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Prologue

Last year, the middle school students were assembled in order to participate in the magic tournament.

"I surrender," Yui's opponent declared, and immediately afterward, the judges loudly announced Yui's victory and her opponent's defeat. At the same time, a loud cheer rose from the crowd. However, mingled in with all that noise were many angry shouts of "Coward!" and "Rigged!"

It was an odd feeling. After all, Yui had just secured her advance to the semifinals. But every match of hers up until then, including this one, had been decided by her opponents—they'd either been in poor health and unable to fight, or they'd gone missing before the match, and some had even surrendered right at the start. Yui hadn't actually fought once. As such, the shouts were from disgruntled students who hadn't gotten a chance to fight in the tournament. They continued voicing their displeasure at her after she exited the ring, and she heard them as she headed to the competitors' waiting room.

There were many staff in the wings, along with other students who were in the tournament. Including Yui, three out of the four students who would be advancing to the semifinals had already been decided, and the last match of the quarterfinals was starting shortly. The others who were there and not preparing for their next match were the ones who had already lost. Turning left or right, there was no difference; Yui could feel their doubting gazes on her everywhere she looked. As she walked through this veritable lion's den, she sighed deeply. So annoying, she thought. If you have a complaint, you should direct it to the people who gave up without even fighting. Why am I the one you're suspicious of? As she was feeling a bit irritated by this inconsistency, Yui spotted Rouelle in her field of view.

Rouelle noticed her too, and she walked over. "Well done, Yui."

"Rouelle, I didn't fight at all, so I haven't really done anything..."

"That's not what I mean." Rouelle glanced at everyone around them.

With that, Yui understood that Rouelle was talking about the hostility radiating off of the other students. "You can say that again. I haven't done anything at all, but because of it, everyone's suspicious of me, and people are calling me out just to bother me!"

"Yeah, I get that it's frustrating, but it's not worth getting all worked up about. All doubts about you have been cleared, and apparently, the organizers issued a warning to all the cowards who surrendered to you. Well, not that that made anyone less suspicious of you..."

"I knew I shouldn't have come. I know Ivo and Clo begged me to, but I just want to go home..." Yui said. At first, in contrast with the other contenders, Yui hadn't felt a single bit of interest or enthusiasm about participating in the tournament. However, after persistent invitations from her friends, she had eventually caved in. And after all of that, *this* was what she had to deal with.

Rouelle smiled awkwardly. Yui looked displeased enough that she worried Yui would leave if she didn't say anything. "If you keep saying that, Ivo'll raise a fuss again. In the first place, you came because Lyle lured you in with sweets, right? Let them all say what they want. They'll have to shut up once they see your match with Ivo."

Do I endure all these exhausting looks and fight Ivo, or leave now and face his wrath? Yui wondered, stuck between two extreme choices. No, Ivo's too annoying. She didn't want to be at the receiving end of one of his rants, so she chose the first option. "Hmmm, fine... Rouelle, I'm going for a little walk, okay?"

"Ivo's quarterfinals match is up next. You're not going to watch?"

"No, I don't need to. There's no way he'll lose. I want to escape somewhere for a bit before the semifinals." Yui's goal for the time being was to get away from all the uncomfortable looks and find somewhere to calm down.

"Yeah, I can't blame you. And don't forget: the semifinals are at one o'clock."

"Don't worry, I won't. I'm not a little kid, you know."

Yui parted with Rouelle and walked around the venue, looking for somewhere without any people. When she finally found an empty passageway, she leaned up against the wall and took a short break.

Then she saw a man up ahead. He was walking toward her. She had a bad habit of looking down instead of meeting people's eyes, so only the man's feet were in her field of view. He approached her, and just as she thought he was about to pass by, he stopped right in front of her. Thinking this suspicious, Yui looked up at the man's face, and what she saw made her instantly freeze in place.

"It's been a while," the man said derisively, in a quiet, yet overpowering voice. Yui's face went stiff. "You've certainly made it far in the tournament...after all the times you've disgraced me with your worthlessness."

Yui knew she had to say something, but the words were stuck in her throat, and she couldn't speak.

"You can't even answer me? You really are useless," the man spat. "Well, whatever. I don't know how you did it, but it's to your credit that you've lasted this long. I thought I didn't have a use for you, but I guess you aren't a failure after all. How about this? Do whatever it takes to win, and I might think about taking you back."

The man's contemptuous words made Yui's body go stiff from fear, and she listened quietly. Even after he left, she couldn't move for some time. When she finally unfroze, her body began to tremble against her wishes, and she crouched down on the spot. She suppressed her shaking body and thought over the man's words again and again. Why did he show up again after all this time? And what did he say to me? When she understood fully what he had meant, she felt truly afraid—this was no joke.

Yui quickly stood up and left the venue.

"Hey, did you see Yui?!" Rouelle shouted.

"No, she wasn't anywhere," Lyle replied, panicking.

Gayne hurriedly joined them. "She's not in the waiting room either!"

It was already almost time for Yui's match, but they didn't know where she was.

Rouelle looked frantic. "If we don't find her soon, her match will start!" "Yuiiii, I have sweets for you, so come on ouuuut!" Lyle yelled.

As her friends searched for her, Yui was at a café nearby. Perhaps because it was close to the tournament venue, the place was full of what looked to be spectators, and the employees were briskly moving around and serving people. Yui opened up a menu, quickly made a decision, and then called over a nearby employee.

"Excuse me, I'd like a strawberry pancake with maple syrup, a seasonal fruit tart, and a slice of chocolate cake. Oh, and lemon tea, please," Yui said.

"Coming right up!" Contrary to Yui's low spirits, the employee's reply was lively, and he quickly went away.

After a short wait, Yui's order came out and was lined up on the table in front of her. She took a bite of cake, then checked the clock on the wall. It was already well past the time her match was supposed to start, and she was pretty certain that she'd already lost by default.

Things won't go the way he wants now, Yui thought.

"I bet Ivo's really angry at me right now," she said. The image of the friend she was supposed to have faced in the semifinals came to mind. He had been more overjoyed than anyone when he'd learned that she was going to be his opponent. He wouldn't be happy one bit when he advanced to the finals because of her disappearance; no, she was certain that he would be furious.

When I get back, he and Rouelle will probably scold me. But what's a good excuse for this? I can't tell them the truth... I don't want to.

"Sorry, Ivo," she murmured. "I was weak, and I ran away... I'm sorry." That was right—she had run. There had been other options. She could've even fought back. But she hadn't; she had closed her eyes and covered her ears to seal off everything she hadn't wanted to deal with, and she'd run away. "Just how much longer will I have to... El, help me..."

Without anyone hearing it, Yui's trembling whisper faded away in the noise of

The sky was dark. It was still the middle of the night, and Yui awoke from an unpleasant dream. The dream had been about something she had forgotten—something she absolutely shouldn't forget. It had been a warning—she had gotten too excited after Filiel had confessed to her, and she had gotten carried away.

What was I even thinking? There's no way I could ever hope to be with someone like him...

Chapter One: An Outing

After Yui left the royal palace, she settled back into her daily life. At the moment, she was at a café with Layce for a date. She had used this outing as a bargaining tool to get him to let her stay in the palace, and now she was having to pay up. Layce had been so very enthusiastic. Despite how busy he was as prime minister, he'd prepared for this day by investigating every restaurant with cakes that might be to Yui's taste. She knew that it was because he wanted to please her, but she was still impressed that he'd been able to do it while at the same time keeping up with his regular duties. He must've been really looking forward to the two of them going out somewhere. There was one problem, however.

"This was supposed to be our long-awaited date..." Layce said, shaking. "So... So... Why are you two here?!" he yelled at Yui's older brothers, Cecil and Carlo. After hearing about the date from Yui, they had secretly come to the restaurant beforehand. Of course, they hadn't told Layce they would be present.

"What's wrong, paaapaaa? We want to hang out with Yui toooo," Carlo said in a soft, cutesy voice.

"Stop it, that's disgusting!" Layce said. "I don't want to be called 'papa' by a boy your age. It gives me goose bumps!"

"But Yui calls you that."

"Yui's cute."

Cecil held his fork out to Yui. "This one's tasty too. Here, open up."

Yui's eyes lit up. "Mmm, you're right! Try this."

As Layce and Carlo were arguing, Yui and Cecil fed each other cake. When Layce noticed, he instantly got closer to Yui. "This is an outrage! You're in quite an enviable position right now, Cecil. If you weren't Yui's brother, I'd get rid of you. Yui, can I—"

"You can get mama to feed you, papa."

Layce recoiled, stunned by Yui's rejection. "This was supposed to be *our* date..."

Yui ignored Layce's quiet sobs. This time, Yui and Carlo fed each other a piece of cake.

After having their fill of cake, the four of them went to an upscale shopping district lined with stores that catered to nobles and the rich. They were there to get Yui's birthday present and buy her a magic communicator.

A few days ago, Layce had given Yui the king's payment for the magic formula she had made available for public use. The moment she had taken the money in her hands, she had been surprised by its weight: an average family could live comfortably for three years on the sum she had received. It was too much for her, and she had tried to give it back to Layce so he could return it, but he'd told her that her spell would be valuable for future research too, and that it was fair compensation—if not slightly low. Apparently, the king had prepared an even greater sum of money, but he had reduced it after taking her status as a student into account.

So this is a small amount... Yui had thought, but in the end, because it'd been fair, she'd had no reason to refuse. After much agonizing about how to best make use of the money, she had eventually hit upon the idea of buying a magic communicator. Filiel and her brothers each had one, and she had wanted one for some time, but ordinary people generally couldn't afford magic items. She knew that Layce would buy her one if she asked, but he already bought her gifts all the time, and she felt shy about begging him to get one. Thus, she had given up on it. But now that she had her own money, it was no issue.

So, they all headed to a shop specializing in magic items so Yui could get the communicator she had been longing for.

When they got there, there were several stern, tough-looking security guards standing out front and inside the store to protect the expensive merchandise. Yui had never been inside a magic item shop before, so she curiously looked around at everything there, and before long, an employee came up to them.

"Welcome. Is there anything you're looking for today?" he asked.

"Yes, she's interested in a magic communicator," Layce said. "Do you have anything good in stock?"

"Yes, we do. We have various kinds, and depending on price, the model and features vary. Do you have a certain price range?"

"Please show me the best ones you have here."

"Papa!" Yui exclaimed. She didn't know how much communicators cost, so she was going to give the employee her budget first, but Layce had started talking before she could. She had a lot of money, but it was still limited, and if the communicator was too expensive, she wouldn't be able to pay for it. She looked up at Layce, flustered.

Layce patted her head. "Don't worry. If it goes over your limit, I'll pay for the rest."

"But..."

"Magic items are meant to be used for a long time, so you should pick the one that works best for you without compromise. And I might not look like it, but I make a fair amount of money, so you don't need to worry about it."

Yui reluctantly nodded, unable to object over Layce's decisive tone of voice.

When the employee heard Layce say that there was no upper limit to the price, his radiant smile widened even further, probably because he had judged that they were important customers. "Certainly. I'll prepare our finest selection, so please wait for a moment." He went to the back of the store.

As they waited, Carlo spoke. "But anyway, His Majesty must've been really happy—he gave Yui so much money. I know the spell is valuable, but she isn't a researcher; she's still only a kid."

Cecil nodded. "Grandpa Theo said he was overjoyed."

"I'm sure Grandpa Theo was just as happy."

"Right?"

As Layce heard them speak familiarly about "Grandpa Theo," his face stiffened. "'Grandpa Theo...' You don't mean to say that you're in contact with him?"

"Yeah, but only sometimes. We talk about Yui, school, and stuff," Carlo said nonchalantly. "Other than Filiel, Grandpa Theo was our source of information about everything that's happened recently."

Layce had an indescribable expression on his face. This seemed to be the first time he had heard them refer to the still greatly influential former King Theodore so casually.

Just then, Carlo turned to Yui like he had just remembered something. "By the way, did it turn out fine, Yui?"

"Did what?" Yui asked. She didn't remember doing anything that would've been a cause for worry. But Carlo's next words brought various things back to mind.

"You stayed in the same room with Filiel for a few days, right? With the age he's at, he didn't pounce on you, did he? Aha ha ha...ha...ha..." Carlo had been joking, but when he noticed Yui's cheeks turning red, his laughter got quieter and trailed off. Cecil's eyes widened in surprise, and Layce went pale and pressed her.

"Y-Y-Yui, h-he actually did do something?!"

"N-No, papa. He didn't do that!"

Cecil calmly analyzed Yui's response. "So, he kissed you, then?"

"N-No!"

"Oh, he didn't?"

"He's always been a wimp," Carlo remarked. He and Cecil sounded disappointed, but Layce looked relieved.

"But from how you're acting, he at least confessed his feelings, right?" Carlo asked.

"Ah, umm, well..."

Yui's brothers grinned at her obvious confusion. Their eyes sparkled with curiosity, and they seemed to be a second away from making her tell them everything. Next to them, Layce was brimming with rage. Yui's mind raced as she tried to think of a way to make it the situation, but just then, the employee

conveniently returned.

"Apologies for the wait," he said. Then, sensing an odd mood, he asked, "Is there an issue?"

"No, it's nothing!" Yui said. In order to escape from any further questioning, she focused her attention on the magic items that had been brought out.

While Yui was looking at communicators, Layce was burning with so much anger that it seemed like he was ready to go and storm into the palace at any moment. "It takes some nerve to make a pass at my daughter," he muttered.

Taken aback, Cecil chided him for being so overprotective. "Now, now, calm down, dad."

"How am I supposed to calm down?! Why aren't you two angry? Are you just going to give up your little sister to some nobody from God-knows-where?!"

"He isn't a nobody—he's a prince, and we know him." Cecil smiled awkwardly. "I might've been angry if I didn't...but he's Filiel, after all."

Carlo backed him up. "Cecil's right. If anything, I'd like to commend him for keeping it to just a confession. We know how long he's been in love with her. He'd never do anything to hurt her." Neither of Yui's overprotective brothers were angry at Filiel; on the contrary, they had accepted him, and they didn't doubt for a second that he would treat Yui well. Layce could sense their trust in Filiel, and his anger abated somewhat.

"I guess I'll look past it this time. I have to thank you two."

"Hm?" Cecil said, confused.

"For what?" Carlo asked.

A menacing aura emanated out from Layce, and he said, "If you hadn't told me about that bug beforehand, I might've crushed him in my fist and turned him into fish food."

Cecil and Carlo momentarily wondered what "bug" meant, but they quickly realized that he was talking about Filiel. The two of them had known for some time how much Layce doted on Yui, though she was only his stepdaughter. They

had been afraid that Layce might somehow find out about Filiel because they knew he would positively explode. So, they had both figured that it was safer for them to let him know beforehand rather than risk a sudden outburst. They hadn't told Layce who he was, but they had let him know that there was a member of the opposite sex that Yui was on close terms with. And just in case the two ever met, they had emphatically pushed Layce to remain calm. Naturally, when they had told Layce this, he'd erupted with rage. But, because he had been able to vent beforehand, he'd remembered the twins' warning—he hadn't immediately resorted to violence when Theodore had said he wanted to keep Yui at the palace. The twins were struck with terror whenever they imagined what Layce might've done if they hadn't talked with him.

"I know it was a good idea to tell him," Cecil whispered to Carlo.

"Yeah, it definitely was. We'll have to get Filiel to thank us sometime," Carlo replied quietly. Then, in a loud voice, he said to Layce, "But you know, I don't think it's all that bad of an idea. Think about it, dad. When Yui gets married—"

"She's only fifteen," Layce cut him off, not even wanting to consider it. "It's too early to be talking about marriage!"

Unmoved, Cecil picked up where Carlo left off. "But she will get married someday. Regardless of whether he'll be a noble or a commoner, when she gets married, it'll mean that she becomes a part of that family. She won't be able to visit you easily like she always has. You won't see her nearly as often, you know. But if she and Filiel get married, she'll be moving into the royal palace, and with your position as prime minister, you're close to the king—you'll be able to see her every day."

Layce was at a loss for words. He was undoubtedly frantically calculating the benefits and drawbacks in his head.

"Cecil's right," Carlo said. "Filiel's pretty much guaranteed to become the next commander in chief of the army, so they won't have any trouble with their livelihoods. And since he can't touch anyone else, there's no worry that he'll ever be unfaithful. Marrying Filiel means that Yui will become part of the royal family, so she'll have some official duties, but she'll only be the wife of the second prince, not the queen, so she won't be burdened by nearly as much

work, and she'll be able to live more freely—meaning she'll probably be able to make time to spend with you. On top of that, Filiel's gentle and kind, and he's always been just as sweet to Yui as we have. And, I know how this sounds, but he's rich, he's got a high status, and he's a great guy. You'd be missing out if you didn't buy in now."

