolled onto his side. His heart almost leaped out of his chest. Lying next to him was Yui, softly breathing as she slept quietly. He was momentarily stunned, but he quickly remembered what had happened the night before.

That's right. So she fell asleep like that, he thought. He propped his upper body on one elbow and leaned in until he was right beside her. A smile crept onto his face as he watched her sleeping peacefully. If Eliza could've seen him at that moment, she might have vented intense jealousy at Yui; then again, she might've just made the effort to overcome her feelings for Filiel. After all, his overflowing love for Yui was obvious from just a single look at his eyes.

Filiel put his hand on her cheek and brought his face closer, then planted a soft kiss on her forehead.

"I'm sure she'll let me get away with this much."

He continued to gaze at her. After a short while, Yui stirred and woke up. She met his eyes, but it didn't seem like she could tell whether she was perceiving reality or still immersed in a dream.

Filiel smiled sweetly. "Good morning, Yui."

She was silent for a long moment, then said, "El..."

"Hm?"

"I'm hungry..."

With perfect timing, her stomach rumbled, shattering the charming atmosphere Filiel had been working hard to create. Feeling deflated, he buried his face in his pillow.

She had woken up next to a boy with his hand on her cheek, and their bodies were close enough to be touching. Normally, being in that type of situation with the opposite sex would be a cause for her to turn red and shriek—whether she liked him or not. Filiel had anticipated that reaction, but she hadn't blushed; on the contrary, she had been completely unaffected, and the first words she had spoken had been entirely divorced from anyone's idea of passion. He could already tell that she truly didn't see him as a member of the opposite sex.

Unaware that her frank desires had caused hitherto untold amounts of damage to Filiel's psyche, Yui looked confused. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I knew what I was in for, I really did, but I didn't know it would be this bad," Filiel muttered. "But even just a bit more... Darn it, I have to win here if I'm going to have any chance of beating the Prince of Darkness."

"Are you okay?" Yui asked. She seemed fully awake now, and the sleepiness in her eyes was gone.

"Yeah, I just had a small realization about how cruel reality can be. I'm good. Food... Okay, let's have breakfast."

Yui tilted her head in puzzlement at Filiel as he got out of bed with slumped shoulders. He rang a bell, and after a short wait, Luca and Zeke entered the room. When they saw Filiel, they rushed to his side, looking deeply concerned.

"Are you all right?!" Luca asked.

"Yeah. It looks like I worried you guys quite a bit. I'm fine now, so don't worry."

"That's great to hear."

Filiel's two guards looked relieved to see that he was back to normal.

"Anyway, we're hungry, so can you get us something to eat?"

"Of course, right away," Luca said. He exited for a short while, then returned

carrying a succession of dishes. After having slept on an empty stomach, Yui's eyes sparkled when she saw the diverse array of food before her. An ordinary household would've never been able to whip up such a spread.

"Wow, amazing. The palace chefs don't work here for nothing! Hey, is it all right if I have some?" she asked.

"Sure," said Filiel.

Yui picked up a fork and was about to dig in when she noticed that Filiel had nothing but soup in front of him. "Is that all you're going to eat, EI? Nothing else?"

"I've been in my room for a while, and I've hardly had anything to eat. Soup is easy to digest. Go ahead and have the rest for me."

"All right, I'll take you up on that offer."



Plate after plate, the food disappeared from the table. Yui had learned enough manners as a child to know proper etiquette during meals, and she cleaned each plate without any hesitation.

Filiel smiled peacefully as he watched her happily eating. "You must've been really hungry."

"Well, I was called here in the middle of my lunch yesterday."

"Sorry about that. Next time we see each other, I'll give you something as thanks for everything yesterday."

"Okay, then during the training camp, come shopping with me in town. I'm going to buy a bunch of stuff to bring back for everyone, and it'll be hard to carry it all on my own," Yui said happily.

Filiel smiled awkwardly. "I wish I could join you, but there are too many issues with me walking through the middle of a crowd of people. I don't think I'll be able to do it."

"Don't worry, we'll manage something."

"Something? I mean..."

Their friendly conversation continued. Luca and Zeke watched it all. It was as if they'd never seen anything like it before. After the meal ended, Yui and Filiel took a short rest.

With a serious look on his face, Filiel began to speak. "I'm going to see my brother now. Can you come with me, Yui?"

"Sure."

Before going to see Alexis, they tried to meet with Bernard, but the king was swamped with all the various government business that had piled up recently, and they were told that he didn't currently have any time. So, with no other option, they headed to Alexis's room.

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On the way there, they passed by a number of people. That in itself was nothing to remark upon. They were in the royal palace, so knights and maids

often traversed the corridors. What bothered Yui was the look in their eyes when they saw Filiel. When he passed them, they stepped to the side and bowed their heads. However, in addition to the awe and respect they displayed toward royalty, they looked frightened, like they were trying not to come too close to something dangerous.

Yui had heard that the people around Filiel were afraid of him. She could touch him without issue though, and many who knew him, like Theodore, Cecil, and Carlo, treated him normally and never showed a single inkling of fear. Because of that, she hadn't ever gotten a real sense of what that fear looked like. But now that she could see it firsthand, she was finally able to experience what he dealt with on a daily basis, and it came as a considerable surprise.

El has always had to deal with people looking at him like that, Yui thought as they walked. She was so absorbed in this idea that she didn't notice when Filiel stopped—she bumped right into him, headfirst.

"Oof!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I was looking somewhere else."

They had finally arrived outside Alexis's room, but Filiel seemed nervous. He just stood motionlessly in front of the door without knocking or calling out to his brother. When Yui abruptly took his left hand with both of hers, his shoulders twitched. Then she smiled, and he relaxed. The tension in his shoulders disappeared, and his expression softened slightly, as if to say, "I'm all right now." With his free right hand, he patted Yui's hands. She quietly released her hold on him.

Zeke and Luca, who were standing behind them, hadn't known that Yui could safely touch Filiel. They were so surprised by Yui's lack of hesitation when she touched him that they couldn't even speak, though Yui and Filiel didn't notice this.

Filiel faced forward and knocked on the door. A man who looked like an attendant appeared from inside. The man bowed, then let the four of them into the room.

Alexis was lying in bed with his torso propped up, and Alicia was sitting in a chair next to him. Filiel had braced himself for them to be afraid of him, but neither showed a single trace of fear or disgust; they just smiled warmly. Filiel relaxed his clenched fist.

"My apologies, Alexis," Filiel said.

Alexis paused. "Are you feeling better, Filiel?"

Filiel had been prepared for a scolding from his brother, but the first words past his lips were ones of worry. "Y-Yes, sorry for making you worry."

"That's good. You don't have to bother yourself about what happened, you know."

"But-!"

Alexis interrupted Filiel's protest. "It was just an unlucky accident. You were just trying to protect me, right? What's the use in blaming you for that?"

"But it doesn't change the fact that I almost killed you! And you still look ill..."

"But I'm here, and I'm fine. I also wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been. There's no need to beat yourself up about it."

Alexis was clearly offering forgiveness, but Filiel locked eyes with his brother, a look of dissatisfaction on his face. Then Yui, who was watching the situation unfold as she stood next to Luca and Zeke near the door, stepped forward. Everyone turned to look at her, and she bowed.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness," she said, speaking to Alicia and Alexis, "my apologies for not properly introducing myself yesterday. My name is Yui Curtis, and I am the daughter of Layce Curtis, the prime minister."

Alexis didn't seem to be feeling well at all, but with an unbroken smile, he replied, "I don't mind. Everyone had other things on their minds yesterday, and besides, you came all this way to help Filiel. I should be thanking you."

"Yes, he's right. Thanks to you, Filiel came out of his room," Alicia said with a warm smile.

Filiel awkwardly averted his gaze, and Yui quietly laughed at his childish behavior. She looked at Alexis, then said, "With all due respect, Your Highness,

may I ask how you are feeling?"

"Yeah. I feel a lot better, so I'm fine."

Contrary to what he said, she could tell just by looking at him that he was actually hardly fit to even get out of bed. Yui fretted for a bit, then decided to bring it up. "If it's all right with you, Your Highness, I believe that I may be able to be of service."

Alexis blinked. "You? Are you saying that you can heal my current condition?" "Not definitively, but I may be able to make it better than it is now."

"The palace doctor and the best healers in the kingdom have said that hastening my recovery would be impossible. But you're saying you can do just that...?"

Without any hesitation, Yui nodded. "Yes."

"Do you mind if I make my judgment after hearing you out?" Alexis asked after a pause.

"Of course not," Yui said. "Your Highness was affected by a strong, outside source of magic energy, and your own magic energy is currently in an unstable state, which has had a negative effect on your body."

Everyone listened intently to what Yui had to say. The palace doctor had told them much the same thing, which showed how knowledgeable Yui was.

"Yeah, so to put it simply, I'll get better if someone stabilizes my magic energy," Alexis said. "But all the doctors and healers say there's no way to do it—that I have no option but to wait until it stabilizes on its own. When you say that you can heal me, you mean to tell me you can do that?"

"Yes, as far as I'm aware, there is a spell that makes it possible."

"I see... But if you fail, neither you nor your father will get out of it unscathed. You're aware of the consequences of what you're saying, I assume?" Alexis shot Yui a piercing gaze, warning her that if she couldn't be absolutely certain, she shouldn't do it. He sounded almost as if he was threatening her, but it was for her sake as well. Even if she was only trying to heal him, if something were to happen to the crown prince, both Yui and her father would take the blame.

Without faltering, Yui replied, "It will be all right. In fact, I've succeeded in healing someone before, and he's in this room." She looked at Filiel, and everyone else followed suit.

"You healed him?" Alexis asked, shooting a wide-eyed look at his brother.

"Yes, I did."

"Huh? I don't remember that at all," Filiel said. He was the most surprised out of anyone there.

"Your magic energy was out of control until yesterday, but when you woke up this morning, it was stable, remember?" Yui said.

Filiel hesitated. "Wait, did you heal me?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, now that you mention it, you did tell us about that when we checked up on you yesterday," Alicia said. "Father was quite surprised as well."

"I see... Grandfather too..." Alexis pondered something, then checked with Yui again. "Are you sure you can do it?"

"Yes." She showed no hesitation. If now wasn't the moment to reveal the results of the research she had done for Filiel, then when *would* be the right time?

Alexis nodded. "Then, if you don't mind..."

"Please wait, Your Highness!" A man standing in the corner of the room hurriedly protested Alexis's request. "No matter how confident she may be, to entrust this to a child—"

Alexis silenced him with a look. Seeming dissatisfied, the man silently bowed and stepped back.

"Sorry," Alexis said.

"No, not at all. Feeling nervous is perfectly reasonable."

The man had every reason to not trust Yui, after all. She was just a girl who had come out of nowhere, and now she was saying that she could treat something that even the palace doctors had been helpless against. Alexis had

only assented so readily because Layce was Yui's father and because his own grandfather had called for her. He had more faith in the people around her than he did in her.

If she messed up, she would cause trouble for Layce and Theodore—failure wouldn't be tolerated. However, she was absolutely confident in herself. She never would have spoken up otherwise.

Yui walked up to Alexis's side, looking somewhat nervous, then said, "Please excuse me." She held her hand up to his chest, just as she had with Filiel. Light began pouring out of her outstretched palm as soon as she began her incantation. It spread, wrapping around Alexis, then disappeared within his body.

"How are you feeling, Your Highness?" she asked.

Alexis opened and closed his fist, checking how he felt. "Incredible. I feel good. Definitely better than I did just a moment ago. I had no idea a spell like this existed. From how you look, you're a Liefe, right? So that must have been a nonelemental spell."

"Yes, it was," Yui replied. She had been confident, but failure hadn't been an option, and she was secretly relieved that she had succeeded without an issue.

"Now that I'm feeling better, there's no reason for you to feel bad anymore, Filiel."

Filiel still looked unhappy. "Alexis, that doesn't—"

"El, stop trying to close the sale if he isn't buying," Yui interrupted.

"What am I supposed to be selling...?"

"His Highness, who was the one hurt, is telling you that he forgives you, so there's no reason for you to complain and keep trying to make him accept your apology. I also think it's improper to continue tiring out someone who's sick."

Unable to refute her, Filiel remained silent.

Alexis laughed out loud after watching their exchange. "It looks like she knows how to handle you better than I do, Filiel."

"It seems so," Alicia said. "And Yui, by 'El,' you aren't, by chance, referring to

Filiel, are you?"

"Ah... My apologies." They weren't in public, so Yui had inadvertently reverted to her usual way of speaking. She and Filiel might have been close, but even so, she was worried that her casual speech might have been too much. She tried to gauge how Alicia might react.

"Hee hee, there's no need to apologize. I'm not angry at all; I was only asking. I'm just happy that Filiel is close enough with you that you feel comfortable calling him by a nickname."

Yui felt relieved that Alicia hadn't been angry. Then, she turned to Alexis and observed him intently. Judging by how he looked, his magic energy had calmed down, but it was always better to be safe than sorry. "I believe His Highness is all right, but just in case, it might be wise to have the palace doctor examine him."

"I know my body best, and without having anyone else examine my condition, I can soundly say that I'm feeling better now," he said. "But, I guess we might as well." He glanced at the man in the corner, and without needing any further instruction, the man bowed and left the room.

"We'll be leaving too, then," Filiel said, moving to exit the room.

"Wait, Filiel," Alexis called out. "I want to talk with Yui, so wait outside the room for us."

"Talk? By herself?" Filiel asked, hesitating.

"Don't look so worried. Mother will be with us too. I just want to thank her."

"Very well," Filiel said after a pause. He looked at Yui as if to ask, "You good?" and when Yui answered him with a nod, he exited with Luca and Zeke. That left Yui, Alexis, and Alicia still in the room.

"Thanks for everything. Not just for what you've done for me, but for Filiel too," Alexis said.

It seemed that Yui had been receiving nothing but thanks from royalty since yesterday. She was so uncomfortable that she almost felt like running away. Though she was the daughter of a noble, after the last four years, she felt more

like a commoner.

"Not at all. I haven't done anything special. And I had my own reason for healing Your Highness."

"What reason was that?"

"As long as Your Highness was bedridden, El would continue to blame himself. I wanted to help him feel better, if only a little bit. If that hadn't been the case, I probably wouldn't have said anything." And the cost of failure was much too high, Yui thought, giving herself a wry, internal smile. "So, while I appreciate it, I didn't do anything worthy of praise."

Alexis smiled awkwardly at Yui's frank implication that she wouldn't have helped him if Filiel hadn't been there. "Still, you did heal me. And as his brother, let me thank you for caring about him so much. Truly, you have my sincere appreciation. Take care of Filiel."

Yui bowed and left the room.

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"You okay?" Filiel asked Yui as soon as she came out.

She smiled uncomfortably, feeling a bit fed up. What does he think will happen in a room with the queen and the crown prince? Why does everyone around me have to be so worried about everything all the time? "You and my brothers are always so worried. I'm not a kid, you know."

Filiel patted her head. "I can't help that I'm worried. And I'm much better than they are."

Seeing that, Zeke and Luca were surprised, and Zeke said, "Hey, Filiel!" "What?" Filiel asked, annoyed.

"Don't 'what' me."

"He's right. Is it really okay for you to touch her?!" Luca asked. Normally, defense magic was essential before Filiel could come into contact with anyone, but he had been able to touch Yui without either of them casting a spell.

"Oh, Yui's all right. She can touch me normally. She doesn't have to cast any

defense spells like grandfather does."

Filiel had never once tried to initiate contact with anyone else on his own, even Eliza, but he had just touched Yui like it was nothing. Now that Luca and Zeke could see how much he let his guard down around Yui, she looked completely different in their eyes. Knowing Filiel, they would have expected him to avoid her and everyone else after he had mistakenly hurt Alexis, whether he was able to touch her or not, so they were surprised to see that he didn't show even the slightest sign that he was avoiding other people.

"What should we do now?" Yui asked Filiel. He'd finished apologizing to Alexis. She had been told to stay at the palace for a while, but she hadn't heard anything about what she should do during that time.

"Hm, yeah. I was thinking we could go see grandfather... Though honestly, I don't really want to. I just *know* he'll make some sarcastic remark!" Filiel exclaimed. His statement had a whiff of paranoia to it, but the concern behind it was a certainty based on many years of experience.

"But that doesn't mean you should avoid seeing him," Zeke said.

"Zeke's right," Luca added. "He was quite worried about you as well."

"Ngh..." Filiel grunted, unable to say anything in response, and Yui quietly giggled. Theodore sometimes teased him, but she knew that he really was worried about Filiel more than anyone else.

From there, they went right to Theodore's room, but Filiel made no attempt to knock or enter; he left his hand hanging in the air in front of the door. This wasn't from nerves, like when he had gone to see Alexis, but out of reluctance —he didn't want to enter, and he couldn't bring himself to knock.

"Maybe you can resign yourself to it and just go in?" Yui suggested.

Filiel hesitated, then he finally said, "Yeah," and resolved to get it over with. However, the moment he was about to knock, the door opened.

"What are you doing in front of the door, Your Highness?" the man who had opened the door asked.

"Ah, sorry, I... I was just preparing myself..."

Yui remembered the man's face. "You must be the person who came to meet me," she said. He was the man who had visited the O'Brian residence as Theodore's messenger once.

The man looked at Yui and smiled gently. "It has been quite some time since we last met, Lady Yui. I am honored that you remembered me. My apologies for not properly introducing myself back then. My name is Russ, and I take care of His Majesty's everyday needs." Russ put a hand to his chest and bowed. "Now, please come in. His Majesty is eagerly looking forward to seeing you."

At Russ's insistence, the two of them entered, and Theodore greeted them with a smile. "You sure left me twiddling my thumbs for a while."

Filiel paused. "I'm sorry for worrying you."

"And how? I sure didn't expect my grandson to be shutting himself up in his room at his age. Just where did I go wrong in raising you? I even had to bring Yui to the palace. I feel so ashamed that I could cry," Theodore said with a mock sob. He covered his brow and acted like he was crying, but his eyes were completely dry.

Filiel suppressed his anger at Theodore's obvious teasing and replied, "I didn't shut myself up in my room just for the fun of it, you know. I had to."

"Getting so worked up over something so small and losing control just means you lack training. A weakling like that will never defeat the final boss."

"Gah."

Where did that kind, worried grandfather from yesterday go? Yui thought. As Theodore enjoyed Filiel's responses, Luca and Zeke looked upon their master with pity, like this was an everyday occurrence. Yui felt a twinge of nostalgia at Theodore's insistent joking. Grandpa Theo hasn't changed one bit.

"All right, that's enough teasing..." Theodore said, satisfied. "Yui, come here." He waved Yui over to a table at the back of the room, and she followed. "I thought you'd be here before long, so I got a few treats for you. The palace pâtissiers put their heart and soul into every single one of these! So, do they look good?"

The table was crowded with an assortment of fruit tarts, cookies, and other

baked goods, alongside chocolate and custard pudding. There were all sorts of treats that Yui loved, and some that she hadn't ever seen before.