Cecil continued without giving Layce a moment to think. "Besides Grandpa Theo, Filiel tells us that the other members of the royal family—especially the queen—have taken quite a liking to Yui, so they'll all love her. Yui won't have to deal with a troublesome mother-in-law."

"You won't find better conditions for Yui's new family than these. Right, dad?"

Layce spent a short while silently brooding over it. Thinking about it logically, it was a good-looking offer. The best part was that he'd be able to see her every day. However, when he noticed he was starting to succumb, he abruptly cut off his thoughts and banished them. "I won't be cajoled! No matter how good he might be, Yui would be a waste for that brat!"

Cecil and Carlo clicked their tongues in frustration. They had only needed one more push. They exchanged looks, knowing that they had to think of some other way.

"Well, dad isn't the only issue." Cecil mumbled.

"Right? If anything, he's going to be more of a problem," Carlo whispered back.

"You're right. That's why Filiel was so worried about how Yui was doing."

Carlo watched Yui as she listened intently to the employee explaining the magic items. "How much more does that bastard have to torment Yui for him to be satisfied?" he spat, angry at a man who wasn't there.

"These are our finest, handpicked products. I can confidently recommend any of these designs," the employee said. He then went over each one of the magic items. Though they were all magic communicators, they had wide variation in both size and shape. One of them was a large rectangle that could fit in the

palm of your hand, there was another that looked like a pocket watch, and there was even a one that looked like a piece of jewelry that hooked over the top of your ear.

"There really are a lot of different kinds," Yui remarked.

"Yes. Right now, one very popular design among our female customers is this ear hook model. In contrast to the conventional models that you hold in your hand to use, it frees both of your hands, and it's lightweight. It has a beautiful design, so you can also use it as an ordinary accessory. If you'd prefer something besides the ones here, we also offer custom-made designs." As he had said, there were some pretty ones that had more subdued designs, and some others with cutesy ornamentation. They all looked like normal jewelry and not at all like magic items.

Yui painstakingly thought it over, then chose a communicator with a cute white flower motif. "Hmm, then, I'll take this one," she said. She was satisfied with her choice, and it was also within her price range.

"Thank you for your purchase. There are some final adjustments that need to be done, which can take up to an hour. Would you be able to wait in the store?"

Yui turned around and called over the others from where they were standing a short distance away. "Umm... Papa."

"Yes, what is it?" Layce asked.

"He said it'll take an hour to adjust it and asked us what we'll do."

"If it's only an hour, then let's wait in the store. Time will pass before you know it if you look around at the other magic items here."

Yui had been curious about what else was there, so she eagerly welcomed Layce's proposal. Of course, Layce had known that when he'd suggested it.

"Please enjoy yourselves. We also have plenty of brand-new models in stock. If you ever wish to take one in your hand to look at it, please don't hesitate to ask a nearby associate."

"Okay," Yui said. The employee left holding the earring, and Yui went to look around the store.

Each magic item was quite expensive. Some of them were decently affordable for a regular family, but cheaper ones were plainer and had fewer features, and they tended to be of poor quality. If you wanted something powerful that performed well, the price inevitably rose. Even as the daughter of a count, Yui, who lived with her commoner grandparents, would never have been able to afford one. She had never been in a store like this, especially not one with so many high-quality magic items in one place, and she had fun browsing around and seeing the novel and surprising variety on display. However, as she continued browsing, a certain thought suddenly crossed her mind.

"What is it, Yui?" Carlo asked. "You look really serious."

She realized she had been lost in thought and had been frowning. "Hey, at magic academies, there's an elective where they teach you how to make magic items, right? I think you can take it starting your second year."

"Yeah, you can. Cecil and I are taking that class right now."

"How do you make one?"

"Well, to put it simply, first you begin by casting a spell. You let your magic take shape, but then, in the spell's inactive state, you affix it to an inanimate object. If you do it right, the spell's function will be etched into the material. But at the academy, they only teach you how to make basic magic items. The more complex the formula, the harder it gets to affix magic to an object. Why do you ask?"

Yui wondered whether it was okay for her to say it here. She lowered her voice so none of the employees could hear her. "You know, looking at the magic items here, I think I could make them. Listening to your explanation, it sounds pretty easy, and I think even I could do it."

Saying that she could make such high-quality, expensive magic items was basically picking a fight with the store, and normally, Carlo would've said, "Don't be ridiculous," and flatly rebuffed her. But, this was *Yui*. She had created a spell that all the country's researchers hadn't been able to discover, so if she out of all people was saying it, then Carlo couldn't deny the possibility that she might be right. "Hm... Well, why don't you wait until you take the magic item elective next year?" he suggested.

"Good idea. I guess for now, I'll think of some formulas and features of items that I might want to make."

Yui looked like she was really looking forward to next year. She was speaking so excitedly that Carlo couldn't bring himself to tell her the magic item elective was divided into four levels—beginning, intermediate, advanced, and expert—and that each of the courses took a year to complete. Creating magic items was only for the advanced class and up, which meant that she had to be at least a fourth-year to take it.

"Thank you very much," an employee said to them as they left the store.

Yui was wearing the magic item she had just purchased. It really did look like just an ordinary accessory.

"It looks really good on you, Yui," Cecil said, and Yui smiled bashfully.

"Now, should we head to where we're going next?" Layce said.

"It's for Yui's present, right?" Carlo asked.

"Yes, at a store owned by an acquaintance of mine," Layce answered.

Yui's birthday was a week away, but it took place during the joint training camp that students from the three schools went to, which meant that they couldn't celebrate it on the actual day. So today, they would buy Yui her present, then in the evening, Sherina would join them at a restaurant where Layce had made reservations, and they would all celebrate together over dinner.

"Hey, papa, I already asked for something else, so I don't think I really need this present..."

"That is that, and this is this," Layce said firmly.

"But..." Yui said. What she had asked for had been quite expensive, and she felt awkward receiving anything more. She felt guilty, but it didn't seem like Layce would change his mind anytime soon.

"Give it up, Yui," Carlo said. "If dad says he will, then he won't go home until he buys it."

Yui finally gave in, and a look of resignation crept onto her face.

"Actually, what did you ask for from dad?" Cecil asked her.

"It's a secret. You'll find out during camp."

"Oh? I'm looking forward to it."

"Yeah, me too," Yui said cheerfully.

Despite Yui's bright mood, Layce secretly frowned, and his mood slightly worsened. He couldn't help but feel dissatisfied with what Yui had requested. But since she rarely asked for anything, he had decided to grant her wish without complaint.

Next, they visited another upscale shop. This one was owned by a friend of Layce's, and it dealt in clothing, jewelry, and accessories.

"Whoa, so this is the Langert Company?" Carlo exclaimed in surprise.

Cecil looked up at the sign. "They're purveyors to the royal household, and they even have branches in other countries," he said, also impressed. "This is your friend's shop, dad?"

"She's the only daughter of the owner, and we've been friends since we were students. For now, let's just go inside," Layce said.

The store had a gorgeous interior, and there were beautiful clothes and sparkling jewelry on display everywhere they looked. As one would expect from a company that provided goods to the royal family, there were many other customers already in the store—they were instantly recognizable by their high-quality attire as either members of the nobility or very wealthy. Here and there, customers were taking suggestions and recommendations from employees as they tried on various clothes and compared them in the mirror. When Yui and her family came into the store, a short, somewhat elderly man walked up to Layce.

"Why, if it isn't Lord Curtis," the man said. "Welcome, and thank you for coming."

"Is Lydia here?" Layce asked.

"Yes, I'll go call her right now." The man bowed, then immediately disappeared into the back of the store.

Carlo followed the man with his eyes. He noticed that, for some reason, there was a crowd of people gathered in a corner. "What's over there?"

"I wish I could tell, but that area is surrounded. I don't think I'll be able to see," Cecil said.

"We can go look at it later," Layce said. In contrast to the curious twins, he seemed completely disinterested, and he was looking around the store.

Yui also wondered why the crowd was there, but she was completely captivated by something else entirely: a lighter, engraved with an elaborate floral pattern. After a single look, she was mesmerized. "So pretty..."

As she stared at the lighter, unable to take her eyes off of it, Cecil and Carlo peeked in from the side. "That flower is an Elphie," Cecil remarked. "The magic item you bought earlier had the same flower motif."

The Elphie flower was the national flower of Garlant and part of the royal family's coat of arms. Everyone in the kingdom could recognize it. A long time ago, it had been beloved by the first king of Garlant, Elphin, which was where it had gotten its name from. It was also known by another name: the king's flower. When the anniversary of the founding of Garlant drew near, this white flower was in full bloom across the country. Yui had always loved Elphies, and she had bought her magic communicator because it'd featured one as part of the design.

"That's not all. Look, it's a Laroque," Cecil pointed out. "That's why it's so incredible."

Yui had never heard that name before, and she tilted her head. "Laroque?" she asked.

"Laroque makes these kinds of ornamental objects all by himself, from the overall design to the fine details by hand," Cecil explained. "His works are so beautiful and refined that he's said to be better than anyone else out there, and he's famous among the nobility. But he doesn't produce very many items, and the Langert Company is the only place that deals with them. He's skilled, but

apparently, he's quite an eccentric. Seeing as he made this lighter, the rumors might not be that inaccurate."

Nearly everyone could use fire magic, and that was especially true among the nobility, many of whom possessed more powerful magic. It would be one thing if the lighter had been cheap enough for an ordinary household to afford, but at a store that sold products targeted toward nobles and the rich, it was highly unlikely that anyone would buy it. That being said, the lighter was a Laroque original, which meant that some collectors might want it, even if it had no practical use.

"Do you like it, Yui?" Cecil asked.

"No, I was just looking," she replied. Actually, she really, really wanted it, but when she saw what was written on the price tag, she gave up hope that she would ever get it. It was shockingly expensive, which made sense for an artist popular among the nobility. With the money she had left over after buying the communicator, she wouldn't have been able to put even a dent in the price. Yui walked away, reluctantly parting ways with the lighter.

Cecil, who had many years of experience with Yui, didn't fail to notice that. He exchanged looks with Carlo, who seemed like he had been thinking much the same thing as his twin. Carlo instantly took out his communicator and contacted someone, making sure Yui didn't notice.

"Do you have a moment? There's something..."

A woman came out from the back of the store, and several male customers turned to look at her. She was wearing a formfitting dress that accentuated the curves of her body, and on her ears, fingers, and wrists, and around her neck, she wore expensive, luxurious jewelry with plenty of precious stones. The average noblewoman would've shied away from wearing such a revealing dress, but on her, it didn't appear even a shred indecent—in fact, it greatly heightened her refinement and feminine charm.

"Welcome, Layce," the woman said, smiling. Several men around her were captivated by her smile, and they were blushing.

Layce was not one of those men. Despite being the target of her smile, he showed surprisingly little reaction to it. "Hello, Lydia," he replied.

The woman Layce had called Lydia then noticed Yui, who was standing behind her father. "Oh, you're Yui, aren't you?"

"Yes," Yui said. "Um... Have we met before?"

Lydia quietly giggled. "We've never spoken, but I attended Layce's wedding, and I saw you then. The dresses that you and your mother wore were from my store."

Layce had given Yui her dress on the same day as the ceremony, so she hadn't known where it had come from. She was surprised. "Oh, really? Thank you for the wonderful dress." Yui bowed.

Lydia smiled at her. "You're very welcome. Hee hee, I understand why Layce is so crazy about you. I was interrupted, and I didn't have a chance to meet you back then, but I'm happy that I finally have a chance now."

Interrupted? Yui wondered, puzzled by what Lydia was saying. But then she saw her give Layce a slightly cold look, and she instantly knew who had gotten in Lydia's way.

Lydia turned to the twins. "I did meet you two at the wedding."

"Yes, it's been a while, Lydia," Cecil said. "I had no idea when we met that you were with the Langert Company."

"I'm glad to have had the chance to see such a beautiful woman again," Carlo said. He and Cecil both had smiles on their faces, the same ones that had charmed so many girls at the academy.

"Oh, you flatter me," Lydia said. With greetings over, she looked at Layce. "By the way, I have what you requested of me. I displayed it in the store with your permission, and it was a *sensation*. It really helped draw customers in. Thank you." Strangely enough, though she was thanking Layce, Yui sensed a hint of irritation in her voice.

"You aren't perhaps referring to that crowd over there, are you?" Layce asked.

"Oh, I am. I don't know how many times I've had to refuse someone coming up to me and saying, 'I'll pay anything, so just sell it to me.' It was good publicity, but honestly, it's a bother, so please take it back soon."

Layce sighed deeply. Yui and her brothers didn't know what they were talking about, and they looked at each other, confused. "Hey, papa, what's she talking about?" Yui asked.

"Well, I asked Lydia to prepare your birthday present for you. She asked me for permission to display it in the store for some time."

"It's a masterpiece made by the master craftsman Laroque, and it features rare Orthyrian gemstones impossible to find in Garlant," said Lydia. "I could see it being presented to the king if it weren't already spoken for."

Yui, Cecil, and even Carlo were speechless. It hardly sounded like something fit to be just a regular birthday present. While they seriously doubted Layce's priorities, they also began to worry about how much it must've cost to have it custom-made. They were even taken by a fear that the Curtis family might go bankrupt.

"What were you thinking, dad?" Cecil said. "No matter how well paid the prime minister may be, this is too much."

"I get that Yui's cute, but if you lose everything because you bought that, it won't be pretty for us," Carlo said.

"Papa, I don't need a present, so can we return it? Or sell it, if we have to ...?"

As the three of them protested, one after the other, Lydia looked like she was trying to stop herself from bursting into laughter. Her shoulders shook.

Layce sighed deeply in response to their serious concerns. "It's nothing for you three to be worried about. While it would certainly be the absolute best product on the market if it was sold, I used all my connections to the utmost of my ability in order to obtain it, so it didn't cost as much as you think."

"What connections?" Yui asked.

"The king of Orthyria, Laroque, and I are all friends. I was able to get the gemstones at a reasonable price, and even Laroque, when I told him that it was

Yui's birthday, made it specially for free. There's no need to worry about the money."

Yui and her brothers looked at Layce with suspicion, but they finally relented.

"I guess that makes it fine...?" Yui murmured.

"If there's anyone who could do all that, it's dad. As long as there are no problems, it should be fine," Cecil said.

"I'm just relieved he had the barest minimum of common sense," Carlo said.

"I know how I am, but I would never use my money in a way that would worry any of you." Layce squinted angrily, and the three of them quietly averted their eyes.

"It's amazing that you all can speak to him like that," Lydia said. "You're very amusing." She was still smiling slightly, but she seemed to have avoided bursting out into a fit of laughter in the middle of the store.

"But anyway, how are you friends with so many important people?" Yui asked Layce. She still thought it odd that Layce had such an impressive lineup of acquaintances.

"I became friends with the king of Orthyria and Laroque when we were students," Layce said. "Well, I was only with the king for the year I studied abroad, but we instantly clicked, and we've been friends ever since."

"Oh, and don't forget poor Van, the Melphis family heir," Lydia chimed in. "Layce made him go all the way to Orthyria to get those gemstones."

Cecil quickly reacted to the name Melphis. "You mean the massively economically influential family with a large number of business ventures in various industries? *That* Melphis?"

"Yes, that Melphis," Lydia replied. "He's also been a friend since we were students. Melphis merchant vessels can dock and trade in many countries, including Orthyria, without being subject to too many inspections. So, because they can make the trip quickly, Layce used them to do his errands."

Cecil's and Carlo's voices grew strained.

"Using the heir to the Melphis family as his errand boy..."

"The Prince of Darkness isn't feared for his reputation alone. His personal connections are also scary," Carlo muttered. Cecil and Yui nodded emphatically.

Orthyria was an ally of Garlant, and though it was a small country, it was rich in high-quality ore, gemstones, and other natural resources. Selling and exporting those resources to neighboring countries had caused the Orthyrian king's coffers to grow quite full. Laroque was just a craftsman, but he had numerous fans among nobles and the wealthy, so he had extensive connections both in Garlant and abroad. And then there was Lydia, the only daughter of the head of the Langert Company—one of the leading companies in Garlant, a purveyor to the royal household, with branches in many different countries. Those three people alone were significant connections, enough to give someone no small amount of influence, but on top of them, Layce was also acquainted with the Melphis family heir, Van. Yui and her brothers thought that, out of everything, Layce's circle of friends made him truly terrifying.

Layce turned to Lydia. "Well, with that problem solved... Lydia, if you don't mind."

"All right," Lydia said. "Yui, this way"

"What is it?" Yui asked.

"We'll be going to dinner after this, so you have to be dressed in the finest clothes," Layce explained. "Lydia's taste is impeccable, so she'll choose the right outfit for you. Cecil, Carlo, you two should also pick out what you like."

"Nice! You're so generous, dad!" Carlo said.

Cecil smiled. "Thanks."

Yui stood next to the celebrating twins, not knowing what to do. As she lingered there confused, Lydia took her arm and led her to a large changing room. Inside were countless outfits and several female employees. As soon as Yui set eyes on the scene before her, she was instantly overcome by a horrible sense of déjà vu.

"I feel like this happened to me not too long ago..."

"Now, we don't have much time, so let's do this quickly," said Lydia. "Get ready, Yui."

The beaming smiles on Lydia's and the employees' faces reminded her of another dress-up moment she'd endured at the royal palace. Feeling like she was about to experience a recurring nightmare, Yui's face stiffened. "P-Please be gentle..."

When Yui was finally released, she came out of the changing room. Layce, Cecil, and Carlo were waiting for her, having already changed into their outfits. Her brothers already had a fan club at the academy, so with the fine clothes that they were wearing, their good looks were even more striking than usual. When they stood next to Layce—who, while having a few personality flaws, looked pleasantly attractive—the three of them caught the eye. Nearby noblewomen, young and old alike, were all intently staring at them.

"I'm back..." Yui said.

"Are you all right?" Cecil asked.

"Somehow." She looked so exhausted. Before praising her for how pretty she looked, Cecil had first felt the need to express his concern about her condition.

"Lydia, you overdid it," Layce remarked.

Paying no heed to Layce's warning, Lydia smiled, satisfied. "Tee hee, I'm sorry. Yui was just so cute—the girls who helped me out also got a bit too into it."

"That's why I didn't want to let her meet you," Layce mumbled.

"All right, next up is what Layce asked me to procure. Should I put it on now? I chose clothes that would match," Lydia said.

"Indeed." Layce turned to Yui. "Is that okay?"

Yui nodded. "Yeah."

Lydia called several employees over and told them to bring what was on display. For some reason, as they left, they looked so happy that they seemed like they might cry.

Ever since those precious pieces of jewelry had been put on display, the employees had handled them with great care and much nervousness—after all, they would fetch an *exorbitant* price if sold normally. The employees didn't

want to know what would happen if there were even a single scratch on the merchandise. On top of that, they had spent the days timidly dealing with persistent, high-status customers demanding that they sell the jewelry to them, all while having to make sure not to anger their clientele. Now that they were finally about to be released from all of that, they were filled with joy from the bottom of their hearts.

The employees told the customers swarming the display case to move away. They looked displeased, but they were members of the upper class and knew their decorum, so they all followed the directions. A few made annoyed comments to the employees, but since they were in public, they couldn't very well make too much of a fuss, so they reluctantly complied.

One of the employees opened up the glass case and emptied it, taking out several pieces of jewelry from inside. However, just as she was about to return to Lydia, a woman accompanied by a girl around Yui's age approached her.

"Excuse me, do you have a moment?" the woman asked.

"Yes, how can I help you?" asked the employee.

"That jewelry—my daughter really likes it, so would you mind selling it to me?"

"My apologies. These pieces have already been sold."

"Huh?! Mother, I want it..." the girl whined.

Cecil and Carlo watched this exchange from afar, frowning grimly. That expression was so uncharacteristic for them that Yui was about to ask what was wrong. But before she could, the mother and daughter looked at Cecil and Carlo. Surprise flashed across their faces.

"Oh, Cecil, Carlo!" the girl said to them. "Mother, my brothers are here."

For a second, Yui didn't know what the girl was saying—she watched it all as if it were happening to someone else entirely. But she quickly realized that the girl was talking to Cecil and Carlo, and she felt her face stiffen. *Brothers... Does she mean...?*

The mother and daughter came up to them. Carlo stood in front of Yui and

blocked her from view, seemingly trying to shield her. The girl approached Cecil and entwined her arm around his. Cecil reacted with an even more stern look before matter-of-factly disentangling her arm. He put some distance between them. There was a clear loathing visible on his face, but the girl didn't notice, or she was just unconcerned. Regardless, she didn't pay it any mind.

"Gosh, Cecil, you're so shy," she said.

Yui couldn't help but feel impressed by how little Cecil's and Carlo's hostile gazes seemed to affect her.

"Adele, you know better. A lady shouldn't so frivolously cling to a man in public like that," the mother chided. She was gentle and understated—the exact opposite of the glamorous Lydia.

"We're siblings, so isn't it all right?"

"It isn't. I'm sorry, Cecil," the woman said. "By the way, who is that young lady there?"

When the woman abruptly called upon her, Yui reacted with a start. She sensed traces of someone she knew very well in the well-defined facial features of the girl named Adele, and she felt confident she knew who the girl was.

Carlo clicked his tongue, frustrated that the woman had spotted Yui even though he'd been trying to block her. The noise had been quiet enough that only Yui could hear him.

"She's not of any concern to you," he said flatly.

"O-Okay, I'm sorry," the woman replied. She hung her head, a sad expression on her face.

It seemed like Cecil was one-sidedly reproaching her. He didn't seem to care if this was how others perceived his actions, and he continued to stare coldly at her.

Layce, who had been spectating all of this, called out to Yui. "It looks like they're ready, so please come here."

Yui wanted to get out of her current situation, so she did as he said and walked over to Layce. There, the jewelry that had been on display a short while

ago was neatly arranged on a table.

"I'll put them on you now, so stand still for a bit, okay?" Lydia said.

Yui did as she was told, and Lydia put a hair ornament, earrings, and a necklace on her. Yui had been wearing her communicator and the pendant that matched Filiel's, but she had taken them off before changing.

"So pretty..." Yui said. The Orthyrian gemstones shone like prisms, and their rainbow sparkle changed color depending on the direction you looked at them. Laroque had used them to great effect to create a small, reserved, yet cute design. They fit Yui's ephemeral aura perfectly, which made sense, given that they had been made for her. As she stood in front of the mirror and tried the jewelry on, nearly all of the customers in the store were looking at her.

"So the jewelry on display was hers," one said.

"I wonder what family she's from."

"How do you think she was able to afford something so expensive?"

Besides that, Yui could faintly make out several envious comments here and there, like "I'm so jealous," or "I wish I could try them on, just once." Some had heard the rumors that prospective buyers had been firmly rejected no matter how much or how persistently they'd offered to buy these pieces—these people had come only to see the jewelry. Thus, it made sense that so many people were paying attention to Yui.

"I knew Laroque could do it," Layce said, satisfied. "He's an odd one, but his skill is second to none. They fit you perfectly, Yui."

"But papa, I can't take all this..." Yui said. She had thought there would only be a single gift. In contrast with her father's elation, her feelings of guilt surpassed any of the joy she felt. With the clothes and shoes Lydia had given her and the jewelry on her ears and around her neck, just how high was the total price of everything she had on? She was so afraid to know that she couldn't even make a guess.

"These are my feelings for you, Yui," Layce said. "This is your first birthday since you became my daughter, so it's also a kind of commemoration for me. Please accept them."

It was to celebrate that Yui was his daughter—when he put it that way, there was no way she could refuse.

She smiled softly. "Okay, thanks, papa. I'll treasure them."

Layce contented himself with her smile, which Yui only revealed to people she was close with. Suddenly, he heard a displeasing voice coming from right next to him.

"Hey, that was on display just now, wasn't it?" Adele said. "Let me try them on! It'll only be for a bit."

Adele's rude behavior instantly soured Layce's mood. She and her mother were the only ones who didn't notice that she had done the one thing she should've avoided.

"Adele, don't ask that. It's rude," Adele's mother said. However, she continued. "I'm sorry, but my daughter really seems to like them, so if you can, would you mind letting her have just one?"

She sounded like she wanted to say, "You already have so much, so it'd be no big deal if you sold one piece." The way she pleaded with Layce with an awkward, troubled look on her face might have made the average man want to instinctively help her. However, Layce was the wrong man to try it on. He held his wife and daughter above anyone and anything else, and he didn't feel charmed by her behavior in the slightest. The only thing he felt was annoyance, and nothing else.

"You can't be serious," Layce said in a bone-chilling voice. "In one breath you're apologizing for your daughter's impoliteness, and in the next, you're telling me to give you something? I don't think you feel sorry at all. That's the only way I can comprehend how you'd be able to say something so shameless. I have no desire to speak with someone so rude. If you're going to ask for something, please learn proper manners beforehand."

The woman looked somewhat surprised. She probably hadn't imagined he would refuse. As soon as he finished speaking, Layce paid no further attention to either mother or daughter, and he didn't look at them again. Though the mother stood there dumbfounded, Adele flared up with anger. She was about to talk back to Layce when several people around them started talking.

"To be suddenly demanding that... She's an awfully impolite lady. Who is she?"

"Quite so. Even if you were thinking it, you should never say something like that. How shameless."

"And if you wanted to negotiate, there's a proper way to do it. What was she thinking?"

When Adele and her mother noticed all the judgmental looks directed their way, they hastily left the store.

As Yui watched them go, she had a question for her brothers. "Hey, are they, maybe...?"

"Yeah, they are," Carlo confirmed. "They're the woman he remarried and her daughter. The daughter is our half sister, and she's your age."

"I see... That's what I thought," Yui said, her expression clouding over. Carlo patted her head to comfort her.

Layce frowned. "I've heard about them, but they sure are something else."

"Yeah, her mother only cares about herself, and at home, she only ever does what she wants to do," Cecil explained, still clearly irritated.

"Adele is her favorite, but she never taught her daughter any manners," Carlo said angrily. "Adele's always impolite and doesn't have any common sense."

"Our stepmother was surprised when dad stopped paying attention to her."

"That felt good. She doesn't have that kind of charm in the first place, so I don't know what sort of mistaken impression she's under."

Judging by those harsh words, Yui could tell how much her brothers hated them.

"Well, it's no matter. Those idiots are gone now. What's most important is Yui," Layce said.

Cecil nodded. "You're right."

"Yeah," Carlo added.

With the three of them in agreement, they went up to Yui and gazed at the

jewelry on the table.

"By the way, whose are those?" Cecil asked. He was looking at a necklace, a brooch, a pair of earrings, and a ring with the same Orthyrian gemstones as Yui's. They, however, had a more grown-up design.

"They're Sherina's," Layce said happily.

Yui and her brothers brought their faces close together, and Carlo whispered quietly, "No matter how you look at it, he had her in mind first."

Yui and Cecil seemed to agree.

"I think so too."

"Same here."

What confirmed it for them was the fact that the gemstones in the pieces meant for Sherina were clearly larger than the ones in Yui's set. There also were more pieces of jewelry for Sherina.



And more than anything else, what made it obvious was the way Layce's expression had softened even more than when he'd given Yui her gift—he looked so excited, and it seemed almost as if he were ready to sprout wings and fly away at any moment. He was probably imagining Sherina as she happily accepted her present.

"I guess yours were just an afterthought, Yui," Carlo said.

Oddly enough, Yui found herself agreeing. "You might be right."

"But thanks to that, you're able to accept an expensive gift without worrying that it cost too much, so isn't it fine?"

"Yeah, and I get to match with mama."

Hearing this, Lydia giggled. "He might've put more care into Sherina's gift, but you were by no means an afterthought. He spent a lot of time on it. Take good care of this set, Yui."

"Yes, I certainly will," Yui replied, nodding firmly. She had known that, of course, and she had only been half joking.

Lydia smiled too, satisfied. "Well then, goodbye, Yui. Come again for a visit sometime. I'd love to spend a bit more time picking out clothes for you."

"I-I'm looking forward to it," Yui replied, her face tight.

After Lydia wrapped up Sherina's gift, they said their farewells and left the store.

Finally, they arrived at the restaurant where they were meeting up with Sherina. She wasn't there yet, so they went ahead to their private dining room and waited for her to show up. As they did, a certain thought was bouncing around Yui's mind, and before she knew it, she found herself preoccupied by it.

"What is it, Yui?" Carlo asked. He was wondering why Yui hadn't been speaking much.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just..." Yui was at a loss for words.

Cecil seemed to know what she wanted to say. "Are you still thinking about them?"

Though she was reluctant to answer, Yui nodded. "It's not really about them at all. But when I think about how she can see you two every day... And then she was acting so close to you, and it felt off...or, how should I put it...?"

Yui had known that she had a sister, and she had even wondered what the girl was like. But now that Yui had seen her firsthand, she was surprised by how little she felt for her. She had expected that she might react with more warmth since they were biologically related, but Yui had been able to clearly see her as just a stranger. Of course, it had still shaken her to see the girl behave with such familiarity around her beloved brothers, whom Yui hardly ever got to see. When Yui thought about the fact that Adele was able to be around them every day, she felt a jumble of hazy, complicated emotions whirling around inside herself.

"Whenever I think about how I'm not your only sister, it's like I feel really annoyed or something..."

In other words, she was jealous and lonely.

Yui looked pouty because she had the notion that Cecil and Carlo were being taken from her. But the twins, on the other hand, were happy. They were overwhelmed by how cute she was, and they hugged her tightly from both sides.

"What are you saying? You're our only sister, Yui," Carlo said. "We've never thought of her as our sister."

"Yeah, you don't have to worry about us," Cecil added. "We love you." They both smiled sweetly. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that just then, they were smothering her with love.

"Before you complain about my behavior, look at yourselves," Layce swiftly interjected. "You're the ones who indulge her the most." He looked irritated. "Don't worry, Yui. Next spring, we'll all be able to live together."

Yui tilted her head, confused by Layce's unexpected words. "Why's that?"

"Next spring, we're also changing our last names to Curtis," Carlo said.

"Huh?" Yui exclaimed. She was stunned, and she opened her eyes as wide as they could go. "You can do that?"

"Of course we can." Carlo proudly puffed out his chest.

Cecil quietly laughed, then explained. "We're still minors, so we need a guardian with parental authority to approve our leaving the O'Brian family. But anyone who's an adult can change the family they're a part of at will without needing permission."

"Basically, when we become adults on our twentieth birthday, we'll go through the process to make dad our guardian. Then, Cecil and I will leave that house, and we'll live with you and mom at the Curtis house."

I'll be able to live together with Cecil and Carlo... Yui thought. She had figured it would be impossible, and she had given up on it. If they could really do it, then she ought to have been happy. However, she felt uneasy. "But it won't be that simple, will it...?"

The source of her fear was their biological father, Arthur. It was hard to imagine that he'd simply part with his two brilliant and talented heirs. She was worried that, even if Cecil and Carlo legally became Layce's sons, Arthur might take some sort of action against them. That concern clouded her expression.

"There's no need to worry. Who do you think I am?" Layce said. "I'm the prime minister, and I'm the second most powerful person in the country, right behind the king. I have more connections than that man could ever even dream of. And, if necessary, I can always ask His Majesty to do something about it." He was smiling deviously.

Layce's exceedingly confident smile was enough to dispel any worries Yui had. At the same time, she and her brothers all thought with one voice, *Are you sure you'll only be* asking *the king and not* threatening *him?* They were overcome by a different worry.

"There's no way he'd intervene in a problem that involves only a single noble," Carlo pointed out.

"I'm afraid that dad might actually find a way to do it," Cecil said. Layce was the type of person to use whatever and whomever he could without any hesitation, king or otherwise. They couldn't help but feel sorry for the king, who Layce always forced to work hard.

"But dad, are you really okay with it?" Carlo asked suddenly, his voice apprehensive.

"What do you mean?" Layce said.

"Well, when you're legally our father, that means we'll be your sons. I was wondering whether you'd really be fine with accepting us, even though we aren't related by blood."

Yui understood very well how her brothers felt. She could say the same thing as Carlo. In fact, she constantly felt conflicted about whether it was all right for her to depend on Layce so much.

Layce quickly put their unfounded worries to rest.

"We might not be related, but you're still Sherina's children, aren't you? I love her—every last part of her. Her precious children are precious to me too, blood-related or not. Besides, you already call me dad, so it's a bit too late to be worrying. It'll be nothing at all for me to get two new, impudent sons."

They were all moved by what he said, and they felt love in his voice. He was more fatherlike than their actual father. Cecil and Carlo both smiled, embarrassed.

"But if you interrupt me when I'm spending time with Sherina, I'll instantly throw you both out on the street!" Layce warned, his voice turning serious.

Cecil scoffed. "You don't have to tell us—we won't."

"Yeah, we care too much about our lives," Carlo added.

The emotional moment had soon ended.

"So that means I'll be able to live with you again," Yui said. Her earlier anxiety had completely disappeared now that they had talked, and she felt overjoyed. She smiled, savoring the feeling, and she started to look forward to next spring.

Meanwhile, oblivious to Yui's excitement, Layce let slip what he was really thinking. "Heh heh heh, when you two come live with me, that means Yui will join us too."

Luckily, Yui didn't hear him.

"If only he hadn't said that last bit, then his sentiment would have been so nice," Carlo murmured.

"Yeah, it's too bad," Cecil said solemnly.