"Thanks! I love you, Grandpa Theo!" Yui said, overjoyed at the unexpected treat. As she took a seat at the table, she was so cheery that she was about to start humming.

"Oho ho ho, love, huh? Hear that, Filiel?" Theodore shot his grandson a meaningful gaze.

A vein bulged at Filiel's temple. "You...damn...geezer..."

Russ made them tea and placed teacups in front of everyone. Filiel's two guards stood behind him. Yui, meanwhile, had her fill of the treats before her. Each one looked so beautiful that she almost felt like it was a waste to eat them, and it was clear that they had taken an inordinate amount of time to make. And, whether it was because the tea leaves were high quality or because Russ was good at brewing it, the tea was also delicious. Yui eagerly ate, aiming to sample every single dish on the table.

"Mmm, this is incredible!" she said, satisfied.

"Oh, really?" Theodore smiled. "Just watching you enjoy those treats makes it all worthwhile." If an outsider had witnessed that scene, they would have thought that the two of them were really grandfather and granddaughter.

"Ah, by the way, since I'll be at the palace for a bit, where should I stay?"

"I think Filiel's room works just fine."

"Just hold on! When did you talk about this?" Filiel asked. This was the first time he'd heard that Yui would be staying in the palace, and hearing that she would be sleeping in his room on top of that was quite a surprise.

"What, you don't want to stay in the same room?" Theodore said.

"No. That's not what I'm saying." If anything, I'm glad to have her stay, Filiel thought.

Theodore grinned like he had somehow heard Filiel's internal monologue. "So it's not a problem," he said, moving to end the conversation.

However, Yui then said something that startled Filiel. "But Grandpa Theo, isn't

El engaged? I think it'd be a big problem if we stayed in the same room."

"Huh?!"

"That girl outside your room yesterday said so."

Theodore paused. "It was Eliza, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," Luca said, and Zeke also agreed.

"You seem to be misunderstanding something," Filiel said, hurriedly correcting her. "Eliza's just a childhood friend. She isn't my fiancée."

"Oh, really?" Yui asked. She had a vague memory of Filiel's guards denying it, but since her mind had been completely occupied by thoughts of Filiel, she had only been partially listening.

"Yes, really!" Filiel exclaimed.

Overwhelmed by Filiel's frantic insistence, Yui was convinced, but she was still a bit worried. "Even so, if a girl stays overnight with a prince, people will spread strange rumors. Won't that be a problem, El?"

"That won't be an issue," Theodore said. "People hardly ever go near Filiel's room if they aren't called there. The only people who do are trustworthy, and they won't spread rumors. Just in case, I'll warn them, so you don't have to worry. You're already staying in an unfamiliar place, so you would feel safer and less lonely with Filiel by your side, right, Yui?"

"Yeah," Yui said. She certainly would feel more at ease if she was with Filiel. She didn't notice, however, that Theodore had expertly led her to agree.

Theodore got close to Filiel and whispered in his ear so Yui couldn't hear. "Don't be a wimp, or you'll waste this perfect opportunity. No matter how terrifying the Prince of Darkness may be, he'll permit it in a heartbeat if he has a cute grandchild that looks just like Yui."

"Grandfather!" Filiel shouted, rebuking Theodore.

Theodore smiled playfully. "If you're so shaken by something like that, then you still have a long way to go, Filiel."

Yui didn't know what Theodore had said, but she could tell that he was

messing with Filiel. "Grandpa Theo, don't tease him so much."

"What? This is just how I show my love! Oho ho ho."

Theodore's loud laugh sapped all of Filiel's energy, and he slumped over listlessly. Luca and Zeke looked at him with sympathy in their eyes. Then his grandfather announced yet another coming hardship Filiel would have to face.

"Also, you'd better watch your back from now on."

"What's this all of a sudden?" Filiel asked.

"Naturally, he knows that Yui is staying at the palace, and by now, he should've caught wind that his cute daughter spent last night with a boy."

"Gah!" Filiel exclaimed. His face stiffened as he reckoned with the deadly yet imminent possibility that he was heading to fight the final boss mentally unprepared and without any weapons.

Knowing her father, Yui sensed danger as well. *El is a prince, so even papa won't do anything rash...right?* She couldn't completely rule him out using force against royalty. She knew the outrageous way he acted normally, and she couldn't help but feel uneasy, no matter how much she tried to convince herself otherwise.

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Meanwhile, Alexis was being visited by the palace's chief doctor, Augus. He was a man in his early sixties with gray hair who wore glasses. Accompanying him was a tall, thin, nervous-looking young man with long hair down to the middle of his back—this was Clive, the commander of the blue division.

Garlant's army consisted of a commander in chief at the top with six large divisions beneath him. Each division was referred to by its color, and the blue division was organized around those who specialized in the healing arts. Clive, the commander of the blue division, was incredibly skilled at healing magic. It was often said that no one in the country was better at healing than him.

Incidentally, the color that represented the Royal Guard was gold, and Gaius, who had raised Filiel, was its commander. The Royal Guard was not often referred to by its color.

When Augus finished Alexis's medical examination, he had a serious look on his face, and he glanced at Clive before telling Alexis the results. "It appears that Your Highness's magic energy has returned to normal. Honestly, I doubted it when I first heard it, but Your Highness really does seem to have recovered."

"I see," Alexis said.

Unable to sit and remain silent, Clive leaned forward. "Your Highness, is it really true that the girl used magic to heal you?!"

"Yes. She spoke an incantation, light appeared, and my body absorbed it. After that, I instantly felt better."

Augus and Clive still looked like they couldn't believe what he was saying. Augus was the most highly trusted and skilled doctor out there, and he managed the other palace doctors. Clive, who was in charge of the blue division, was often referred to as the best healer in the kingdom. Both of these high-ranking men were confident in their own abilities, and in their professional judgment, it had been impossible to cure Alexis. The only option they'd been able to think of was to wait until his magic energy stabilized on its own. From that perspective, it was unimaginably shocking for them to hear that a girl who was still attending a magic academy had cured him.

"Currently, there exists no spell that can directly suppress the magic energy inside a person's body," Augus said. "Research along those lines has become much more active since His Highness Prince Filiel was born, but it hasn't been practically applied yet. The best we have is the formula that, when engraved on a door, can prevent magic energy from leaking through, but using it on a human body would be unthinkable."

Clive supplemented the doctor's explanation. "Just as Dr. Augus says, casting a spell on a human being and on an inanimate object are completely different acts. If there is any interference from the body's internal magic energy, the spell becomes quite dangerous, and if you're unlucky, both the subject of the spell and the caster may be harmed. At present, it is said to be impossible, and it goes without saying that I can't cast a spell on a person either."

"So that means she can use magic that's beyond your ability," Alexis said.

"Still, she's only a student..." As the commander of the blue division, it was

hard for Clive to admit that he had been bested by a student.

The look of displeasure on his face told Alexis all he needed to know. "But it's a fact—I was cured. And Augus said that it would take at least three months for my magic energy to stabilize."

Clive pursed his lips and said nothing more. Alexis was indeed better, so there was nothing else he could say. But he still couldn't believe it. He had his pride as the commander of the blue division, and he wouldn't accept that a lowly student had been able to accomplish something he couldn't.

"Your Highness, would it perhaps be possible for me to speak with that girl?" Augus asked. "As a doctor, I have an interest in finding out how she did it."

"Please, I would like to talk to her too!" Clive chimed in.

Alexis couldn't answer them right away. He wanted to let them meet with her, but he knew very well that things weren't that simple. Yui's guardian stood in the way. "I'd like to let you meet her, but it's a bit difficult," he said after a pause.

"Is there some sort of problem?" Augus asked.

"Well, you see...she's Prime Minister Curtis's daughter."

"The prime...minister..."

Augus and Clive were two of the kingdom's higher-ups. Naturally, they knew that Layce had recently gotten married to a woman who had a child from a previous marriage. They also knew that Layce doted on that child to an abnormal degree. Layce continually refused to send his daughter to formal events or have her meet with members of the government because he didn't want her to start dating anyone untoward—this stance was the stuff of legends in their circles. Both of them knew that if they went to ask Layce, it was incredibly unlikely that he would let them meet her.

Still, they couldn't completely give up, so they recklessly marched into Layce's office just as he was angrily dealing with a pile of work. They begged him to let them meet her, but as soon as the words left their mouths, he ruthlessly drove them out of his office with a glacial smile on his face.

Afterward, each of their desks was buried with an unexpected deluge of work many times greater than normal. They were so swamped that they weren't able to see Yui for the entire time she was at the palace. It went without saying that they knew who had created all that work for them.

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The next day, as Yui and Filiel were idly spending time together in his room, the door was suddenly thrown open. They both turned to see who in the world would be so rude as to come into a member of the royal family's room without permission. It was the queen consort of Garlant, Alicia. She stood there looking excited for some reason, and several of her ladies-in-waiting were arrayed behind her.

Alicia pointed at Yui and said, "All right, get to it!"

"Yes, Queen Alicia!" the ladies-in-waiting said in unison.

"Huh?" Yui exclaimed, but before Filiel could stop them, they charged in and dragged Yui out of the room. She could hear Filiel saying something behind her, but the ladies-in-waiting were practically carrying her, and she couldn't do anything except let them take her to some room.

Indifferent to her bewilderment, they pulled her deeper into the room and, of all things, grabbed Yui's clothes and began to undress her. With no time for her to comprehend this sudden turn of events, they threw her into a luxurious bath, one large enough to accommodate ten adults comfortably stretching out their legs. To add insult to injury, they started painstakingly scrubbing her entire body. When she got out of the bath and went to the next room, Alicia was there. Alongside her ladies-in-waiting, the queen engaged in a passionate discussion while they all looked at the numerous dresses that packed the walls.