If one only listened to what Layce was saying, he would've come across as a compassionate and devoted husband. Unfortunately, his blissful eyes and slovenly expression ruined everything.

In the meantime, Sherina arrived. With her there, they enthusiastically celebrated Yui's birthday as a family, and Yui had a fun time from beginning to end.

That night, Yui was in her room, tightly gripping the magic communicator she had just bought. She stared at it with a serious look on her face. After spending some time like that, motionless, she summoned up the necessary resolve and turned it on. She had decided beforehand who she wanted to talk to first. In fact, she hadn't even thought about contacting any other person.

"Who is it?" asked the person on the other end. She had only just seen him, but she felt so nostalgic for his voice that she could almost believe that they had gone years since their last meeting.

"El, it's me," Yui said.

"Yui?!" Filiel exclaimed, extremely surprised. But that made sense. She hadn't contacted him at all since they had parted with each other at the royal palace. "What is it? Did you borrow a communicator from the twins?"

"No, I just bought one today. I wanted you to be the first person I called."
"I see."

Yui felt herself grow calm as she listened to his gentle voice. However, what she was about to say would push him away from her. At worst, he might even hate her because of it. *This might be the last time we talk like this...* Yui thought. She felt a burning sensation in her nose, and her eyes seemed like they would overflow with tears. But this was for his sake as well as hers. No, she was

actually afraid, but she had been avoiding thinking about it.

"El... The camp is already about to start pretty soon," Yui said.

"Yeah, it is."

"There's something I want to tell you before then."

"What is it?"

"At the palace, when you told me you loved me... I was really surprised."

She heard quiet laughter on the other end of the call. "I bet you were. You can be pretty oblivious sometimes, so I had to say it." His voice, full of kindness, hurt to hear.

"This is my reply... I can't answer your feelings."

There was a brief silence. Then Filiel simply replied, "I see. All right." There was no sign of disturbance in his voice; it was so normal that it actually made Yui feel a bit shaken.

"Okay. Then, that's that. Sorry. Good night."

"Yeah. Good night, Yui. Sweet dreams."

With those final words, Yui released the communicator.

"This is for the best. It's for the best..." Yui repeated that to herself several times.

It sounded like a warning.

Chapter Two: Training Camp—Start

With Filiel still occupying Yui's thoughts, the first day of the training camp finally arrived. That being said, in order to actually get to where everyone was staying for the camp, they first had to travel for two days by train to the town of Bahal, then take a carriage. At present, Yui was on the train. Instead of looking at the scenery outside the window of the room she had all to herself, she was nodding off to sleep.

Just then, there was a knock on her door, which brought her thoughts slightly back into focus. Yui stifled a yawn, then said, "Yes... Come in..." Then, surprised by who entered, she really woke up. "Why are you here, Finney?" she asked.

Finney hadn't been on the list of students going to the camp. Actually, Yui's presence was itself an irregularity, as she wasn't in class A. Still, for some reason, Finney was standing right there in front of her. For a moment, she had thought she was just tired and mistaking him for someone else, but by then she was wide awake, and there was no doubt that it was Finney.

"Yeah, I know," Finney said. "I was just as shocked as you are. It looks like I overdid it a bit on the test."

"If it was just 'a bit,' you wouldn't be here right now!"

Yui had been so surprised to see Finney that she hadn't looked at anyone else, but when someone fired off a cutting retort from behind him, she finally noticed that Finney wasn't alone.

"Lyle...and Clo and Ivo." Lyle was the one who had spoken just a moment ago. Apart from him, there were Clois Castren—or Clo—who wore glasses and had a nervous demeanor and Ivo Arman, who had a youthful face and was a bit taller than Yui, though he was somewhat short compared to other boys his age.



Clois and Ivo had been her friends since middle school, and they had scored first and second place respectively in the previous year's middle school tournament. Yui and Lyle had also made it to the semifinals back then—Lyle had lost to Clois and placed third. Finally, Yui had lost to Ivo by default, putting her in fourth. This meant that the highest-ranking competitors in the tournament were currently all gathered in her room.

"You have a room all to yourself, Yui? Ahh, that must be nice," Lyle said wistfully. "All four of us are stuck in a single room in third class. This unequal treatment is so cruel!"

The train had multiple classes of accommodations, from a special carriage all the way down to third class. Anyone part of a family with the rank of count or higher was given first-class accommodations, those below were in second class, and everyone else in commoner families were put into the third-class carriages. The cramped rooms in third class had bunk beds, and you could only move around freely in your own bed, which meant that the room was basically only suitable for sleeping.

On the other hand, in first class, Yui had her own room that was larger than the four-person rooms in third class. She had a soft, fluffy bed, a couch, and a table, which made the long journey a comfortable one. Normally, during school events, ability meant everything and status was unimportant. However, the training camp must've been different. Regardless, many of the students who had been assigned to the uncomfortable third-class cars were moving around the train. Her friends had been up and about for that very reason when they decided to go to her room.

"More importantly, what do you mean by 'overdid it'?" Yui asked.

Her friends had been looking restlessly around her room, and their attention returned to her when she spoke. The slightly younger-looking, annoyed Ivo plopped down in the seat next to Yui, and the others followed after him, each finding a spot to settle down in.

Finney was the first to speak. "Do you remember the student I was matched up against in the recent practical test?"

Yui thought for a moment. "If I remember correctly, he was that class A

student you destroyed, right?"

"Yeah. He was set to go to training camp, but apparently, he was so shocked that he was thoroughly defeated by a student from a low-ranking class that he dropped out right before the start, saying that there was no way he could come. The teachers yelled at me and said it was my fault, and I ended up coming in his place. Whoops!" He laughed, delighted.

Yui was exasperated; Lyle and Clois looked at Finney with stiff expressions on their faces.

Unable to keep quiet, Lyle took a verbal jab at Finney. "This isn't funny! He was pretty depressed after the match, you know, and he was crying that he didn't deserve to be in class A anymore."

Clois seemed sympathetic, and he agreed with Lyle. "And you just had to use the same spells as him. He must've felt like his pride was being torn to shreds and stomped on when your counterattacks were stronger than his. All the more because he's in class A."

"You'll have to restrain yourself a bit more from now on, Finney," Yui said. She looked at Ivo. "Now I get why he's here, but why are you so upset, Ivo?" He hadn't spoken a word since entering, and he wasn't making any effort to hide his bad mood—his arms were crossed, and he had a sour look on his face.

"It's your fault, Yui," Ivo replied.

Yui's eyes widened. "Mine?" she asked, pointing to herself. Everyone else besides Ivo nodded in agreement.

"It's because, during the exam, you fought that guy from class A," Clois said.

However, Yui didn't understand what he meant. She tilted her head in confusion, so Lyle continued.

"During the tournament, you didn't show up to fight Ivo, so you lost by default. But you fought someone else for the test at school, so he's pouting."

"I am *not* pouting!" Ivo loudly rebuked him, seemingly upset by how Lyle had put it. "I just don't like that you fought with someone else."

"They call that pouting, Ivo," Finney said, sounding tired.

Ivo instantly tried to retort, but he knew keenly well that he couldn't beat Finney in an argument, so he turned his anger toward Yui. "It's your fault, Yui! You disappeared right before our match without telling anyone where you were going. And when Rouelle finally found you, you were eating cake?! No, you were eating seconds!"

"Did you want some too?" Yui said nonchalantly.

"Of course not!" Ivo was so worked up that his face was a deep red and he was panting. It seemed that at any moment, a vein might burst and cause him to collapse.

"Is it really that big of a deal?" Yui asked. "We can have a match at any time. It doesn't have to be at a tournament. When camp is over, do you want to borrow a study room at school and fight?"

"It has to be at a tournament, or it's pointless! Without a large audience, how will I show everyone how powerful you are?"

Having been unable to fight Yui wasn't the only thing Ivo was upset about—far from it. Even though Yui was the most powerful out of any of them, she was seen as useless by those around her just because she was a Liefe. He had thought that this unpleasant attitude would naturally go away as she continued to win matches, but because her opponents had all dropped out when they'd learned how strong she was, it had only gotten even more pronounced. Ivo couldn't stand that, precisely because he recognized her strength.

"If we'd fought, you definitely would've won, and then everyone would have acknowledged how powerful you are! They would've stopped looking down on you," Ivo said. "But then... Then you... Gaaah!" His anger again reached its boiling point, and he stood up and got up close to Yui so vigorously that it seemed like he was about to grab her.

However, Yui was unfazed. "But either way, if it got out that we're friends, wouldn't they have just said that you went easy on me, or that we planned it? I don't think it would've made a difference."

"Anyone watching would've known that wasn't true!" Ivo exclaimed. "And if they were so incompetent that they still couldn't figure it out, you could've just ignored them." "Haaah..." Yui sighed, realizing that it was pointless to try to say anything more to Ivo. Trying to escape from her current situation, she turned to Finney and gave him a look asking for help. Ivo was always left at a loss for words whenever he was up against the smooth-talking Finney, and he always had trouble dealing with him. Whenever Finney stepped in, he suddenly went quiet. So, taming Ivo had become a kind of role for Finney.

When Finney noticed Yui's look, his smile widened as if to say, "I've got this." Normally, he would have resisted having extra work foisted upon him, but it was very much like him to interpret this as a chance to enjoy himself.

"But you know," Finney began, and Ivo diverted his attention to him, "I don't really think you have any right to get angry at Yui."

"Why not?"

"You got all angry that you couldn't fight against her, but then after that, you didn't show up to the final match against Clo."

"Urk..." Finney had hit a sore spot, and Ivo hesitated.

"Exactly. It was unheard of for the championship match to just not happen," Lyle said, stabbing Ivo in the back with a smile.

"Ungh," Ivo grunted.

"When you, the tournament's prime contender, didn't show up to the final match after winning the semifinals by default, they thought it was all arranged—they even suspected me of cheating," Clois said. He unhappily pushed his glasses up his nose with a finger.

"Aaah..."

Finney patted Clois on the shoulder. "Poor Clo."

With Lyle and Clois jumping in for backup, Ivo looked frail and pathetic. It was hard to believe he'd been so angry just moments earlier. His annoyance and disappointment toward Yui had led to further irresponsible behavior on his part, and he seemed to realize that this had been immature of him. He didn't have anything to say in response.

"Even though you're angry at me, you did the exact same thing." Yui's words

seemed to be the finishing blow. Ivo plopped back down in his chair and held his head in his hands.

A delighted Finney watched Ivo. "Aw, he's sad."

"You started it, Finney," Clois said. He looked at Ivo with pity in his eyes. The way Finney had fun watching Ivo's reaction was why Ivo had a hard time dealing with him. At the same time, Ivo *did* always offer up such good reactions.

"But it *is* true that we went through a lot of trouble because of Ivo," Lyle said. No one there objected.

After the championship match and a semifinal match had both ended with one of the competitors not participating, Yui and Ivo, who had dropped out, and even Clois and Lyle had all been summoned by the tournament organizers. Because all four of them were friends, they had been asked why they hadn't shown up and whether they'd rigged the results. The organizers had already strongly suspected some sort of match-fixing; they'd even expected that this might develop into the largest scandal in the tournament's history. However, when Yui had said, "I was eating cake and I didn't get there in time," they'd instantly deflated.

While they had been forced to acknowledge that there'd been no cheating, they had lectured Ivo for disrespecting the dignity of the tournament by getting angry and not participating. The rest had been subject to a severe, somewhat unreasonable scolding for not properly keeping an eye on Yui.

"It was so ridiculous that they scolded us too, even though Cloey and I had nothing to do with it," Lyle said. "And why didn't they get angry at Yui? That part's still a mystery..."

"Didn't you see how the organizers acted?" Clois said. "The second she got sad, they just looked at her like she was a small, cute animal or one of their grandchildren. That's why we got all the blowback... And hey, stop calling me Cloey!"

The organizers had originally planned to lecture Yui, the same as everyone else, but when they'd seen how dejected she looked, they'd been overcome by pity. They'd even felt a surge of guilt, as if they were somehow in the wrong for getting mad at her. So, unable to scold her any further, they had turned their

attention to the other three.

"Yui has a kind of ethereal frailty to her... By the way, don't you think Cloey sounds much cuter than Clois?"

"I'm not trying to be cute!"

"Whaaat, why not? There are advantages to being cute, Cloey."

Every time Lyle made fun of him, the wrinkles on Clois's forehead stood out more and more. Just when they were about to reach their peak, the door to Yui's room opened. Everyone reflexively turned to see who it was. Yui happily stood and went over to greet the people who had just arrived.

"Cecil, Carlo," Yui said.

"Hey, Yui," Carlo said. Yui went up to him, and he rubbed her head somewhat forcefully. That messed up her hair, and she looked a bit irritated, but her happiness about seeing her brothers was still clearly evident on her face.

"You guys sure are lively. We knocked, but it didn't seem like you heard, so we just came in," Cecil said.

"Are these your friends?" Carlo asked Yui.

"Yeah."

Cecil and Carlo looked around the room, letting their gazes rest on each one of her friends, who all bowed their heads slightly in greeting. Finney acted as usual since he was already acquainted with the twins, but the other three seemed nervous. At the same time, their eyes sparkled like they were gazing upon people they greatly respected.

That made sense—Cecil and Carlo were said to be the most powerful students at the academy. Prince Filiel had a deep trust in them, and he permitted them to be by his side on the academy's grounds. According to some credible-sounding rumors, many different organizations were fiercely competing in order to poach them for a position after graduation. Though Ivo, Clois, and Lyle were in class A, just like them, the three were underclassmen, and while they admired the twins, they could never get close to them. With Cecil and Carlo right there in front of them, it would have been more unreasonable to expect

them not to be excited.

"So, is something the matter?" Yui asked her brothers.

"Yeah, we want to ask you for a favor," Cecil said, smiling enigmatically.

"A favor?" Yui tilted her head, wondering what it was.

Carlo brought his face close to her ear and whispered so the others couldn't hear. "You know the spell you used at the palace? We'd like you to cast it on us. We were thinking about dropping by his place for a sudden visit." He smiled mischievously as he spoke about crashing Filiel's room.

Yui could easily imagine the surprised look on Filiel's face, and her expression softened into a smile. "Okay. Hold out your hand," she said. She put her hands out over theirs and cast the spell. Cecil and Carlo looked quizzically at the complicated magic circles etched onto the backs of their hands. They each examined them from various angles. "Be careful; the spell is only effective for about thirty minutes. When it starts to wear off, you'll see the magic circle grow fainter."

"All right, got it," Carlo said.

"If I remember correctly, wasn't it shorter when you used it at the palace?" Cecil asked.

He was right. When she had cast the spell on the king and queen, it had only maintained its effect for the length of time it took for all the sand in a small timer to fall to the bottom.

"I've improved it since then," Yui replied. She had continued her research since getting back home from the palace. The spell had only lasted a few minutes in the beginning, but she had extended its effect. She had enthusiastically thrown herself into working to improve the spell before the training camp, but accomplishing this much in such a short period of time had necessitated sacrificing sleep; last night, she had hardly slept a wink, instead devoting all that time to research. Because of that, she had been battling drowsiness for quite a while.

Cecil and Carlo spotted the dark spots under her eyes, and they smiled awkwardly. Whenever Yui liked something, she had a tendency to completely

engross herself in it, enough to skip meals and neglect proper sleep. Conversely, when it came to anything else, she was horribly indifferent, and sometimes, even lazy.

"I'm glad that you're so eager, but you have to take care of yourself," Cecil said.

"That's right," Carlo chimed in. "Sleep deprivation is the enemy of beauty."
Yui nodded obediently. "Okay."

"Well, we don't have much time, so let's go," Cecil said to Carlo.

"Do you want to come with us?" Carlo asked Yui.

Yui shook her head. She very much regretted that she wouldn't be able to see Filiel's moment of surprise, but it hadn't been long since she'd turned him down, and she still felt awkward about seeing him. Carlo didn't say anything else, and Yui was secretly relieved.

"Thanks, Yui. Later," Cecil said.

Carlo waved. "Bye!"

Cecil left the room, and Carlo followed after him. However, just as Carlo was halfway out the door he turned around. "Ah, that's right," he said as if he was remembering something. "Don't even *think* about making a move on Yui," he said to the boys in the room. In sharp contrast to the kind, brotherly look he'd worn when talking with Yui just a moment ago, his eyes were now filled with hostility, and his voice was deep and threatening. Yui's friends froze in place, and the next second, they nodded their heads so vigorously that it looked like they might pop off.

Satisfied by their response, Carlo left the room, following after Cecil. For a while afterward, the boys were pale, and no one spoke a word.

The highest-quality accommodations were in the special class car at the rear of the train, where there was only a single room in the whole carriage. That room had been assigned to Filiel. As one would expect, it was spacious enough to make one doubt that they were on a train; the bed and the couch were very

comfortable, and the paintings on the walls were high quality.

Also inside were Luca and Zeke, Filiel's exclusive bodyguards. In addition to them, royal guards dispatched from the palace stood watch outside on either side of the door. Normally, soldiers of the royal guard never entered the grounds of the academy, but as they were headed to an event that was taking place outside the academy, they were permitted to accompany Filiel. After all, it could be dangerous with only Luca and Zeke. Besides the guards at the door, there were several others there with the duty of escorting Filiel while he was on the train.

As Filiel quietly read in his room to kill time, there was a knock on the door. Luca quickly responded, opening the door, and one of the guards from out front appeared.

"Yes, what is it?" Luca asked.

"There are two friends of His Highness who wish to meet with him," the guard said. "What would you have us do?"

"Friends?"

"Yes. They introduced themselves as Lords Cecil and Carlo O'Brian."

"Oh, the twins?" Luca said. He looked back, seeking Filiel's permission. The prince nodded, so Luca told the guard to let them in. Immediately after that, Cecil and Carlo showed up.

"Hey, Filiel, how's it going?" Carlo said cheerily, entering first.

Filiel ignored Carlo's happy greeting. His mood clearly worsened when he saw them. "What is it?" he asked curtly. Cecil seemed to think it strange, but Carlo was completely unfazed.

"What? Someone's cranky," Carlo said, sitting down on the couch next to Filiel. Then he put his arm around Filiel, resting it on his shoulder.

Filiel was completely stunned—Luca and Zeke gawked at them, eyes wide open.

"Wh-Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Ahhh! You idiot!"

Ignoring his guards' panicked shouting, Filiel quickly regained his composure. "Did Yui cast that spell on you?" he asked, irritated.

"That's right." In sharp contrast to Filiel, Carlo was smiling gleefully like a child who had just pulled off a successful prank.

Luca and Zeke both looked at the twins when they heard Filiel say Yui's name. "Yui? Could you perhaps be referring to Prime Minister Curtis's daughter?" Luca asked.

"How do you two know her?" Zeke asked.

"She's our sister," Cecil answered matter-of-factly. This was Luca and Zeke's second surprise of the day.

"Huh?! What are you saying? She's the prime minister's daughter!" Zeke said.

"You know that both of our parents divorced then remarried, don't you? Our mom took Yui, then married His Excellency after that."

"I had no idea..." Luca murmured. Neither he nor Zeke would have ever thought that the twins they knew so well had any link to Yui. At the same time, it also resolved their long-standing doubts as to why Filiel—who tended to stay cooped up in the palace, hardly ever attended parties or other events, and had very few friends—had hit it off so well with the twins as soon as they'd been admitted to the academy. At this point, it was impossible to perceive the difference in status between them. "So, she cast that spell on you, which means you can touch His Highness."

"What, are you jealous?" Carlo asked. He got closer to Filiel, as if he was showing off.

A vein in Luca's temple twitched. If he had to give an answer, he would admit that he was jealous. In addition to guard duties, he and Zeke also served Filiel by taking care of his everyday needs. Despite that, they couldn't touch him, which meant there were few things they could actually do for Filiel. Luca didn't know how many times he had keenly felt his own lack of power and thought, *If only I could touch him, then I could do so much more*. He and Zeke were proud to be Filiel's guards, and the ability to touch him was their greatest and most desperate desire. As Carlo agitated him with his clear display of that ability,

Luca glared back at him silently.

Because of this unproductive exchange, no one had noticed the change in Filiel's expression.

"So that means it's not an issue if I touch you guys," Filiel mumbled quietly. He gripped Carlo's arm that was resting on his shoulder. Suddenly, he twisted it, then positioned himself behind Carlo's back, hooked his right arm around Carlo's neck, and put him in a choke hold.

"Gehk." The grunt that came out of Carlo's mouth sounded like a frog being squashed.

At first, Luca and Zeke idly spectated, thinking that Filiel was just joking around, but when they noticed his deathly calm eyes and saw that Carlo's face was turning deep red, they realized he was serious. They quickly intervened.

"Filiel, no more!" Cecil shouted.

"Carlo's gonna die! He'll diiiiie!" Zeke yelled, panicking.

"Please let gooooo!" Luca shouted.

Luca and Zeke couldn't touch Filiel, so Cecil tore Filiel away from Carlo and pinned his arms behind his back.

"I..." Carlo gasped for breath. "I thought that would be the end of me..." After his unexpected glimpse of the other side, Carlo steadied his rough breathing, thankful to have fresh air again.

"Filiel, what were you even thinking?" Cecil asked. Everyone was baffled by the normally mild-mannered Filiel's sudden deranged behavior.

Filiel paused. "It was just a joke."

You liar! Everyone's thoughts synchronized. Even then, Filiel's eyes still looked glazed over.

Filiel sat back down on the couch, and after composing himself slightly, he spoke what he was thinking. "Yui dumped me. She said she couldn't return my feelings," he said, irritated.

"Ahh," Cecil said.

"Don't worry about it," Carlo said. He and Cecil looked at Filiel with compassion, and they tenderly patted him on either shoulder. "But that doesn't mean you should take it out on me. You almost killed me."

"When I saw that stupid expression on your face, I couldn't help but get angry."

"It's because you aren't trying hard enough to win her over."

Unable to argue back, Filiel just stared at Carlo.

Cecil sensed that Filiel was about to jump on Carlo again, and he interrupted, consoling him. "Now, now, Filiel, you make Yui aware of your feelings, so that's an improvement, right?"

"Except she rejected me."

Cecil couldn't say anything in response, and he quietly averted his eyes. Even his backup bargaining was ineffective against Filiel's sulking. An awkward mood settled over the room. However, Carlo's next words made Filiel's expression completely change.

"But isn't it fine? She used to think of you as just one of her brothers' friends, and now she sees you as a member of the opposite sex. She turned you down once—so what? That doesn't mean you're just going to meekly give up, right?"

"Of course not," Filiel said. If his feelings had been so flimsy, he never would've held them close for so many years. He had absolutely no intention of giving up. He would persistently cling to her, not so much that she would come to hate him, but until she gave in.

However, Cecil's next statement instantly blew away that renewed sense of resolve.

"Oh, by the way, our dad also knows you confessed to Yui."

"Just you two was bad enough, but out of all people, him?!" Filiel's face stiffened. He had recently learned how frightening Layce's infatuation for Yui was.

After that, until they arrived in Bahal, Filiel agonized over how he should best deal with the Prince of Darkness.

Chapter Three: Training Camp—Arrival

The town of Bahal was north of the capital, and with its comparatively cooler summers, it was a popular destination for tourists looking to escape the heat. Additionally, the town was surrounded by nature and had a thriving dairy industry, which made fresh milk and eggs plentiful and easy to come by. This had given rise to streets with rows and rows of highly competitive pastry shops, bakeries, and confectioneries. To survive in the crowded market, the shops were always devising new flavors and unique-looking sweets, and as a result, Bahal boasted a countless variety of unusual confections that couldn't be found in the capital. Many visitors came from afar, not for sightseeing, but just to visit all the shops.

For Yui, it was like a land of dreams.

Bahal's train station was connected to the capital by a single line, which meant that they didn't have to change trains. When they arrived in town, the carriages set to take them to the training camp were already ready to go.

Though the vehicles were called carriages and looked like them too, they weren't actually horse-drawn. Horses had been used in the past, but with recent developments in magic items, the driver could move the carriage using magic instead of horses. It was a bit pricier, but with just a small amount of magic energy, carriages could now carry more passengers, travel faster and for longer periods of time without any breaks, and there was no need to worry about the horses growing tired or getting hurt. For those reasons, they were being rapidly adopted. However, that didn't mean all carriages used magic. Around half of them were still pulled by horses because their owners didn't have enough money for magic items, they weren't very magically powerful, or for other reasons.

The students were ordered to gather at the carriages so they could all get on. But Yui, perhaps unable to hear it, was standing still, her eyes fixated on the rows of shops. She looked like she was just about to break into a run, so Ivo

grabbed her arm. She wasn't the only one being grabbed; Lyle had gotten ahold of Clois. Though he didn't look it, Clois had just as much of a sweet tooth as Yui.

"What are you doing?!" Clois shouted. "Lyle, let go of me!"

Yui also shouted, "Let goooo!"

"Yeah, yeah, you'll have your chance later, Clois," Lyle said.

"Quiet down, Yui," Ivo said. He and Lyle dragged the whining Yui and Clois to the carriages and tossed them in without allowing a word in edgewise.

"Aaaah, they were right there!" Clois said.

"Give it up," Ivo replied.

The carriages started off. Yui and Clois could only watch helplessly as the shops passed by outside their window.

Bahal's train station was in the lively central part of the town, full of people and buildings, but as they traveled, signs of human habitation began to grow sparse. In place of human speech, they began to hear birds calling and insects buzzing; in place of man-made structures, lush, green, tranquil natural scenery spread out before them. The bustling town outside the station had disappeared without a trace.

Yui was sulking because she hadn't been able to eat even a single treat, but whether she wanted to or not, she had no choice but to give up. Instead, she opened her bag and pulled out a book, which she began to leisurely read. There was nothing to do in the carriage, and Lyle was suffering from an excess of free time, so this piqued his interest. He eyed her book.

"Yui, whatcha readin'? Here we are... Read This and You'll Be Unbeatable! All Must-Eat Treats! The Complete Expert's Guide to Popular Bahal Confectioneries."

Everyone made strange faces as Lyle read aloud. "What's with that ridiculous title?" Ivo said.

"And 'unbeatable'? Are you going to be competing with someone?" Finney said.

However, one of them—Clois—seemed extremely interested. "Yui, show it to me too."

"After I'm done."

"Tch." He clicked his tongue. "Whatever. Hurry up and read it." He sounded frustrated, but he intently waited with bated breath for Yui to finish reading. Then, unable to wait any longer, he peered in from next to Yui. The two of them began enthusiastically chatting about the different sweet shops, saying, "Ooh, this one looks good," and "Mmm, that one too."

"What are you two here for?" Ivo asked them.

"To eat sweets in Bahal," they replied in unison, as if Ivo was odd for suggesting otherwise.

Their answer made Ivo explode with anger. "No! You're here for the camp!"

His response was exceedingly proper, and any of the other students staking their futures on this camp would have definitely had the same indignant reaction if they had heard the two's answer. But Yui and Clois were not pleased. Combined with the discontent they felt at having been unable to go to the shops at the train station, their bad moods had reached their lowest points.

"My original goal wasn't to go to the training camp; it was to eat Bahal's sweets," Yui said. "And there's a training camp next year anyway!"

"That's right!" Clois joined in. "Next year, the training camp will definitely be somewhere else, so this is our only chance!"

Even though Ivo hadn't been wrong, he recoiled in surprise, taken aback by the sheer force of their counterattack. Next to him, Lyle quietly mumbled, "Their obsession with food is incredible."

"All right, that's enough, you three. It looks like we've arrived at our destination," Finney said.

His words stopped Yui and Clois in their tracks, and all of them turned to look outside.

Ahead on the road, beyond the long line of carriages, the building where the training camp was being held came into view. The single, solitary structure

looked like a fortress, and it stood alone surrounded by trees. There were no other buildings or people nearby. A foreboding aura was practically oozing from it, and it made them all think of a prison or a dungeon. It might've just been their imagination, but they felt like the air surrounding it looked dim and stagnant.

"Are you perhaps talking about...that?" Yui asked hesitantly.

"We're living there for two weeks?" Lyle said.

"Apparently so," Finney replied.

An inexplicable air washed over them. This was not at all what they had expected. While they had known they wouldn't be staying in an expensive hotel, they had all imagined a typical inn. With their hopes dashed, they all deeply regretted coming to the training camp.

Lyle screamed first. "Nooo! Send me back hooome!"

"I'm going home too," Yui said. She and Lyle started violently struggling to disembark from the carriage.

"Hey! Calm down! Get ahold of yourselves!" Ivo hurriedly tried to pacify Lyle and Yui, but neither of them stopped.

"Is this supposed to help me calm down?!" Lyle yelled. "There are definitely ghosts there! I'll be cursed!"

"There's no way I could sleep there! I'm leaving!"

"Hey! Clo, help me grab them!"

"I don't think he'll be of much help," Finney said.

Ivo looked at Clois and saw that he seemed to be even more terrified than Yui and Lyle. He was clutching his head and trembling.

The inside of their carriage had fallen into a panicked chaos, but theirs wasn't the only one; the disorder had spread to several other carriages, and shouts could be heard everywhere. Just about all of those were carriages with first-year students, or upperclassmen who were participating in the training camp for the first time. The other students who had already experienced this a few times simply mumbled to themselves, "Not again..." and, as if they were

By the time they passed through the high wall that ringed the building and entered the grounds, they were exhausted from the earlier confusion. When they got out of their carriages, many other students seemed just as tired as them.

They gazed up at the building again, this time, from a much closer distance. Yui felt like the eerie aura had only gotten more intense than earlier. The thought that she would have to spend two weeks here was just depressing. She honestly wasn't even confident that she'd be able to fall asleep alone at night, and she fervently prayed that she'd be in a room with someone else. There was an enormous gap between her current dread and the pleasant time she'd spent in her spacious room on the train.

Several teachers from the various academies had accompanied them, and the main teacher in charge of the Luster Academy students was the villainous-looking Berg, who also served as the student guidance counselor.

"All right, everyone's out of their carriages," Berg said. "We're going to the hall, so everyone, follow me, and make sure you don't lag behind."

The students began to move, streaming after Berg as he walked ahead. He opened a large door, and when they went inside, a long, gloomy corridor lay before them. It seemed like something might jump out at them at any moment, and more than a few students were pointlessly darting their eyes around, frightfully observing their surroundings. Lyle was one of them, and Yui clung to his arm as they advanced down the corridor together. Both were trying desperately to endure their fear. Finney, on the other hand, was smiling as brightly and affably as ever, and Ivo didn't seem afraid either; he was behaving normally. The biggest coward among them—Clois—was struggling the most.

The moment they finally stepped foot in the hall, they were taken aback. Their fear completely disappeared.

"Oh? It's normal," Lyle remarked.

"Yeah, it is," Yui said. In a sudden reversal from the dark and eerie corridor,

the hall was anticlimactically normal, bright, and pretty.

"It looks like the students from the other academies are here," Finney said.

"You're right," Clois replied. The hall was easily large enough to fit several hundred people, and looking around, the other students were already assembled.

You could quickly tell which academy a student attended from their uniform. The school in the east, Dyne Magic Academy, had black uniforms with red stripes, while the western Celeste Magic Academy had gray shirts and gray-and-white checkered bottoms. Finally, Luster Academy wore all white.

"Luster students, line up," one of the teachers said. They did as they were told. All of the students lined up in front of the teacher representing their school, and Berg began to speak.

The Luster students had been immunized to Berg's face and his intensity, which could put a hardened criminal to shame; they knew that he actually liked to look after others and be helpful. However, the students from the other schools couldn't look at him straight on. A few fearful ones here and there managed to secretly peek at him out of the corner of their eyes.

"My name is Berg, from Luster Academy," he began. "First, I'd like to talk about this facility, which I'm sure everyone here has questions about." They had been told that the camp was near the town of Bahal, but no one had informed them about the kinds of places where the training camp was usually held, so the first-timers listened intently to what Berg was about to say. As they did, they hoped that there hadn't been some sort of incident or scandal, or any other questionable events in the past.

"This place is normally for military training exercises," Berg continued, "and we've been given special permission to use it. And, well, I know how it looks, but it has the best facilities around. It's a privilege to be able to borrow them while you're still only students."

They were then told that, apparently, when this place was being designed, someone had said that it would be boring to make just a regular training facility—no one else had thought to stop them. No, far from it: each one had upped the ante even further, and by the end, it had resulted in a building that

resembled the site of a gruesome tragedy. Now, it was often used as a place to mentally train rookies in the army to withstand their fears.

Finally, Berg added, "But don't worry; your rooms are completely normal." Sighs of relief could be heard coming from everywhere.

Next to speak was a young-looking male teacher with an intimidating air that was different from Berg's. "There's an enchanted forest surrounding the facility, so make sure you don't go outside without permission. We can't take responsibility if anything happens to you."

An enchanted forest was what dangerous forests that were inhabited by large numbers of magic beasts were called, and normal people never got near one if they didn't absolutely have to.

As for magic beasts, there were two kinds. First were what had originally been normal animals—either domesticated ones like dogs or cows, or wild, forest-dwelling animals like birds or wild boars—that had mutated one day and come to possess magic powers. These altered animals were big compared to their normal variants, and they were clearly a different kind of creature. Countries and researchers all around the world were studying these mutations and why many of the mutated animals lived in enchanted forests, but the cause was still unclear.