"Oh, how lovely. She's fair-skinned, so I think this color would suit her well, Queen Alicia."

"You're right, it's wonderful! But it's hard to give up on this one. Look, it has a bunch of frills," Alicia said.

"Should we put up her hair? I think she'd look cute if we braided it and let just the hair at the nape of her neck fall loose." "Which color should we choose for the hair ornament?" Alicia wondered.

Yui looked at herself in the mirror with empty eyes, internally begging them to just choose something already. Meanwhile, they happily chatted and put different outfits on her like she was a dress-up doll. After a long while, they settled on a pale-pink dress. Then, they put the finishing touches on her hair by adding a pearl ornament. Finally, they escorted her to the palace garden, and on the way there, she stumbled a few times because she was walking in a pair of heels she wasn't used to wearing.

Yui and the queen sat at a table surrounded by summer flowers in full bloom, and they were soon brought a light meal. The rays of the hot summer sun beat down on them, but Yui didn't feel overly warm while at the table. She guessed that it was due to a magic barrier that lessened the heat.

And why had she been brought to the garden in the first place? It was for the same, ostensible reason that they'd given for her presence at the palace: namely, Yui was to be the queen's conversation partner, and Alicia had seemingly invited her to have some tea. *Still, why was it necessary to dress me up?* Yui wondered. She remembered that Alicia had said, "If we're having tea anyway, it's more fun to dress up in something cute."

When the ladies-in-waiting were finished serving them, Alicia instructed them to retire, and they bowed and left. None of the servants' actions had included a single wasted motion; they weren't the queen's ladies-in-waiting for nothing.

"I made sure to lay out a bunch of treats for you because I heard from father that you love sweet things," Alicia said. "Don't mind me. Have as much as you want."

"Thank you," Yui said. She was glad that Alicia had gone to all the trouble, but she was totally exhausted and she didn't have any appetite. Also, without Yui noticing, Alicia had dropped the formal term of address and was speaking in a more familiar manner.

"It sure is nice that you're a girl. I've always wanted a daughter I could pick out cute clothes for and dress up. I can't do that with a boy, after all."

Yui was so tired that she almost unconsciously replied, "I think either one of your sons could easily pull it off. Their faces are prettier than any woman's," but

with their honor at stake, she swallowed her words. If she said that and it actually ended up happening, she would feel great pity for them.

Alicia gazed at Yui. "Hey, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"No, I don't mind. I'll answer what I can."

"Is the pendant you're wearing around your neck the same as Filiel's?" Alicia asked, looking at Yui's chest.

When the ladies-in-waiting had undressed her, the pendant had been the one thing Yui had desperately clung to.

"Yes, El gave it to me several years ago. It's a pair with his own pendant."

"I see." Alicia smiled tenderly. Then, she spoke again, hesitantly this time. "It isn't very happy, but will you listen to a story of mine?"

"Are you sure you want to tell me?" Yui asked. Although Alicia was smiling, she could see the sadness in her eyes, and she could tell this wasn't going to be ordinary small talk.

"Yes, I'd like to tell you. Filiel accepted you, after all."

Yui nodded silently.

"Well, when I found out I was going to have Filiel, I was as happy as I'd been when I'd learned I was having Alexis. But, after some time passed, and as Filiel grew, my health suddenly started to deteriorate. The doctors told me that I should give up. They said that if things continued, my life would be at risk. But you know, I never considered it. He was my child. And whenever a mother gives birth, there's always some risk, whether it's a special case like Filiel or not."

Alicia was looking somewhere far off in the distance as she remembered her past, and Yui quietly listened.

"It was a fairly premature birth, but thanks to the excellent healers, Filiel was born without any issues. However, I didn't improve much afterward, and apparently, my life was in danger several times. Somehow, I stabilized, and I was told I could finally see him, even if it was only for a little bit..." Alicia's face twisted, and she looked like she was about to cry. "But they said I couldn't hold him. His magic energy wasn't all that strong right after he was born, but as long

as I was unwell, my magic was weak. I could have died if I'd touched him." Alicia clenched her fists on top of the table. She looked down and closed her eyes, as if she was enduring something. "I despaired. Countless times, I cursed myself for not being strong enough. I tried training my magic so I could touch him like father could, but it was no use. I just didn't have enough magic energy. I can't touch him even now, but at the very least, I try to tell him that he's my son and that I love him... But I still want to hug him, even if only once."

How painful was it for her to be unable to hug the child she would have given up her own life for? And what was it like for the child who couldn't be hugged by his loving mother? Seeing Alicia's pained expression, Yui could imagine the agony she must have felt at the time, and it wrenched her heart. However, she couldn't say anything to Alicia. She'd never had children, and she could touch Filiel; she was worried that if she said anything, her words might hurt Alicia more than help her.

Alicia noticed that Yui was at a loss, and she smiled, troubled. "I'm sorry. You must not know what to do. I just said it all so suddenly."

"No, not at all. I should apologize. I can't put anything into words," Yui said. She had only been able to listen, and she was unable to come up with a single thing to say in response.

"I didn't want you to fuss over me. I just wanted to let you know about Filiel, and to once again offer my thanks."

You've already thanked me more than enough, Yui thought. What else is there to be grateful for?

"You know, I think that people need the warmth of others to live," Alicia said. "But as he grew, his magic got even more powerful, and even father became unable to touch him without spending time preparing. Ever since Filiel's attendant passed away, he put even more distance between himself and others, and I was worried for his future. I wondered, would he turn out all right as a person? That's why I was happy to see his calm expression as he slept next to you yesterday—I learned that he, too, had finally been able to find warmth." Alicia's expression had now returned to the kind, motherly one that Yui knew. "So, thank you. I'm sure that because of you, he's already been saved."

"I haven't done anything at all. Actually, he's the one who's helped me out countless times."

"That's all right. You just have to be there for him. He needs that more than anything else."

After that, Yui talked about the time she first met Filiel and about her grandparents' bakery, and before long, their tea party came to a close. She said goodbye to Alicia and left. For the entire walk back to Filiel's room, Alicia's story and the image of her sorrowful face wouldn't leave Yui's mind.

"He— Yu— Hey...Yui Curtis!"

Yui finally noticed that someone was saying her name, and she looked all around to see who it was. She soon spotted Zeke, who was standing right behind her.

"I was trying to call out to you. You passed Filiel's room; are you going somewhere?"

She had apparently been so lost in thought while walking that she'd unknowingly passed her destination.

"Did something happen?" Zeke asked.

"No, I was just...thinking..."

"Anyway, you sure look prettier. I'm sure Filiel will be happy to see you," Zeke said.

His words went in one ear and out the other. Yui was transfixed by something else. As soon as she saw it, she felt as if a fog had lifted from her thoughts—she could finally think clearly. As her mind worked in overdrive, she exclaimed, "This is it!"

"Huh? What is?" Zeke looked completely lost.

The next day, Yui ended up seeing Layce, whose work had finally settled down somewhat. As soon as she entered the room, the usual cool, calm smile he wore while working disappeared. In place of the Prince of Darkness, the face of a doting father emerged.

"Yuiii!" he shouted with joy while tightly hugging her.

From Yui's perspective, this was Layce's normal, everyday behavior.

Besides the two of them, several others were in the room. There was Bernard, looking dead tired from his work; Alexis, who actually looked better thanks to Yui; Filiel, who was still mentally and physically unprepared to fight the Prince of Darkness; Gaius, who was up to speed on everyone's situation; and the guards Luca and Zeke. Unused to seeing the Prince of Darkness's lovey-dovey behavior, they thought, *Who is this?* as they watched Layce greet Yui.

"Are you all right?! He hasn't done anything disgraceful, has he?!" Layce asked Yui.

"Don't worry. Nothing's happened," she said.

"Are you sure? Let me know if anything *does* happen. I'll turn his life into a living hell and make him regret the fact he was ever born," Layce said. He glared at Filiel with a gaze sharp enough to impale the prince.

Sensing danger, Filiel shrunk back, his face stiffening from fear.

"How terrifying," Alexis murmured. "If anything happens, I'll make sure I find your bones, Filiel."

"Alexis... Don't act like this isn't your problem," Filiel muttered back.

Having confirmed Yui's safety, Layce let go of her and took aim at Filiel. He was smiling, but his eyes were cold, and he approached Filiel, taking one step, then another. The only person who might have been able to stop Layce—
Theodore—wasn't there, and the rest of them were unable to do anything except hold their breath and watch. Actually, even if Theodore had been there, he probably wouldn't have stopped Layce; he was more likely to just watch it all with a smile on his face.

Prime minister and prince—there would ordinarily be an insurmountable gap between the two. However, oddly enough, Layce and Filiel looked more like a tyrant and a scared, trembling puppy. Needless to say, Filiel was the puppy. As Layce emitted an intimidating aura befitting the Prince of Darkness, he glared at the puppy—Filiel—with a dangerous glint in his eyes. Alexis, who was standing next to Filiel, silently distanced himself from his beloved younger brother. He

was clearly afraid of getting mixed up in things.

Noticing that the brother he loved and respected had abandoned him, Filiel called out, "Alexiiis!" and looked at him with pleading eyes.

"Sorry, Filiel. I care too much about myself. Forgive my weakness for being unable to lay down my life to protect you."

While they continued their hushed exchange, Layce had come right up to Filiel. He was now standing before the prince. "How are you feeling, Your Highness?" he asked.

Contrary to the whirlwind of sarcasm and anger Filiel had expected, Layce's incredibly calm, quiet voice was quite anticlimactic. But that just made Filiel feel all the more afraid. "Thanks to Yui, I'm fine now. Apologies for all the trouble, Prime Minister."

"I see. I'm glad that my daughter was able to be of use," Layce said. The look in his eyes, however, said anything but. "By the way, a little birdie told me that Your Highness and Yui have been staying in the same room. That couldn't actually be true, could it?"

"Ah, well...you see..."

"I gave permission for Yui to stay at the palace, but I don't remember allowing that. Two young children is one thing, but it's a questionable choice to let a boy and a girl of your age stay together." Layce was speaking politely, but his voice contained an overpowering—one might even say demonic—sense of intimidation.

Filiel wasn't one to give in at just that, however. He psyched himself up and defiantly retorted, "I asked Yui to stay with me in case my magic energy gets out of control again. From her perspective, she must be relieved to have someone she knows by her side in an unfamiliar place like the palace. No one without business with me comes near my room, and besides, my grandfather has sworn all of them to secrecy, so I don't imagine you'll have to worry about any rumors."

"But you can't say that for sure, right? Yui will eventually find a husband, and strange rumors could make it difficult for her to get married. Perhaps that

ought to be taken into consideration."

"If that happens, I'll—"

"You aren't thinking of saying something frivolous like, 'I'll take responsibility,' right, Your Highness? My precious daughter's happiness won't be decided on so abruptly." Whether he knew Filiel's feelings toward Yui or not, he'd vetoed the prince's suggestion with an icy voice.

With Layce having thwarted his desperate resistance without breaking a sweat, the words Filiel needed to make Layce agree with him wouldn't come out. He had never been good with words, and up against Layce, who had made countless nobles yield by sheer force of his will, the difference in their abilities was painfully clear. Filiel was at a loss for words, and he almost felt like he could hear Theodore's booming laughter somewhere in the distance.

Yui didn't think Layce would try anything risky against royalty, but she also couldn't shake the feeling that he might end up doing something anyway. At first, she had been nervously watching, ready to step in and stop him just in case, but she felt unexpectedly calm as she spectated. Layce was talking big about rumors, her happiness, and so on, but she thought that, deep down, he just didn't like the fact that she and Filiel were staying in the same room together. Besides, Theodore had been the one to propose the idea, and she herself had agreed, so if there was anyone to get angry at, it was her, not Filiel. She couldn't bear watching Filiel get blamed for what had been her decision, so when he finally surrendered his unwinnable battle and looked at her with a pitiful, pleading gaze, she had no choice but to extend a helping hand.

"Papa, that's enough picking on him. I was the one who decided to stay with him, after all."

"You mustn't be fooled, Yui," Layce said. "You were unfamiliar with the palace, and he took advantage of that to bring you into his room. How despicable!"

"I'll go on a date with you sometime."

Layce froze. Then, he said, "Date?" like it was a word he had never heard before. The next moment, he darted over to Yui and grabbed her hand tightly. His movements were so fast that they were just a blur. Even Yui, who was used

to Layce's wild behavior, was surprised—no, she was afraid. "Will you really?" Layce asked.

"Y-Yeah... So that's enough, okay?"

"Yes, you're right. Now that you mention it, I guess I should stop." In a complete about-face from before, he was now smiling cheerfully.

Bernard was impressed that Yui could bring the Prince of Darkness to heel with just a single word, but more than that, he was stunned by the total shift in Layce's persona. "Don't you think your personality changes too much, Layce? What's with that doting behavior?! Why don't you show *me* some of that kindness once in a while?!" Bernard exclaimed, exploding with pent-up anger. For the past few days, he had hardly slept at all, he had had to read through documents during every single one of his meals, and whenever he'd begged for a break, he had just been laughed at.

"My kindness is reserved for my wife and daughter. Besides, Your Majesty was the one who let the work pile up that much in the first place, so it's only natural that I'd make you work until you dropped."

"Gah..." Bernard grunted. He was the king, but right now his position was, unbelievably, inferior to Layce's. Still, he knew that Layce was far and away doing more work than he was, so he couldn't talk back. Neither parent nor child could beat the Prince of Darkness.

When Layce left, his parting words were, "Please find Yui another room immediately, all right? If you don't, I'll take her home myself." After he was finally out of the room, all of them, Yui included, sighed deeply with relief.

Additionally, just before Layce had left, Yui had asked him to bring her something from her grandparents' house. It was delivered to her the very same day, and several days later, it would end up profoundly altering Filiel's daily life.

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The subdued color palette of Filiel's room gave the interior a relaxed atmosphere, and it suited its owner's dislike for fancy things. The disquieting air that hung around Filiel's immediate vicinity was a sharp contrast to these surroundings. His mood was rather poor—after Layce had made Yui move

rooms, she had been spending most of her time in the library, and he hadn't been able to see her at all. Out of impatience, Filiel had gone to see her there several times, but he'd been driven out and told he was in the way. This had hurt his feelings a bit, but he could tell that she was concentrating on studying something or other. He knew that when she was like that, she neglected the people and things around her. So, with no other choice, he gave up and waited.

A few days had passed since Yui had come to the palace, and there were no signs of Filiel's magic energy getting out of control. It was decided that his condition was no longer an issue and that Yui would be returning home tomorrow. Upon hearing that, Filiel got even more irritated that he couldn't see her. He grew quite anxious, vowing that he would do whatever it took to see Yui before the day was up.

Filiel had become aware of his feelings for Yui a few years previously, when Theodore had brought Yui to the inn where they'd been staying. At the time, he'd been in the depths of despair after causing the death of the female attendant who had played a role in taking care of him. Though it had been an accident, and the incident had never been made public, there were some who had known about it. After that day, he could tell that the fear in their eyes when they looked at him had grown stronger, but he'd been unable to do anything about it—he'd had no choice but to bear it. He had also been afraid that his parents, his brother, and the grandfather who had raised him would look at him with the same fear. Over time, all the feelings he'd been unable to express had piled up inside him. He'd bottled up his emotions, growing more and more stubborn. He hadn't even listened to his worried grandfather when the man had tried to comfort him. Everyone treating him so gingerly had only hurt him more.

When his grandfather had asked if he wanted to see Yui, he hadn't even thought about it; he had instantly said yes. However, the moment before they'd been about to meet face-to-face, he had grown afraid. What if she, too, was afraid of him? He had unthinkingly shouted at her because of that, but even then, she had embraced him without hesitation. The warmth of another person had rescued him from his own self-hatred, and he had finally been able to open up with someone about his feelings. When he had woken up, having held her

hand the entire time, he'd realized that he didn't want to let go. He wanted her to stay by his side, always. He had realized that what he felt toward her was different from how he felt about his friends and family.

Reconfirming that his feelings were unchanged after all those years, Filiel suddenly noticed that he couldn't see Zeke. "Where's Zeke?" he asked Luca. "Don't tell me... Is he with Yui?"

"He is. They're talking about something in the library," Luca replied. He had been next to Filiel the entire time.

Filiel frowned. Over the past few days, Yui hadn't attempted to see him at all, but she had been meeting with Zeke frequently. The two of them had only just gotten to know each other, and he didn't think anything would happen, but still, it put him in an increasingly bad mood.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Luca headed to open it, and Eliza, who was visiting the palace for the first time in a few days, entered.

"Oh... It's Eliza..." Filiel had faintly hoped that it might be Yui, but with his expectations shattered, he instinctively let out a disappointed voice.

Eliza looked offended by his attitude, and she said, "What's that 'oh' supposed to mean, Fil? I'm here because I was worried about you. Don't you think you're being harsh?" She had every reason to complain. For the entire time Filiel had shut himself up in his room, she had been worried and continually calling out to him. Then, as soon as he had come out, he hadn't cared about anyone except Yui. After that, Eliza had ended up witnessing the Prince of Darkness's fury, so without any chance to learn how Filiel was doing, she had been sent home.

Actually, she had wanted to see him the next day, but she was the daughter of a duke, and she had been busy with studying and other social engagements. For the entire time afterward, she had been sick with worry. And after all that, when she finally came to see him, *this* was the reception she received. Anyone else would undoubtedly want to complain just as much as her.

Reflecting on what he had said, Filiel looked awkward. He knew he had been in the wrong. "My bad. I didn't think it was you. I'm sorry for worrying you. You spent all that time outside my room calling out to me. My magic energy was out

of control, and I couldn't leave, but thanks."

Eliza paused. "But you opened the door as soon as that girl came," she mumbled. Filiel didn't hear her. Then, she said, "You might not have been able to talk in person, but you had your magic communicator, right? Cecil was worried too. He said he couldn't get in touch with you. He asked me about various things, but I didn't know whether I should tell him, so I kept quiet."

"Yeah, I also thought of contacting him at first, but the communicator wasn't able to withstand my magic, and it broke. I'll tell them about it all myself. Luca, can you get me a new communicator?"

"Certainly, Your Highness," Luca said.

Eliza looked Filiel up and down. "Are you well? You said that your magic energy got out of control."

"Yeah, I'm all better. Yui used a spell to fix my magic energy and heal Alexis."

Eliza reacted when she heard the name that came out of Filiel's mouth. "Yui... Right, that's her name. It's *her*, right? The girl you said was your first love."

Filiel's facial expression visibly softened. "Yeah."

"But I'd never seen her until now. And you hardly ever left the palace until you started going to the academy, so how did you even get to know her?"