The other kind was made up of living things that possessed magic from birth. Innate magic beasts weren't like mutated magic beasts, which behaved violently and instinctively; many of them were peaceful or intelligent. Not all of them looked like animals either, and in fact, they came in many different varieties.

They were also told that the dim and stagnant air around the fortress hadn't been their imagination at all. It was actually a magic barrier to prevent magic beasts from entering. However, it was still a mystery why that specific kind of barrier had been decided upon, and it was suspected that it was there in part to create an even gloomier ambience.

After the explanation, the students were given several other simple warnings. They were handed a few sheets of paper and told to read them to get all the details. Then, to end everything, a female teacher from Celeste spoke.

"Now, please assemble by school year and create groups of five. You can team up with anyone as long as you're in the same year, and it doesn't matter if you're from different schools. You'll be spending the entire duration of the training camp with your group, so be sure to carefully consider your decision."

The students began moving before she finished speaking. The battle seemed to have already started on the way there, and a competition for the strongest students unfolded all around them. After all, important people from the army, the guild, and the church had all come to observe this camp, which meant that the students' future career prospects were on the line. Every one of them was desperate to stand out from the crowd, which made their desire to team up with powerful students and get ahead of everyone else quite understandable. But, making sidelong glances at those frenzied students, Yui's group was relaxed.

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"There are exactly five of us, so this works, right?" Lyle said.
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Lyle, Ivo, and Clois had finished on top at the middle school tournament, and everyone acknowledged their ability, so they received invitations left and right, but they turned them all down without hesitation. Before going away, the rejected students never failed to glare at Yui when they noticed she was there. They weren't happy to see a Liefe at the training camp—or to see that she was with the others. This was an ordinary occurrence for Yui, and she didn't pay it any mind, but every time someone gave her a dirty look, her friends' moods worsened.

Ivo's annoyance was particularly intense. He drove away the other students with glares of his own. "Dammit, this is so annoying," he muttered.

"Should I throttle them?" Clois asked.

"Sure!" Lyle said enthusiastically. "Finney, do you have any embarrassing information on those guys?"

[&]quot;Uh-huh," Yui agreed.

[&]quot;I think so," Finney said.

[&]quot;Yeah," Ivo said.

[&]quot;Sure," Clois said. "I don't really mind."

"I do. What are you looking for?" Finney pulled out a mysterious notepad from his inside pocket.

Lyle's face went stiff. He had been half joking. "You actually have some..." However, Ivo and Clois were raring to go, and they eagerly looked over the notepad's contents.

"It isn't really worth getting angry over," Yui said.

"They mess with you because you're like that!" Ivo shouted angrily.

Lyle chimed in. "He's right! You're actually the strongest out of all of us, but they just assume you're weak. That isn't frustrating?"

"Not at all," Yui flatly replied, and the fired-up Ivo and Lyle hung their heads.

It seemed she'd taken the wind out of their sails. People had always spoken ill of Yui, ever since she was a small child, and she didn't feel like getting angry about it after all this time. Normally, one might expect someone to become a ball of insecurities after being called worthless for so long and so continuously, but Yui was remarkably talented and intelligent—being a Liefe was nothing to her. More than anything, the knowledge and magical skill she had attained with her own efforts had given her an unshakable confidence in herself, and no matter what anyone said, she wouldn't get hurt. She only thought it was a bit troublesome.

When those coming to invite Yui's friends finally gave up, two female students approached them. As soon as she saw the girls, Yui frowned irritably, though it was such a small change in her expression that it was nearly unnoticeable.

"Good afternoon," one of the female students said elegantly. She was pretty, without any frills or adornments, and the graceful way she comported herself was evidence of her good upbringing and education.

"Good afternoon, Lady Charlotte. You're lovely as always today," Lyle instantly replied. While he usually spoke with a saccharine sweetness with women, there was a vague distance in his voice. The intense-looking girl accompanying Charlotte stood a step behind her. She didn't seem to be pleased with Lyle's lighthearted tone, and she glared at him.

The girl who had spoken first was Charlotte, the daughter of Marquess Chamberly. She was with Stella, a daughter of the Emery family, whose members had always worked for the Chamberlys. Stella herself had served Charlotte from a very early age. The two of them were first-years in class A, which made them Ivo, Clois, and Lyle's classmates.

"You're as wonderful at flattery as always," Charlotte said with a smile. Then, when she noticed that Yui was there, she looked slightly surprised. "Oh, could you be Yui? It has been quite some time. Have you been well?"

Yui paused. "Yes, it has been some time." She replied with her usual, expressionless look. Stella didn't seem to like that either.

"You're as cold and boring as always," Stella said, raising her voice. "The daughter of His Grace the Marquess Chamberly is addressing you, so why don't you try being a bit more happy about it!"

She and Charlotte hadn't noticed it, but while Yui was generally expressionless, her friends knew her well enough to pick up on the subtleties of her emotions. They could tell that she was in an abysmal mood.

Sensing danger, Lyle hastily cut in. "Aaanyways, did you have something to speak with us about, Lady Charlotte?"

At that, Charlotte returned her attention to Lyle, as if she had remembered what she was there for. Lyle was relieved, but Yui was still irritated. Ivo and Clois, judging that they shouldn't let Yui stay around Charlotte, gave each other a look, then quietly moved Yui behind them. Wanting to prevent her from being rude to the daughter of a marquess was one reason for shielding her, but the biggest reason was that it wouldn't be good if Yui snapped.

"That's right. I was wondering if you'd perhaps like to join up with us, but..." Charlotte looked at all of them and awkwardly smiled, having noticed that there were already five people present.

"We are all honored to have received your invitation, but as you can see, there are already five of us. My apologies," Lyle said.

"That's too bad," Charlotte said.

She immediately tried to leave, but then Stella yelled angrily at Lyle with a

look on her face that said she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Are you being serious?! How dare you decline an invitation from a lady—your rudeness has gone too far! You may be powerful, but there's no way that do-nothing, incompetent Liefe could ever be useful. She'll just hold you back!"

For better or for worse, Stella's devotion to Charlotte sometimes bordered on worship. Because of it, she often flared up at people and overreacted to little things related to her mistress, all without noticing that her behavior made Charlotte look worse. If one were to be brutally honest, it was a failing in her role as a retainer. Lyle was staring at Stella with a cold look that Yui had never seen before.

"Stella, we're the ones who asked them, so speaking like that is impolite," Charlotte chided. She turned to Lyle. "Lyle, I'm sorry about Stella."

Despite this apology, Lyle and the others still had harsh looks on their faces. It was incredibly doubtful whether Charlotte and Stella had noticed this, but since there was no need to point it out, Lyle brushed past it with a superficial reply. "I don't mind. It was impolite of me to decline an invitation from a marquess's daughter. If anything, we would be unfit to be part of the same group as you, considering the difference in our positions."

"Please, don't be so stiff. Inside the academy, we're all students."

"You honor me with your words... More importantly, wouldn't it be best if you went and formed your own group soon? Though, with your strength, I'm sure many will jump at the opportunity to be with you, so I imagine you'll be fine."

"Yes, you're right. Excuse us." Charlotte turned to Stella. "Stella, let's go." Stella nodded. "Yes, my lady."

Charlotte said her goodbyes with a smile, then left, accompanied by a discontented Stella. Just as Lyle said, they were quickly crowded by other students, and they easily formed a group.

Making sure the two were far enough away that they wouldn't hear him, Lyle sighed deeply. He seemed exhausted. "So annoying!" he shouted.

Ivo and Clois nodded in agreement, and they looked at him sympathetically for having had to deal with those two all by himself.

"Are they always like that?" Finney asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," Clois replied, displeased. "You might be able to deal with the lady on her own, but when her devoted lapdog starts snapping at you over everything, it's hard to say anything. And whenever the marquess is mentioned, you can't very well talk back either."

"Huh... Still, that's the first time I've ever seen you talk to a girl like that, Lyle," Finney said. Lyle always treated women tenderly, and he always enjoyed himself when he talked to them. However, the insincere conversation earlier had been full of nothing but empty politeness and feigned smiles. It would've been impossible to imagine for anyone who only knew Lyle as he usually was.

"Not even I can deal with *that*. You heard everything earlier, didn't you? Marquess this, lady that, 'how rude,' and on and on. We can't have a proper conversation, not with someone like that constantly butting in. That was the first time I've ever felt irritated after talking to a girl." Lyle sighed in exasperation again, then looked at Yui. "Putting that aside, Yui, cheer up, okay? Here, I'll give you some candy."

Lyle took out a piece of cutely wrapped candy that he had brought just in case Yui needed some humoring. He handed it to her, and she wordlessly took it and popped it into her mouth. Yui's mood always brightened whenever she ate something sweet, but this time, she was still cranky.

"You looked like you knew them. Did something happen between you and them?" Ivo asked her.

"But where would they get to know each other?" Lyle said skeptically. "Yui's in a different class, and they went to different middle schools."

Yui reluctantly replied. "We didn't go to the same middle school, but we were together in elementary school. Until my parents divorced, I went to a school for the children of nobles and the wealthy."

When she had been living in the O'Brian house, Yui hadn't attended an ordinary school—she'd instead gone to one where nobles sent their children.

Charlotte, the daughter of a marquess, and Stella, who served her, had also gone there. Because they were all the same age, they had often been assigned to the same class at the beginning of the year. That time was packed with unpleasant memories that Yui would rather not think back on. It had been so bad that even now, she felt irritated and angry whenever she recalled them. And at the root of those memories were two people: Charlotte and Stella. Yui had run into trouble more than a few times because of them.

Seeing Yui's face turn gloomy as she spoke, Lyle asked nervously, "Did something happen?"

Charlotte was the daughter of a marquess, so Yui had never complained about her; if she had, there was always the possibility that someone might tell Charlotte. But Yui knew there wouldn't be an issue if she spoke only with her friends. So, thinking that she might finally be able to vent all her pent-up irritation, she began to try to explain.

However, before she could, Finney began speaking first for some reason. "Back when Yui was being bullied, Charlotte, brandishing her sense of righteousness, told the teacher, which only made the bullying even worse. With no other options, Yui had to fight back against the bullies. Then, when the bullying disappeared because of that, Charlotte didn't know the real reason and had assumed that it was thanks to her. She told Yui something like, 'I'm here for you, so it'll be okay.' Apparently, after that, Charlotte tried to push her misguided good intentions on Yui, and she caused a lot of trouble for her."

After listening to Finney's condensed and abridged version of events, her friends all looked at her with pity in their eyes.

"I didn't know," Lyle said.

"That sucks," Ivo said.

"So that's why you were so annoyed, Yui," Clois said.

Yui thought back on the details of that time in her life.

Back when Yui was at the elementary school for nobles, the students there had all looked down on her for being a Liefe. Those born in the noble houses that served the kingdom invariably had strong magic. It was unknown whether

they had attained their positions because of this strength or as the result of generations of political marriages between magically powerful individuals, but it was said that the higher one's rank in court, the stronger one's magic power. To the noble children in whom this belief was instilled, Yui, who had been born to a count but was a Liefe, must have been an oddity.

By the time Yui had become aware of this, bullying like shunning and gossiping was already an everyday occurrence for her. She was only a girl in elementary school. A normal child might have cried to their parents, stopped going to school, and spent their days wallowing in sadness, but not her. This wasn't a front or a bluff; she really didn't think anything of it—of course, it was only shunning and gossip. Yui always spent her breaks reading, so if anything, she gladly accepted the isolation. Rather than having to waste time with subtle noble social maneuvering, she could leisurely read books instead. And when she was focused, the voices of those around her faded into the background, so their insults lost all meaning. She knew that she was being bullied, but her days at school were pleasant and stress-free.

However, when an outsider—Charlotte—had seen this, she protested to the other students, telling them to stop their bullying. She was the daughter of a marquess, so they went along with her at first, but only on the surface. When Charlotte found out that the bullying continued when she wasn't there, she came to Yui and suggested that they go get help from the teacher. That would've normally been a just and righteous action, but Yui was honestly happy with how things were, which made Charlotte's proposal an enormous pain in the neck. So, she refused. She told Charlotte how much she preferred her current situation and how comfortable she was, then asked the girl to stop, because if they told the teacher, the bullying might get worse. Yui was desperate—her relaxed life was in danger of being destroyed, after all. But in the end, Charlotte didn't try to understand her. She ignored her plea and complained to the teacher anyway. And, just as Yui had feared, the bullies thought that she'd tattled on them, and the torment got worse.

While it had originally just been innocuous insults, the bullies escalated to doing real harm. Yui's things started going missing, and the bullies began to physically attack her. After that, Yui lost her leisurely reading time, and when

someone took one of her precious books and hid it, she had no other choice but to painstakingly deal with every single one of the bullies. After all, if she had wanted to make them stop, she could have done so whenever she pleased. It just would've been tedious. She had let them be because she would have much rather used the time to read. Despite that, Charlotte had intervened, which meant that Yui had to waste all that potential reading time. Yui could've even tolerated it if things had ended at that. She knew that Charlotte had honestly been trying to help, so she tried to take it positively...even if Charlotte's actions had ended up making the bullying worse.

The real problem came after that. Charlotte didn't realize at all what she had done, and she mistakenly assumed that the bullying had gone away because of her own proactive efforts. She went up to Yui with a satisfied look on her face that was just begging for Yui to praise her and said, "If anything happens again, let me know."

That was the first time Yui had been so taken aback by something that she momentarily lost her ability to speak. And what was more, Stella then harshly yelled at her for not thanking Charlotte for what she had done. If anything, Yui wanted an apology from Charlotte for making the bullying worse, but Stella was blind to her mistress's faults, and she continued to attack Yui for being in the wrong.

All of that repeated several times after that, in one form or another. Yui imagined that Charlotte thought she had done something good, but Charlotte's good actions were always self-righteous and egotistical, done against Yui's wishes, and only ever made Yui worse off. If it had been only once or twice, that would've been one thing, but as it continued, even Yui, who hardly ever got angry, had a limit. Especially when Stella made false and irrelevant accusations of rudeness and ungratefulness every time.

Charlotte was kind and respectful, which made her well-liked, but there were some who absolutely detested her. They, like Yui, had been subjected to Charlotte's misguided attempts at justice. But there was nothing that could be done so long as Charlotte didn't realize this herself. She could only think about things insofar as they conformed to her own sense of the world, and she didn't understand—no, she didn't try to understand—that everyone had their own

beliefs and ways of doing things. For better or for worse, she was a sheltered noble lady—that was Yui's opinion of her. It also didn't help that Stella was always by her side, showering her with constant, effusive praise for her righteousness.

Up until that point, Yui could content herself with where things were. But only up until that point. Charlotte was in class A, which meant that, barring any irregular circumstances like the present one, they would never see each other. But there was one big problem remaining. Actually, Yui had just discovered it.

Yui snapped out of her memories and turned to Finney. "Hey... Don't you think it's about time we had a nice, long talk?" Yui asked.

"Ha ha, what, after all this time? Could it be a confession of your love for me? Sorry, but can't we just stay good friends?"

"Yeah, I'd like to stay friends with you too..."

"Then it's mutual, aha ha ha... Um, why do you look so angry? Your cute face is going to go to waste—"

Before Finney could finish speaking, Yui grabbed him by his collar and, with cold, angry eyes, got up close to him. "Hey, Finney," she said in a quiet, subdued voice, "why do you know about what happened when I was in elementary school? I haven't even told my brothers about her. Just where did you get that information from?! Spit it out! Spit it out now!"

Yui had questioned his uncanny knowledge many times. For example, he had known when some older girls had called her out to pick a fight, and what she had done afterward. She was sure that back then, Finney hadn't been there either. Up until now, she had avoided pressing him on it, but she couldn't just ignore it—especially when he knew something with such detail that it was almost like he'd witnessed it himself. Yui had only met Finney in middle school, and it should have been impossible for him to know about Charlotte.

Today is the day I'll finally make him talk. He'll tell me how the heck he gets his information! she thought, putting all her power into her arms and shaking Finney.

"I won't tell you my sources that easily," Finney said. He had a big grin on his

In the end, Yui tried pinching his cheeks and tickling him, but Finney wouldn't talk. She could hear the call for everyone to gather, which sapped her motivation, and in the end, she just felt utterly exhausted.

They went to another room and ate dinner, after which each group was given keys to their living quarters for the next two weeks. Some girls in mixed groups, including Yui, naturally expressed an aversion to staying in the same place with the other members of their group, but all of them had smaller, individual rooms inside that they could lock, which quelled their worries.

However, Yui still wondered about something. "Still, we are staying in the same place," she said casually as they went to their quarters. "I was surprised by how quickly everyone went along with it." Some of the groups had students from different schools who had never met each other before, and they were teenage boys and girls. She had expected the noble girls in particular to be more wary.