In addition to general education and etiquette, every member of the royal family learned a wide-ranging array of subjects from an early age—from politics and economics to foreign languages. However, they generally didn't attend elementary or middle school; instead, they stayed at the royal palace and were taught by personal tutors. On top of that, Filiel's strong magic energy meant that he rarely went to social gatherings, which large numbers of people attended. However, when he did happen to go, Eliza, as a daughter of a duke, was almost always invited as well.

"You wouldn't know about it. I met Yui at a party my grandfather and I attended incognito. I didn't want to go, but he made me come along with him anyway—though I'm glad I went now, of course. After that, I sneaked out of the palace whenever I went to see her. Though, it looks like grandfather knew about that the whole time."

Eliza gulped and unconsciously clenched her fist. She had never before seen the gentle smile Filiel had on his face as he thought about Yui.

Then, without any warning, Zeke suddenly opened the door. In a loud, powerful voice, he asked, "Heeey, is Filiel heeere?"

The three who were already in the room jumped.

"Zeke! Try knocking next time!" Luca yelled.

"Whoops, my bad."

Luca was already annoyed by Zeke's rudeness, and his partner's seemingly complete lack of remorse made a vein on his forehead stand out. "Are you aware that you are serving the royal family?!"

"I'll be more careful next time, so don't yell at me."

Luca shook, looking like he still had more to say.

As Filiel watched their exchange, he remembered why he had been irritated earlier. Zeke's constantly cheerful attitude was one of his strong points, but just then, it was rubbing Filiel the wrong way.

Zeke could tell by looking at Filiel that he wasn't happy, and he readied himself. "Ah, what's with the bad mood?"

"You're imagining it," Filiel replied curtly.

"No, you look super annoyed," Zeke said. He looked to Luca for help.

"Apparently, he doesn't like that you're spending all your time with her," Luca said.

"Hey, you were the one who told me to stay away from Filiel because I can't keep my mouth shut!" Zeke protested.

"You can't keep your mouth shut? What do you mean?" Filiel asked, noticing something odd about what Zeke had said.

"Um, uh...I mean..." Zeke was flustered.

"Zeke, Luca, are you hiding something from me?" Filiel asked in a low, threatening voice.

Luca played dumb.

"D-Don't get so angry," Zeke said. "We were told to keep quiet, so we can't say anything. Ask Yui if you want to know."

"Yui?" Filiel tilted his head, his anger partially dissipating after hearing her name.

"Yeah, she asked me to bring you to her."

And so, Zeke escorted Filiel to a drawing room. Eliza accompanied them, and no one argued against it, knowing that it would be pointless. Filiel's parents, his grandfather, and his brother were sitting on a couch in the room, and Gaius was standing next to the wall. When Filiel saw his family, his eyes widened. He had thought it would just be Yui. "What's with all of this? Everyone's here, even Alexis." Filiel looked at his brother. "Is it okay for you to be up?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm better now, so it's not an issue," Alexis said.

Filiel was glad to see Alexis well again, but he still didn't know what was going on. He looked at Yui, who was standing next to Theodore, and asked, "What's going on, Yui?" He had happily come along, knowing that he would be able to see her again, so seeing everyone else there had been a letdown.

"I'll explain it right away. For now, just sit there and close your eyes," Yui said.

Filiel was confused. "Huh? Explain what, exactly? What is it?"

"Don't worry. Just sit down." Yui pushed him, sitting him down across from the couch his parents were on, and then motioned for him to close his eyes. After confirming that his eyes were shut, she flipped over an hourglass on a nearby table, then walked over to Alicia and took the queen's extended hand. Yui held her hand above the back of Alicia's hand, then closed her eyes and focused her mind, pooling her magic energy together. When she finished her incantation, the back of Alicia's hand shone, and a magic circle was etched there. Yui checked to make sure the spell had activated, then looked Alicia in the eyes and nodded.

Alicia nervously stood up from the couch.

Filiel felt the presence of two people approaching, then something warm

enveloped him. Without even having to think about it, he knew who was hugging him. "H-Hey, Yui!" Flustered, he opened his eyes, but when he saw Yui a short distance away, he almost gasped. He had thought it was her because he had smelled perfume, and she was the only woman there who could come into contact with him. Eliza was there too, but she always used the same perfume, so he knew it wasn't her. Yui was just watching him with a gentle gaze.

As his sluggish brain worked to try to understand what was happening, he finally realized who was hugging him. "Mother..." he said hesitantly. Alicia's magic energy was by no means weak, but it wasn't strong either, and he had no memory of her hugging him before that moment. He understood that his own mother was hugging him, but his thoughts couldn't keep up. As he stared dumbfounded at her, the image of his brother collapsing flashed through his mind, and he panicked. "Mother, you can't! I'll hurt you!"

Remembering what had happened to Alexis and his attendant, his face stiffened and he tried to escape from her arms. However, Alicia wouldn't let go—she hugged him even tighter.

As Yui watched the increasingly pale Filiel struggle to get away from his mother, she smiled awkwardly and said, "It's fine, El. Right now, nothing will happen if Her Majesty touches you."

Yui's voice stopped him cold. "What do you mean?" he asked. Then, with some space to really look at his mother, he noticed that she was completely all right. Confusion filled his eyes. He couldn't understand what was going on, so he looked to Yui for an explanation.

"I cast a spell," she said. "One that lets even Her Majesty touch you."

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After their tea party, Yui had continuously thought about Alicia. She'd wondered whether it might be possible to fulfill the queen's desperate wish to hug her son, even if only once. However, such magic did not exist.

There were certain types of defense magic. For example, Theodore could touch Filiel with, say, his hand, as long as he focused his own magic energy there. This would prevent Filiel's magic from flooding into his body. But if Alicia were to try the same thing, her magic energy wouldn't hold. Some researchers

had been exploring similar concepts and asking questions like "Would it be possible for someone to cast a defense spell on another person?" In Alicia's case, if she wanted to directly come into contact with Filiel, the spell would have to be cast on her body, not just on her surroundings. Of course, that would result in interference from the third party's magic energy, and it could potentially cause her own magic to warp out of control. Thus, that method had never been confirmed as viable.

There was also the spell Yui had used to suppress and stabilize Filiel's magic energy, but it could only contain energy to within a certain level; it couldn't completely erase someone's magic. If Yui used it to suppress Filiel's magic as much as possible, Alicia could avoid serious injuries. Yui had imagined Alicia's response—the queen probably would've said that she didn't care about sustaining minor injuries as long as she could hug her son. But regardless, that wouldn't have worked. If Filiel thought that he might hurt her, even if only slightly, he would never let her touch him.

Yui thought back on how her past few days of research had led to this point.

After Yui's teatime with Alicia, she walked back to Filiel's room. When his door came into view, she had a sudden burst of inspiration, and she turned to speak to Zeke. What if it was possible to create a spell that would let someone come into contact with Filiel without any ill effects? A few days prior, when Filiel had been unable to suppress his own magic, his room had been filled to the brim with magic energy, but none of it had seeped outside. Yui thought that, if she could combine the formula on Filiel's door with the spell that let her suppress magic energy, she could come up with some sort of spell that might be applied to a person's body. If it worked out, she could enable a person to touch Filiel without negative effects.

Nonelemental magic was difficult to use, and it was never an issue if someone couldn't wield it because all nonelemental spells were support spells. Many had the impression that nonelemental magic was the weakest of all, and few researchers made it their primary subject of study. Thus, there were overwhelmingly fewer nonelemental spells than those of the other elements. On the flip side, that also meant that there was a much greater possibility of new nonelemental discoveries.

Yui created several new spells after independently analyzing the research she had gleaned from books. Following her first meeting with Filiel, she had begun secretly researching the idea of a spell that could suppress someone's magic, and this study had culminated in the spell she'd recently cast on Filiel. That part of the process was complete, however, the most important thing—the formula that would let someone touch Filiel—was still unfinished. So, following her spark of inspiration, she asked Layce to bring all her accumulated research notes from her grandparents' house to the palace. After obtaining permission to analyze the formula on Filiel's door, she spent her time in the palace library synthesizing it with her research. Finally, she was able to complete the spell that would allow a person to come into contact with someone as magically strong as Filiel without his magic energy getting into their body. Adapting the door's formula so it could work on people rather than inanimate objects had taken her the most time, but she'd been able to complete the spell sooner than expected. And since she already had a spell that could suppress someone's magic energy—her research had been focused in that area—she'd saved a lot of time. It helped that she had extremely precise control over her own magic energy.

She immediately told Theodore about the completed spell, and before she knew it, Gaius, Filiel's two guards, and the entire royal family besides Filiel were gathered to hear about it. At first, they listened with doubtful looks on their faces, but as Yui explained in detail how the spell worked, they gradually grasped what she was saying. In the end, they were filled with joy and a touch of apprehension—they were all hopeful that they might actually be able to touch Filiel.

After they heard what Yui had to say, Bernard and Alicia in particular gazed at her with eyes full of anticipation. "Is that really true?!" asked Bernard.

"And...I'll be able to hug him too?!" Alicia wondered.

There were, however, two problems. The spell had been completed, but it required a fair amount of control over one's magic to cast, which meant that only Yui could use it. Also, she had never tried casting it on a person before, and she didn't want to test it out for the first time on a member of the royal family.

After hearing these concerns, Gaius spoke. "Test it on me first. If there are no

problems, then you can then use it on His Majesty and Her Majesty." Gaius could touch Filiel anyway, so if the spell failed to work properly, he would still walk away with his life.

"Please test it on me too," Luca requested eagerly. "It'll be more reliable if you test it on someone who normally can't touch His Highness."

"Me too! Please!" Zeke exclaimed. For Filiel's sake, both of them were also completely willing to be test subjects.

Because everyone had agreed to keep the tests secret from Filiel, they wanted him to be asleep before they tried anything. In order to facilitate this, Gaius had come by his room a bit earlier with plenty of alcohol.