"I don't think anyone would be so stupid as to do anything bad, not with their prospects riding on this camp. If it became an issue, their future would disappear like that," Lyle said.

"I see."

"And there's going to be a match between the groups, so it's important to give everyone a space where they can discuss strategy without worrying about being overheard," Finney said. "If they talked just anywhere and someone heard them, it could ruin their chances."

"Don't forget, they said we'll be staying with a group from another year," Clois added. "Nobody would do anything that could disadvantage themselves where someone could immediately call for help."

"Huh," Yui said. She was completely disinterested, even though she had brought it up.

As they continued talking at length about trivial topics, they eventually arrived outside their quarters. They unlocked the door, but then, when they moved to

open it, a wave of tension raced through all of them. They had been told that the rooms were normal, but the walk there had felt just as dread-inducing as their experience with the rest of the building. Nobody trusted Berg when he said that the inside was fine.

"I-I'm opening it, okay?" Lyle said hesitantly. Everyone took a deep breath as he flung the door open. The moment he did, they all felt relief. Inside was a typical living room with white wallpaper and furnishings, and right by the entrance, there were doors that opened to each of their individual rooms. They all took a peek in their rooms, just in case, but they were just as exceedingly average as the common room. It was like a share house.

As they were feeling relieved, the other group they were sharing their quarters with came in, and they all stopped.

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"Carlo?" Yui asked.

"Hey," Carlo replied.

"You're the ones we're with?"

"Yeah, we are."
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Yui rushed over to her brothers, and Carlo nimbly picked her up and held her in his arms. She was delighted to be with her brothers, but her friends were still feeling the aftereffects of Carlo's menacing threat back on the train, and they couldn't feel the same as her.

"Wow, what a coincidence," Yui said innocently.

Cecil smiled kindly and said, "It sure is."

However, Yui didn't know the truth. In one of his usual displays of overprotectiveness, Cecil, who'd been worried about Yui sharing a room with boys, had enlisted some members of his fan club to track down the group that was staying with Yui's group. Then, with a bit of pressure, he'd been able to basically force the other group to exchange their keys with him. All of that had led to him standing there at that moment with a look of feigned innocence on his face.

"By the way, who else is in your group?" Yui asked. She wondered why no one

else was there besides her brothers.

"In addition to us, there's Filiel, Luca, and Zeke."

"What?! His Highness is coming here?!" Lyle excitedly exclaimed, his face flushed. The others weren't as obvious as him, but they all felt fidgety and restless. Their reaction was understandable; Filiel might've been a student like them, but at the same time, he was exalted royalty.

"No, unfortunately Filiel and the other two are in another room, for security's sake."

All of them were visibly disappointed, except for Yui. The second she'd heard Filiel's name mentioned, she'd tensed up, and she relaxed when she learned that he was going to be staying somewhere else. Only Carlo, who was holding her, sensed this, and he smiled awkwardly.

They continued lightheartedly chatting in the lounge for a while as Cecil and Carlo told them about past camps. A chance like that was hard to come by, so everyone besides Yui was glad for the opportunity. They listened intently to them.

"Now, we have to get up early tomorrow, so should we get to bed soon?" Cecil asked.

"It's been a while, so do you want to sleep in the same place, Yui?" Carlo suggested.

"Sure," Yui replied.

"All right. While we're at it, let's move the three of our beds to the same room."

After that, a large transfer began as everyone worked together to move all the beds. As Yui stood by and watched, she got the idea to cause some mischief, and she jumped on top of one of the beds as it was being carried in. This caused it to topple over, resulting in quite a commotion and some angry yelling from Ivo, who had been helping carry it. This in turn brought Berg rushing into their room, and he scolded all of them with a face even more frighteningly villainous-looking than usual.

"I'm so tired," Yui said as she collapsed on top of her bed. After all the noise and Berg's severe lecture, everyone was exhausted in both mind and body, and they had all retired to their respective rooms.

"No matter how much you get used to it, that face of his is still scary when he's angry," Carlo remarked as he lay in a bed next to Yui's.

"I feel like I'll see it in my dreams..."

"For all that, his wife is super cute. There was a rumor that he used that face of his to threaten her, but apparently she's the one who liked him first." Carlo chuckled.

Cecil sat down on the bed next to Yui's and opposite Carlo's, then stretched his legs out on the bed. "It's one of the seven mysteries of the academy," he remarked.

Berg was certainly a good person—from the standpoint of his character. However, whenever he smiled, for some reason, his face looked even more evil than usual. When he walked in public, people automatically distanced themselves from him, and he had a high likelihood of being stopped for questioning by the police. *I could never marry someone like him*, Yui thought rudely.

Just when Yui had been feeling a bit drowsy, Cecil turned to her. "Yui, your communicator is going off." She looked at her magic communicator, which she had taken off to sleep, and saw that it was vibrating slightly and giving off a faint light.

"Who's calling this late?" Carlo wondered.

As Yui activated her communicator, the sight of Layce—bawling as if he were making a final farewell as he saw her off on the two-week trip—crossed her mind. She guessed that it was him.

"Hey, is this Yui?" the person on the other end asked.

Yui paused. "Grandpa Theo?"

Cecil cocked his head. "It's him?" He and Carlo looked closely at Yui. They had

also been expecting someone else. Yui put the communicator in the center of her bed so her brothers could hear too. "When did you get the ability to call Yui, Grandpa Theo?" Cecil asked.

"Dad'll be angry if he finds out," Carlo said.

"Oh, you two are there too? The day after Yui bought her communicator, we happily chatted about it together right in front of him as he bitterly watched." Theodore's loud, joyful laugh echoed throughout their room. They couldn't see him, but they could easily imagine the expression on his face at that moment.

"Anyway, are you contacting me about what we talked about?" Yui asked.

"That's right. I got everything ready for it, so I thought I'd let you know. I also told the royal guards, so you can just tell them when the day comes."

"Okay, thanks, Grandpa Theo."

Cecil and Carlo each tilted their heads and looked at each other. Neither of them had any idea what "it" might be.

"What is 'it,' Yui?" Cecil asked.

"What are you talking about?" Carlo asked.

"Remember when I said that I asked papa for something for my birthday? I asked Grandpa Theo for help with it," Yui explained. "He said he wanted to thank me for everything at the palace anyway. Everything besides that is a secret." She didn't seem like she would say anything else.

"That means you should look forward to it when the day comes, oho ho ho." Theodore chuckled.

"That really makes me want to know more," Cecil said.

"Not only dad, but Grandpa Theo too? What are you trying to do, Yui?" Carlo asked. Yui had been the one who had asked for the gift, so he didn't think she'd demanded anything too difficult, but these were the feared Prince of Darkness and the still-influential former king. The two of them working together could answer even an unreasonable demand. It was terrifying. Actually, the truly terrifying part might've been Yui, who had mobilized the two of them without even any bargaining—it had taken only a simple request.

"By the way, you three are at the army training facility in Bahal, aren't you?" Theodore asked. "What do you think? Are you enjoying it? I built it during my reign. We used all sorts of different techniques to bring it together into a real masterpiece. After all, a normal training facility wouldn't have been any fun. I call it: the Fortress of Nightmares! My associates were also fully on board, and everyone in our discussions was really excited, more than they ever were in parliament."

The three of them were silent. They never would've thought that they'd identify the one behind the horrible building. They all wanted to ask him what exactly he'd been thinking. Not only that—his advisors, who should've been the ones to dissuade the king, had been just as enthusiastic as him. What had their meetings been like?

"I don't even know what to say... There's so much to take issue with," Cecil said. "I'm surprised the kingdom functioned with those people in charge."

"So you're the cause of all our woes, Grandpa Theo!" Carlo shouted.

"Woes? How rude. It was just a bit of innocent fun!" Theodore said.

"Because of your 'fun,' all the students, including Yui, were super scared!"

"Well I'll be! I thought she'd be happy... Did you hate it that much, Yui?"

"I never want to come here again," Yui said ruthlessly.

Theodore seemed like he had really thought she'd like it, but about the only people who'd like the fortress they were in were criminals and evil spirits. As soon as he heard Yui's reply, his voice turned gloomy and depressed. "It's that bad?" He paused. "My advisers at the time all loved it... Maybe the Forsaken Fort at Sulbell in the east, or the Scorched Tower of Dis at Cagsen in the south, or the Clockwork Manor at Elsie in the west would've been better."

"There are others?!" Carlo shouted. They didn't have any idea what those places were like, but they sincerely prayed that they wouldn't be the site of next year's camp. Actually, Yui was hoping that she wouldn't have to go to camp again at all.

"Why didn't you just make a normal training facility?!" Cecil asked.

"Think about it before you make something like this!" Carlo said.

This was an urgent problem for Cecil and Carlo, who planned to join the army after graduation, so their tone was harsh. They knew that they'd definitely have to stay at one of those training facilities eventually.

"Just consider it a youthful indiscretion. It was over a hundred years ago, you know," Theodore said.

"Don't try to excuse it with that," Carlo said.

The average life expectancy was around eighty, but those with strong magic lived longer lives. The average life expectancy of nobles and members of the royal family, who were generally more powerful, was about two hundred. However, that was only a general estimate; the more powerful someone was, they lived for that much longer. Theodore, who was especially strong even among royalty, had been given a stamp of good health by his doctors. They said that he'd probably live past 250. He was currently 183. From the perspective of his overall lifespan, he was still fit for service, which had led to many dissenting voices saying it was too early for him to retire when he had abdicated the throne to his son.

"Well, the facility should be in top shape, so there's nothing to worry about," Theodore said. "I built the garden myself, and I'm quite proud of it. It's worth a visit, and I think you'd like it, Yui."

"Okay, got it. I'll check it out," Yui said. "Thanks, Grandpa Theo. For all sorts of things."

"What, for that little thing? Well then, let's talk again soon."

They all said goodnight, and Yui hung up.

And with that done with, the first day of camp somehow came to a close.

Chapter Four: Training Camp—Second Day

On the second day, students gathered in a hall in the fortress to take a special class. There, a magic barrier had been erected that made casting spells possible. While everyone in attendance was working hard to make an impression, Yui was completely unenthusiastic—the singular, impure reason she was there at all was that she wanted to eat sweets in Bahal—and she had slipped out of the class as soon as possible to explore the facility. She had been afraid of the ominous fortress at first, but after Theodore had told her that he had built it for fun, her fear had disappeared. Not that the fortress wasn't still ominous.

Exploring almost felt like a game of hide-and-seek, and she hid whenever she happened to catch sight of a teacher. If she was found cutting class, she would be forcibly dragged back. The teachers didn't seem to expect that any students would dare skip out on the class, not when it was so difficult to even be selected to participate in the camp, so they weren't paying much attention to their surroundings. It was pretty easy to stay hidden. Yui just had to get behind something and wait for them to pass by.

She was heading to the garden Theodore had mentioned the night before. In contrast with the well-manicured garden at the royal palace that was expertly maintained by outstanding gardeners, the garden at the fortress was like a slice of nature itself, without any alterations. However, that didn't mean that it had been neglected. Yui could tell from the harmonious way the flowers were arranged that the garden was regularly cared for. The flowers growing there weren't large, flashy ones either; they were simple, cute, and unassuming, like the ones you might see on the side of a forest path. As Yui walked, she felt excited, like she was going somewhere for a picnic. Just as Theodore had predicted, the garden was to her liking.

Some of the flowers were tall—the perfect height for hiding behind—and it looked like she'd be able to easily get away on the off chance someone noticed she wasn't in class and came looking for her. Nevertheless, while the garden was pleasant during the day, she had a feeling that at night, the fortress's

atmosphere would make it feel quite foreboding. She resolved to return before dark and set off wandering the garden.

After some walking around, she had ventured rather far into the garden. Suddenly, she discovered a large tree. There was shade underneath, and it looked perfect for a short rest. But when she got closer, she found a visitor already there. When she set eyes on him, she froze.

"El," Yui said after a pause.

"Yui?" Filiel noticed her, and a smile crept onto his face. "What, are you cutting class too?"

He was the same, usual Filiel. However, Yui couldn't reply. This was her first time speaking with him since the night she had rejected his confession. She was completely mentally unprepared, and without knowing what expression to make or what attitude she should adopt, her confused brain tried its hardest to string some words together.

"Uh...um, yeah, cutting class. You too? I, well... Sorry, I must be bothering you, so I'll get going." Judging that running away quickly was a good policy, Yui said all she wanted and turned around to go.

"Yui." Filiel called her name in a disapproving voice, so she had no choice but to stop.

"Y-Yes?" she replied, feeling like she couldn't bear to stay there a single second more.

Filiel sighed. "I know that it's awkward, but please, don't start avoiding me..." He furrowed his eyebrows. "It's lonely." He had always lived apart from others because of his powerful magic, so he was always very afraid that people who were close to him might one day leave him.

Yui had known that, and she deeply regretted her reaction. No matter how surprised she had been, it wasn't an excuse for her carelessness.

"I'm sorry, I was a bit shaken..."

"Yeah, I get it. More importantly, standing there must be hot. Come over and sit down?"

"Okay..." Yui still wasn't ready, but she didn't want to sadden him anymore, so she slowly approached Filiel and started to sit down next to him. However, just as she did, he pulled her arm, and she ended up sitting between his legs with his arms wrapped around her from behind.

She felt intensely shaken. "E-E-EI!"

"What?"

"Don't 'what' me! Why did you...? Let go!" Yui demanded, flustered, but Filiel just smiled. He didn't let her go, so she thought of struggling to break herself out, but then she stopped moving. Filiel was holding his hand out in front of her, and there was a box wrapped in pretty paper with a ribbon on top sitting on his palm. "What's this?" she asked.

"Try opening it," he replied.

Though Yui thought this was odd, she opened the box, and she was surprised by what was inside. It was a lighter. Not only that, it was the lighter she had tearfully given up on buying at the Langert Company's shop—the one engraved with the Elphie flower.

"Why're you giving me this?!" Yui exclaimed.

"It's a present."

"What for?"

"It's your birthday tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Oh." Yui had completely forgotten. She only finally remembered when Filiel mentioned it. Tomorrow was her sixteenth birthday.

"Did you forget? I wanted to give it to you tomorrow, but I didn't know whether I'd have the chance then."

She briefly wondered why Filiel had gotten her the lighter she had wanted as a present, but then she quickly remembered her brother's face, and she had her answer. As she had suspected, Carlo had told Filiel that she wanted the lighter. She was overcome by happiness at this unexpected reunion with the lighter, but then she remembered how much it cost, and she felt gloomy.



"I can't accept something this expensive," Yui murmured.

"You don't have to worry about that," Filiel said. "This isn't just for your birthday; it's also thanks for everything at the palace. It's cheap, compared to what you've done for me."

"Aaah, but..." She didn't just want the lighter; she absolutely needed it. But everything she had done at the palace had been because she had felt like it, not out of some pure, virtuous motivation, so she was hesitant to accept it.

"Okay. If you don't want it, then that's that. I won't use it, so I guess I'll just toss it away." Filiel took the lighter out of Yui's hands and actually wound up his arm to throw the lighter away in a patch of grass, which startled Yui.

"Aaah! I want it, I do!" As she shouted, she safely recovered the lighter from Filiel's grasp.

"You could've just said that from the start."

Yui shot Filiel a reproachful look, then turned back to the lighter in her hands and gazed at it from various angles. It was, without a doubt, the lighter she had previously given up on. As she gently traced the flower motif on the outside with a finger, she felt joy slowly well up inside her.

She looked at Filiel again with a sincerely happy smile on her face, and said, "Thanks, El." Yui only expressed her emotions this openly to very few people, even among those she was close to, and her friends would've been surprised if they could see her then.

Filiel gazed back at her and lovingly smiled in a way that he would never do around anyone else. He put his hand to her cheek, then lightly kissed her temple. This made Yui freeze, her smile still on her face. Then she blushed and raised her voice in protest.

"What are you doing?!"

"What am I doing? That was a kiss."

"That's not what I meant! Why did you do that?!"

"It's because I thought you looked cute, and because I love you," Filiel said.
"Prime Minister Curtis interrupted us last time, just as we were getting to the

best part." He looked irritated when he said that, as if he were about to click his tongue in frustration. He peered closely at Yui. "You aren't actually going to say that you forgot my confession, are you?"

Yui's face turned an even deeper shade of red. This assertiveness made his previous wimpiness hard to believe. Filiel was dealing with her differently than he usually did, and she still felt off-balance. "But I turned you down, and you said okay, didn't you?" she asked.

"I did say that, but I never said that I'd give up."

It was like a cheap trick, but Yui was unable to speak, and she just blankly opened and closed her mouth.

"There's no way I'd back down that easily," Filiel continued. "I'll keep going until you say yes."

"I don't know how to respond, except to say that I can't..."

There was a serious look in Filiel's eyes. "Would you be dissatisfied with me as your husband?"