Luca frowned as soon as he entered Filiel's room. "I feel like I'll get drunk from the smell alone..." The stink of booze permeated the air. They all checked and saw that Filiel was completely unconscious and sleeping deeply. Luca, Zeke, and Yui were sure that Filiel would be hungover the next day.

"How pathetic. Filiel's out cold after only having a bit to drink," Gaius said. He didn't appear drunk at all, even though he'd downed more than Filiel.

"You have too much energy. Haven't you had quite a bit to drink?" Luca asked.

"What a monster..." Zeke remarked. As they looked at Gaius with amazement and displeasure, Yui cast the spell on him and watched to see how he would react to it.

"The spell should be working now. Do you feel odd anywhere?" Yui asked Gaius.

"No, everything seems all right..." Gaius replied. "I'll get started, then." As evidence that the spell was properly working, there was a magic circle engraved on the back of Gaius's hand. He first moved his own magic energy into that hand as an extra layer of defense, then touched Filiel. Next, he gradually weakened the magic energy in his hand, lowering his defense. Before long, as everyone watched with bated breath, Gaius's hand was completely defenseless. Yui, Luca, and Zeke nervously stared at him, but after some time had passed and they saw that he was fine, their tension dissipated slightly. The most

important part, however, was yet to come.

"All right, Luca and Zeke, please hold your hands out to me," Yui said.

"Yeah," Zeke said. His face was stiff.

Gaius clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't be so nervous. If anything happens, we'll just say that you two went missing."

"That doesn't reassure me at all..." Luca muttered. He and Zeke looked even more stressed.

Yui cast the same spell on them that she had cast on Gaius, then made them touch Filiel. If they could do it, it would prove that the spell was effective.

After a momentary silence, Zeke and Luca were still standing, completely unharmed. The four of them exchanged looks and quietly celebrated the spell's success.

"Does this mean it worked?" Zeke asked.

"Yes, it does," Yui replied.

"All right!"

"Zeke, shut up," Luca said. "You'll wake Filiel."

"Oh, my bad."

They immediately reported the results to the king, and before long, the day arrived when they would show off the spell to Filiel.

Incidentally, after they had decided to keep all of the testing hidden from Filiel, Zeke's inability to keep a secret had become an issue. When Luca had warned them that he was liable to let it slip at a moment's notice, Zeke had been reassigned away from Filiel until they were ready—he had been conscripted as Yui's human guinea pig so she could fine-tune some aspects of the spell.

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When Filiel heard everything that had happened, his eyes widened in surprise. Until now, he had no memory of being hugged by his parents. Once, as a young child, he had even lashed out at his grandfather because he was hurt

that his parents wouldn't touch him. When Theodore had told him that it was because his magic energy was too strong, he began feverishly studying under Gaius to suppress his magic. However, all his hard work had come to nothing because as he had grown up, his magic energy had also grown much more powerful—at present, even Theodore and Gaius couldn't come into contact with him without preparation.

Noble parents often found some reason to bring their children to the palace for soirees and other gatherings where they could make connections with the prince. He had always envied other children his own age when he had seen them being held up by their mothers, or vying for their mothers' attention; countless times, he had been jealous of the children whose fathers could pat their heads. Perhaps having sensed Filiel's feelings, Alexis had never behaved affectionately toward their parents around him. When Filiel had noticed, he had felt guilty, but he had also simultaneously been thankful. He loved his older brother and was never jealous of him because he knew how kind he was. As Filiel grew older, he eventually gave up on ever fulfilling his wish. He resigned himself to the thought that his desire for touch was nothing but a silly dream—at least, that was what he had told himself.

But now, if he was seeing things correctly, his mother was *hugging* him. Something unreal, out of a dream or a fantasy, was occurring. He didn't know whether he was happy or whether he wanted to cry; he had no clue how to express the emotions welling up inside him.

"Finally... I can finally hug you. I don't know how long I've waited for this day," Alicia said, her voice choking up as she cried.

Bernard shot up from the couch. "Cast that spell on me!" He held out his hand to Yui, urging her to hurry, and she cast the spell. When the magic circle appeared on the back of his hand, he wrapped his arms around both Filiel and Alicia and hugged them tightly. "Sorry, Filiel. I was too weak, and I made you sad... But now, after eighteen years, I can finally hold you in my arms."

"Yes, I never thought this day would come," Alicia said.

"Father... Mother..." Tears welled up in Filiel's eyes as he immersed himself in his parents' warmth for the first time.

As everyone watched them embrace each other, they all felt like they were about to cry. Theodore, who was especially close with Filiel, quietly closed his eyes, and even Gaius was unashamedly sobbing—tears poured down his cheeks.

As for Yui, her success finally hit home—her research had been able to help Filiel, and tears of joy and relief welled up in her eyes. Then she glanced at the hourglass on the table. Almost all of the sand had fallen into the bottom, and there was only a little bit of time remaining before the top would be completely empty. She wanted to let them continue for longer, but the time limit was fast approaching. "Your Majesties, I'm sorry, but it's time," she said hesitantly.

Bernard and Alicia raised their faces. Looking disappointed, they wiped their tearstained eyes. "Already?" Bernard said. "We can't go a bit longer?"

"My apologies, but any longer, and I am unable to guarantee Your Majesty's safety." The spell was complete, but Yui had only tested it on Gaius, Luca, and Zeke for a short amount of time, so for safety's sake, the hourglass was marked their time limit.

"There's no way around it, father. Isn't even a little bit of time better than nothing? Besides, I'm still not able to hug him yet, so please don't be selfish," Alexis said, admonishing his father with a displeased, pouty look on his face. Bernard and Alicia smiled awkwardly and separated from Filiel. Because the spell was directly cast on the subject's body, and because Alexis had been confined to his bed only a short while ago, Yui postponed casting it on him until he had fully recovered, for his safety. Just like his parents, he had been patiently enduring his desire to hug Filiel.

Yui approached Bernard and Alicia and undid the spell. "It's gone now. Your Majesties, are either of you feeling strange or irregular?"

"I'm fine," Bernard said.

Alicia nodded. "I'm fine too. Thank you, Yui."

"It was nothing," Yui replied. "I'm glad that Your Majesty's wish has been fulfilled."

Alicia had spoken to Yui about what she felt only a few days previously, and now the queen sounded incredibly grateful. She had probably never expected that her dream of many years would be realized in such a short period of time.

"Now, Your Highness, we'll all be taking our leave. If there is anything you require, please don't hesitate to call us," Gaius said tearfully, tactfully guessing that they wanted to speak among family. He looked at Yui, Zeke, Luca, and Eliza with his bright-red eyes, motioning for them to follow him out of the room.

As they exited, Yui bowed. "Excuse me."

As Yui was about to leave, Filiel stopped her. "Wait, Yui."

Yui turned around. "Is something wrong?"

"Sorry, there are just so many things I want to say right now, but the words won't come out..." Filiel trailed off for a moment. "Just let me say one thing for now. Thanks." He still seemed shaken after having his long-held assumption overturned, but he looked happy.

"You're welcome," Yui replied.

In a rare gesture for her, she smiled broadly.

## **Epilogue**

The next day, it came time for Yui to leave the palace. Layce accompanied her to see the king so that she could say her goodbyes.

"It's impossible for me to express how grateful I am," Bernard said. "I never thought the day would come when I would be able to hug my son. From the bottom of my heart, you have my thanks."

Yui bowed deeply. "I am unworthy of your gratitude, Your Majesty."

"I'd like to reward you in some way. Is there anything you want? As long as it's within my power to grant it, you can have anything."

Yui was surprised. After all, Bernard was the most powerful person in Garlant, a nation with both military and financial resources that far outstripped its neighbors. He could give her just about anything, and he would probably grant whatever she wanted without batting an eye—whether it was gemstones that were so large that she couldn't hold them in one hand, or a sum of money that would allow her to live comfortably for the rest of her life. Those rewards might've seemed excessive, but from Bernard's perspective, the day before had been worth that much.

After thinking for a little while, Yui made a request. "I would like to ask for one thing."

"Say it, and it's yours."

"I want all of this to be kept confidential."

"You mean, you don't want it made public?"

"Yes. I want both spells to be kept secret—the one I used to suppress the magic energy in Their Highnesses and the spell I cast on Your Majesties to protect your bodies from Prince Filiel's magic."

Bernard seemed to have expected Yui to ask for money or gemstones, so he was taken aback by her request. "Is that really all right with you? I said you

could ask for anything. If you want it, you can have gold, jewels, expensive dresses, or even an important post in the palace. Researchers have tried and failed for many years to produce the spell that you created. If you publicly announced that you'd succeeded, they would all acknowledge your splendid ability, and your future after graduation would be secure. Knowing all this, you want to act as if it never happened?" He looked as if he couldn't believe it. An ordinary person would have jumped at his offer, but Yui didn't waver.

"I made the spell that let Your Majesty touch Prince Filiel by referencing a formula that was on one of the palace doors, so it isn't entirely my creation. If the door hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been able to create the spell so quickly. I can't accept praise because of that."

"But you only used it as a reference, and it's a completely different type of magic. You have the rights to the spell you created, and your contribution, which no other researcher has been able to match, is a large one. You're well deserving of praise."

"That may be true. However, I only created the spell because I wanted to help Prince Filiel, not because I wanted fame or a reward. If I've been able to lighten the weight on his heart, even if only a bit, I'll consider my original goal to have been fulfilled. Besides, I don't really like it when people make a fuss over me."

"Yes, but—"

"Your Majesty," Layce interrupted. He could clearly see that Bernard was against hiding Yui's talent. "Didn't Your Majesty say that you would grant any reward? Yui has requested that you make absolutely sure not to leak the fact that she created that spell. She asked for it, so you'll grant that request—right, Your Majesty?"

"Ah, hmm, very well," Bernard said. He couldn't very well back out now, even if he wanted to.

"Also, after Yui healed the crown prince, it seems that His Highness let the secret slip to the chief doctor and the blue commander. Please ensure their discretion as well."

Bernard grimaced when he heard who Layce wanted him to silence. He knew those two—both of them had a strong thirst for knowledge, and they weren't

very accommodating. He expected that, even if he firmly warned them against talking about it or trying to learn more, they wouldn't accept it lying down. "It had to be those two... All right, I'll make sure they stay silent. I promise on my honor as king that I won't let any of this get out."

"Thank you," Layce said.

Bernard turned to Yui, looking like he didn't quite know what to say. "However, I do have one question. Would it be possible for me to get the formula of the spell that lets me touch Filiel, for research purposes? I won't say who created it, and I'll compensate you for it. I promise I'll also protect your rights to it."

"I don't mind," Yui said. Her spell was based off of the formula on the door, but most of its contents came from her own research. Her formula was completely different, which meant that she had the rights to it. The formulas that acted as foundations for spells were the most important products of a researcher's work, and the people who created them had the rights to them. Compared to simple formulas that anyone could mimic, the one Yui had made was, as Bernard had said, worthy of high praise. There was a possibility that the fruits of her labor might be stolen, so she normally wouldn't have wanted to show it to too many people. However, if the formula was released and the country's researchers were able to improve its effectiveness, it would help out Filiel, so she had decided without hesitation to make the formula publicly available.

"Really?! My thanks. With this, research that can do something about Filiel's magic energy might advance," Bernard said, smiling happily. He had been thinking the same thing as Yui.

"I'll also continue my research into extending the time the spell stays active."

"Yeah, truly, thanks for everything. Good luck."

Yui gave a small smile and bowed her head.

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After their audience with the king was over, Yui and Layce momentarily parted. She had planned to go home with him right after their meeting, but

apparently, he had some tasks left to complete. So he's actually doing his work, Yui rudely thought as she watched him go. In contrast with his normal, sweet expression, he had a dignified look on his face, one appropriate for his position as prime minister.

As Yui returned to the room she was staying in, she heard someone running toward her from behind. She turned around, and when she saw Filiel, she grinned.

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"Yui, I'm glad you're still here."
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"Hi, El."

"When I heard you were going back home, I rushed around looking for you. Do you have time to talk for a bit?" he asked. Yui nodded, and he began walking, leading her by the hand.

They arrived on a third-floor balcony that overlooked a beautiful garden.

There was no one else around; it seemed like they would have plenty of time to talk.

"Thanks for everything, Yui," Filiel began. "I want to show my gratitude for you in some way, but I can't think of anything. Is there something you want?"

"His Majesty asked me the same thing, but I didn't do that research because I was looking for a reward. I don't need anything."

"Yeah, I heard that father didn't give you anything. You only asked him to keep things a secret."

"If you're happy, then I am too. Are you happy?"

"Of course I am," Filiel said, smiling bashfully.

His smile was the best reward Yui could ask for. "Then that's all I need." She smiled broadly, which was something she rarely did around other people.

Filiel gazed lovingly at her, then hugged her tightly. "You know, it was always tough, because of my magic energy. I thought that I'd live a lonely life, afraid of myself and feared by everyone around me. But when I first met you, when you talked to me normally without being afraid... I can't even put it into words how happy I was."

"Was I able to be of help to you?"

Filiel smiled. "I don't know how many times I've been saved by your smile. Thank you for being in my life. Whenever I'm with you, I can forget my power and my responsibilities—I can just relax."

Yui didn't know how to react, and she smiled, looking embarrassed. Filiel took a few deep breaths to calm himself down, then immediately stared at Yui with a serious look on his face.

"And that's why I want you to stay by my side from now on. Yui, I love you."

"Yeah, thanks. I'm glad I met you too," Yui replied, smiling at Filiel's somewhat tense demeanor.

That must not have been the response Filiel was looking for because he looked disappointed. "No... Yeah. That's what I thought. I expected something like this..." he mumbled.

Yui tilted her head, puzzled. "El?"

"That isn't it. When I said 'I love you,' I didn't mean it in the way you thought." Filiel took her hand and kissed the back of it.

Not used to that kind of physical contact, Yui turned bright red. "E-El!" she said, her voice squeaking.

Filiel kissed the palm of her hand too. Then, just as her discomposure and embarrassment was about to reach its highest point, he said, "I love you. Not as a friend, but as a man."

With such a clear confession, even Yui understood what he was saying. But, confused as she was, she tried to play it off as a joke. "You can't *love me*, El. You shouldn't say something like that, even as a joke!" She averted her eyes and tried to speak in a playful voice. She expected him to quickly apologize for joking, but then she glanced back at him and instantly regretted what she'd said. His eyes were intensely serious—there was not a single hint that he had been joking or teasing her.

"I'm not joking. I want you. I've always wanted you by my side, as my wife," Filiel said. He put his hand on her cheek and brushed his thumb on her lips.

Yui's mind was racing, and she couldn't think of anything else. "Wife?" she repeated.

"Of course. When royalty or nobility start courtship, everyone understands that it means they're looking for a partner in marriage. You're a noble, so you should know that."

"That's...right." Naturally, Yui was aware, but she had been so shaken by what Filiel was saying that something so obvious had completely slipped her mind. "But I'm a Liefe, and a lot of people will object to it, won't they? Even your family..."

"Both father and mother have said that they'll let me choose my partner, and grandfather is more enthusiastic about you than anyone, so if anyone tries to oppose it, he'll use all his power to clamp down on them. And, of course, you can touch me, so I can't imagine that too many will complain about you being a Liefe."

"Grandpa Theo..." Yui said. She knew that he treated her like his own granddaughter, but now she understood that he really *had* intended to make her family. She had no clue what to say.

"On top of that, you're the prime minister's daughter, which means that even fewer people will complain. So there's no need to worry about anything. Well, if I had to list one person, I think His Excellency might be the biggest issue."

"Papa does seem like he could commit the perfect crime without leaving behind a trace of evidence behind," Yui teased. She had said it jokingly, but it felt too real, and both of them fell silent for a time.

"Putting him aside for the moment," Filiel said after a pause, "you're the daughter of a count, and with grandfather's support, you should be able to marry into the royal family without any issues. Of course, I'll do what I can to help too."

"But I could never be royalty. You know, I—"

Filiel silenced her with a finger to her lips. "None of that matters now. I want to know how you feel. What do you think of me?"

"About you? I..." Yui hesitated. She had never really thought about it deeply

before. Filiel had mentally and emotionally supported her in the midst of her hard life in the O'Brian household. He was like an older brother to her, but at the same time, he wasn't her brother. He was a friend, but he was a bit different. If she had to choose whether she liked or disliked him, she would, of course, say that she liked him. He was someone special, someone she could never replace, and there was no one else like him. "I... I..." She gripped his clothes, and their eyes spontaneously met. Each of their gazes told the other all they needed to know.

"Yui," Filiel said.

He put his hand to her cheek and stared passionately into her eyes. He slowly brought his face closer to hers. She stared silently at him. Within moments, their lips were close enough to touch, and then...

Something flew between their faces so quickly that all they saw was a blur.

They abruptly fell silent, then timidly looked to see what had flashed past. It was an ordinary pen. However, it had been thrown with quite a lot of force—its tip was embedded in the stone railing. They looked to see where the pen had come from, wondering who in the world would do such a thing.

Their faces stiffened. Filiel's especially.

"Papa..." Yui said.

Standing there was the Prince of Darkness, clad in a shadowy aura. "What are you doing?" he asked. Filiel felt threatened by his deep voice; it sounded as if it had echoed from the pits of hell. "I could've sworn that I warned you time and again not to try anything disgraceful with my precious daughter. I knew I never should have let her stay here." He came up to them. "How long are you two going to cling to each other?!" he said, and he pulled them apart. Then, grabbing Yui's arm, he began walking. "All right, let's go home, Yui. This place isn't good for your health!"

"Huh? Just one second!" Yui said. She hadn't yet said goodbye. She turned around to look at Filiel, and he was standing there waving at her with an awkward smile on his face.

"We'll continue at camp, Yui," Filiel said.

When he said that, Yui felt her cheeks suddenly flush bright red. From there, Layce took her to a carriage and made her get inside, and they headed to Layce's house.

In the middle of the ride, Layce spoke. "Yui, you won't be attending that camp," he said, obviously in a bad mood. Apparently, he'd heard what Filiel had said to her.

"No, I want to go. I've been looking forward to shopping in Bahal."

"I can take you there myself sometime."

"Aren't you busy?" Yui said. She knew that, as prime minister, he didn't have the free time for a vacation. However, he seemed like he was even willing to neglect his job if it meant keeping her away from Filiel. But if she couldn't go, her plans with Filiel would disappear. She was looking forward to going around town with him, so she had to come up with something to prevent Layce from interfering. "Papa, if you try to pressure me, I'll hate you."

"Hate?!" Layce said, looking horrified.

Yui felt no sympathy for him. Still, she wondered what would have happened if Layce hadn't interfered back then. She could have avoided Filiel if she had put her mind to it, but she'd been transfixed by his eyes, and she hadn't been able to move. If things had kept going, then I'm sure... Her thoughts trailed off. "What expression should I make when I see him next...?" Embarrassed, she covered her face with both hands.







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