Feeling awkward and embarrassed, Yui averted her eyes. "That's not it. But..."

Her face went completely blank, like a doll's. However, Filiel had noticed it—fear and deep sorrow were reflected in her eyes. He knew the reason too. By keeping her face expressionless, she was suppressing her feelings and trying to avoid being swallowed up by sadness. Filiel knew the emotions behind that look; he could see clearly that her expression was not one of rejection but a plea for help. Yui probably hadn't realized it herself. She had said that she couldn't accept him, but she'd never, not once, said that she disliked him.

Filiel could tell that she might close herself off to him if he kept pressing, so he stopped questioning her. He didn't want to trouble her or make her suffer, and if she came to hate him, that would ruin everything. "Hey, Yui," he said, "how were the sweets my grandfather got for you at the palace?"

With the sudden change in topic, Yui's expression returned to normal. Puzzled, she asked, "The sweets? They were delicious. I could eat them every day."

The corners of Filiel's mouth ticked up, and he smiled boldly. "If we got married, you'd be able to eat the palace's best sweets as much as you wanted."

"As much as I wanted..." Yui was shaken to her core. This was the best reaction she had given him yet.

Though Filiel internally lamented that he had lost to sweets, not wanting to miss this golden opportunity, he instantly followed up with, "That's right... Imagine the best confectionery chefs in the kingdom using their techniques to their fullest potential to create an endless variety of sweets! You could have what you ate at the palace every day. Not only that, but sometimes, envoys from other countries come to the palace. The chefs could make sweets using the foreign products and valuable fruits you won't find in regular circulation!"

This was something the sweet-toothed Yui couldn't ignore. In spite of herself, she began to think, *Marriage might not be that bad after all...* as she listened intently to Filiel's words. Filiel, meanwhile, sensed that he was getting somewhere. He was about to open his mouth to press even further when a voice interrupting him echoed out around them.

"All right, that's enough!"

Filiel glared at the interloper who had ruined his chance by suddenly appearing in the quiet garden. "Hey, what do you think you're doing, Carlo?"

"What am I doing?! Why are you trying to entice my sister with sweets?!"

"I just needed one more push," Filiel complained bitterly. He now seemed depressed.

Carlo was exasperated. "Don't try to pick her up with sweets."

"She was finally interested. I don't care what it takes!"

As Filiel and Carlo argued, Cecil waved Yui over. She left Filiel and, spreading her arms wide, she and Cecil hugged. "The princess has been rescued," Cecil said.

Filiel noticed that Yui's warmth had slipped out of his arms. "Wha— Hey, Yui," he said reproachfully.

However, with the entrance of her brothers, Yui had come to her senses, and

she looked warily at Filiel.

"Gah! Just a bit more... Actually, why are you two here anyway?!" Filiel said.

"It's lunch break," Carlo said. "Luca and Zeke said that you were gone, and they've been searching all over for you. I decided to help them, and as I did, I saw a kidnapper trying to tempt my sister with sweets, so I stepped in to stop him."

"Don't say it like that. It was a respectable negotiation."

"I'll tell my dad."

"Gah!" Filiel grunted. He was unhappy that Carlo had made him lose his opportunity, but even *he* could do nothing except stay silent when Layce's name was mentioned.

"It's lunchtime, so head back, okay, Yui?" Cecil said.

"All right, got it," Yui replied. An image of an enraged Ivo flashed through her mind, and her and Filiel's previous exchange disappeared from her thoughts. She hurriedly went back to the building.

As Yui was running away, Carlo said to her, "Don't go with someone just because they say they have sweets."

"I'm not a little kid, you know. You don't have to warn me," Yui said, offended. But she had been blinded by sweets just moments ago, so her words weren't persuasive in the slightest.

When Yui was gone, Filiel let out a small sigh. Cecil and Carlo smiled awkwardly.

"Guessing from that sigh, it doesn't look like things are going very well," Cecil said.

"Yeah, it's tough," Filiel replied. He hadn't ever thought it'd be easy, but Yui was more wary than he had expected, and he was at his wit's end.

"Yui's smart. She knows very well what could happen in the future. She's probably thinking she doesn't want to cause you any trouble."

"I know."

Seeing Filiel's pained expression, Carlo abruptly cut in. "But that can be resolved. The biggest issue is her own feelings. If you two end up getting married, she'll have to face those feelings, whether she wants to or not."

"Yeah." Filiel nodded. "But when you consider everything she's been through, you're saying something pretty cruel." Silence fell. All of them wore grave expressions. They were all thinking the same thing: if at all possible, they wanted Yui to continue living peacefully... However... "But it's necessary for her future," Filiel added.

"You're right," Cecil said. "Things are still fine now, but those around her won't leave her alone for much longer, even if it's against her wishes. When that time comes, our dad's power won't be enough on its own. But if she's married to royalty, the country can protect her."

Though Cecil and Carlo were great friends with Filiel, that relationship wasn't the only reason—or even the main reason—why the brothers, who loved their sister more than anyone, were so positive about her going out with him. Even if it was with Filiel, their sister being quickly taken by another man was so irritating that they could hardly stand it. Despite that, they supported Filiel because they had judged that he would be necessary for her.

"So, Filiel, finish everything in the year and a half we have before graduation," Carlo said. "When you enter the army, you won't be able to make much time to see her. I couldn't bear to watch if someone else took her then."

"Mmngh..." Filiel groaned. "A year and a half... I don't know if I can do it..." He started mumbling. "Maybe I should use sweets after all. Next time, if I bring a palace chef with me..."

"Pull yourself together, man," Carlo scolded. Is a wimp like Filiel really cut out for this? he thought.

"It'll be all right. I'm sure of it," Cecil said confidently. In contrast with his brother, his conviction came from his memories of the time four years ago when, as a result of the royal succession dispute, Filiel had lost the ability to see Yui.

As more time passed without Filiel coming to see her, Yui had grown extremely depressed. It got to the point that even Cecil and Carlo were hesitant to speak with her. Her normally lacking facial expressions had become even more vacant, and she almost stopped smiling around her family entirely. She not only spoke less, but she slept and ate less frequently too. Their mother, Sherina, mistook this as a result of the new environment after the divorce, but Cecil and Carlo were sure that Filiel was the real reason. Because of this unexpected change in Yui, they considered telling her the truth many times, but they also sympathized with Filiel's concerns. As long as Filiel didn't want them to tell her, they couldn't make a decision that went against his wishes.

Those days continued for a while, but eventually Yui seemed to have come to an understanding within herself. She said, "I'll make a spell that'll surprise El—for the next time we see each other." She cheered up a bit and started to work hard on her research, which made Cecil and Carlo feel relieved.

They were struck by this—Filiel had been both the reason for her depression and the motivation for her to pull herself out of the depths of her despair. Just as Yui was a vital source of strength for Filiel, he was an irreplaceable emotional support for her.

Yui needed Filiel more than anyone. So, they were certain that...

Chapter Five: Prodigy

Both the Luster teachers and the teachers from the other academies were infuriated by Yui's boycott of the classes at camp. She was instantly summoned and received an hours-long strict reprimanding. Incidentally, Filiel had tacit permission to cut class, so he got off scot-free. He was royalty, and he'd had the finest tutors instilling in him all the necessary education from a young age, so he had already mastered everything the camp's classes had to offer. Yui was outraged by this unfair treatment, and she wasn't going to meekly attend classes after their scolding anyway, so their words went in one ear and out the other. Since then, she had spent every day evading the watchful eyes of the teachers and running away.

However, today, powerful people in government and other important organizations were coming from across the country to watch the students, and her desertion was not going to be tolerated. The second Yui came out of her room, she was captured by Berg, who had been stationed outside, and he forcibly carted her off to class.

"Leeet meeee goooo!" Yui shouted.

"Don't be ridiculous! Curtis, today's the day you'll come to class, if it's the last thing I do!" Berg shouted back.

"Nooo! Please, Mr. Berg! It'll definitely be a big pain! Overlook it, just today!" Yui's pleas echoed unfulfilled throughout the corridors as Berg dragged her away.

The special hall in the royal palace was large enough to fit a thousand people, and there was a giant magic circle on the spotless, polished, pure-white floor of the hall. Many people, whose clothing made it clear that they were researchers, hurriedly moved around the edges of the circle. The long-distance, large-scale teleportation spell was about to commence.

Teleportation magic created an entrance and an exit that allowed for traversal of the space between the two points. In order to cast the spell, the caster had to be able to confirm the locations of both ends with their own eyes, which limited its range to the caster's field of vision. However, after many years of research, a new type of long-range teleportation had become possible, though it was limited by several factors, including the necessity of etching the magic circle at the exit in advance. This magic—called a teleportation gate—was the fruit of the labor of many generations of researchers, and it made it possible to move hundreds of people and objects at once. Fearing potential military applications, the existence of the magic was kept secret, and the only country that could make use of the teleportation gate was the place where it had been invented—the kingdom of Garlant. In addition, it was only ever used to transport the king or the crown prince, or else in an emergency.

On this occasion, King Bernard and Crown Prince Alexis were going to be transported to the training facility at Bahal so they could observe the magic academies' training camp. After a short time, the adjustments were complete, and just afterward, with good timing, Bernard, Alexis, and the captain of the royal guard, Gaius, showed up.

"Is it ready?" Bernard asked.

"The transport can be made at any time," the head researcher said, respectfully bowing his head.

Gaius gave directions to the other members of the royal guard there who would be traveling with them, and they moved into position within the magic circle.

"Then, Layce. Watch over things while I'm gone," Bernard said.

"As you wish, though I'm quite reluctant to do so," Layce replied irritably.

Bernard seemed jumpy around Layce, and he looked like he wanted to get out of there as soon as he could. That was because a bit of a dispute had just occurred.

As a general rule, a member of the royal family went to every one of the training camps. It was exceptionally rare for the king to attend because he was usually busy with governmental affairs, so Alexis generally took on the

responsibility of going. But this time, Bernard had suddenly said that he also wanted to go. This meant that Alexis would've been the one to stay behind and substitute for the king for a while, but the crown prince had also insisted on going. In the end, it was decided that the two of them would go together.

However, with both the king and the crown prince absent, their extensive duties would all fall on Layce's shoulders. It was no wonder that he was dissatisfied. That wasn't Layce's only cause for discontent either; while Bernard had said that he was going because he wanted to see his son's gallant figure for once, the real reason was so he could secretly meet with Yui.

"The moment you cause any trouble for Yui, I'm resigning right away," Layce said, staring coolly at Bernard. Despite Bernard's attempts to hide it, he had sensed why the king actually wanted to go to the training camp.

Unable to withstand Layce's glare, Bernard averted his eyes. "Understood," he said.

This sight would've made anyone question who was really the more powerful person. But ever since Layce had become prime minister, this had become another scene of everyday life, and by now, no one thought it very strange at all. The royal guards nearby only looked at Bernard with pity; none of them stepped in to help him. They probably didn't want to enter Layce's field of view when he was in a bad mood.

Gaius often came face-to-face with Layce, so he wasn't greatly affected by him, but he was a bit hesitant as he interrupted the two of them. "Your Majesty, once you and His Highness move into position, we can depart. What would you have us do, sir?"

"We'll go right away!" Bernard exclaimed with gusto. "Alexis, hurry up!" "Y-Yes, father!"

Bernard hurriedly got away from Layce and rushed into the magic circle, blatantly—but also prudently—taking advantage of the opportunity to escape with his life.

The long-range teleportation gate required a large amount of magic energy to activate, so there were more than ten casters standing around the magic circle.

When they saw that everyone who was to be transported had entered the circle, they all simultaneously began charging the gate with magic. A large pillar of light arose, tall enough to reach the ceiling, and the next moment, everyone inside the magic circle—all several dozen of them—vanished.

The group that had teleported from the hall in the palace was now, in the blink of an eye, standing in a magic circle inside the training facility at faraway Bahal. As soon as they arrived, they were led to a circular arena in the facility, where they took their seats in the stands. The students' mock battles were about to begin.

In contrast with the other observers, the royal family had their own private box seats, and the interior was not a shade less luxurious than a high-class hotel. An entire wall of the room was taken up by a window, through which they could look out over the arena. Many other observers had already taken their seats diagonally and to the side of their room. A few of them noticed that the king was looking over at them, so they turned to him and bowed. He raised his hand in response, then returned inside.

"There sure is an impressive lineup of attendees this year. Is it always like this, Alexis?" Bernard asked.

"Impressive? Who are you referring to?" Alexis said.

"The grandmaster of the guild and a cardinal of the church are here too."

Hearing that, Alexis's eyes widened in surprise. He looked out the window at the observers' room, and sure enough, the people his father had mentioned were there. "You're right. They never usually come...and there are more than ever this year. Do you know anything, Kieran?"

Kieran oversaw recruitment and promotions in the army—he came every year to observe the training camp. He flipped through a bundle of documents in his hands, then pulled out a few pieces of paper and held them out to the king. "I imagine that the reason there are so many observers is because of these students," he replied.

Bernard quickly looked over the three pieces of paper before him. "Cecil O'Brian and Carlo O'Brian. And a first-year student, Ivo Arman. Because of them?"

"Yes. The O'Brian brothers are sons of a count. They're incredibly intelligent, and they have excellent magical and physical abilities. They are also of impeccable character, and no one around them has anything poor to say about them; they're popular and well-liked among both under-and upperclassmen. They'll be fifth-year students next year, which means they'll be graduating, so it seems that many organizations are attempting to acquire them. However, their aspiration is to join the army."

"They're close with Filiel, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, they have stated that they wish to join the army in order to serve at His Highness's side."

Every last detail of Filiel's and Alexis's personal relationships was reported to Bernard. It was necessary to investigate the backgrounds of everyone the princes knew and determine whether they'd be appropriate friends. While it was unfortunate that they couldn't simply make friends normally, as long as they were part of the royal family, it was an essential measure in order to make sure no one dangerous could get close to them. However, Theodore suppressed all information about Yui before it ever made its way to Bernard.

"I'm happy that such promising students are at Filiel's side," Bernard said. They must've had a wealth of options at their disposal, but out of all of them, they had chosen Filiel. As a father, he was as joyful as he could be that there were people who were there to support his son. *Maybe I should meet with them once*, he thought.

"The final one is the first-year, Ivo Arman. This is his first time participating in the camp," Kieran said.

Hearing Ivo's name, Alexis spoke. "I've heard of him. They say he's a child prodigy. He could freely manipulate high-level magic at the age of ten, he's knowledgeable enough about magic to be able to hold discussions with experts, and his magic is strong—powerful enough to defeat a palace mage."

"Oho, so there's someone like *that* among the students?" Bernard said. "I can imagine that everyone is eager to recruit him for a position after he graduates."

"Yes, we also plan to go speak with him." Kieran paused. "However, it is believed that the grandmaster and the cardinal haven't come to observe those

three; their objective is a direct negotiation with a different student."

That surprised Bernard. "Not just to observe, but to negotiate directly? Are you saying that there's another student here who's just as brilliant as those three?"

"Yes. And just like them, I also intend to put my all into the negotiations!"

"Who could that student be?" Bernard wondered. The grandmaster and the cardinal were—even among a kingdom with as many powerful people as Garlant—two of the most powerful and influential people in the country. Additionally, they belonged to the guild and the church respectively, both highly sought-after institutions that many wanted to join even without an invitation. Just who was this skilled individual that those important people had come all this way to see? Bernard waited eagerly for Kieran's reply.

"She's a first-year student," Kieran said. He took out a piece of paper and handed it to Bernard. "Her name is Yui Curtis."

An indescribable silence fell.

"Say that again," Bernard muttered. Maybe he had misheard Kieran.

"Y-Yes, sir. She's Yui Curtis, a first-year student."

Bernard paused. "Is she, perhaps, a Liefe?"

"Yes, she is. Were you already aware of her, sir?"

Bernard, Alexis, and Gaius all fell silent again. They hadn't thought it'd be Yui herself, who, by the way, was also the person *they* had come to see.

"She's talented enough to catch the notice of the cardinal and the grandmaster?" Bernard asked.

"Yes, she's a magical prodigy," Kieran declared emphatically. "Of course, Ivo Arman is said to be a prodigy as well, but her ability far surpasses his. His magical control, quality, speed, and knowledge can't compare to hers."

"That much?"

Kieran had a wealth of experience from serving Garlant for many years, and his ability was widely recognized. He had an incredible knack for judging people.

It was even rumored that he had had some sort of special sensor installed in his eyes—the fact that this was almost believable just showed how highly regarded he was. The king deeply relied on him and entrusted him with important personnel matters.

Bernard was surprised that Kieran had so quickly recognized Yui's ability, even though she was still a student. But at the same time, he could also understand why Kieran had such a positive appraisal of her. He had seen her display of magical power and control in suppressing Filiel's magic at the palace, and he also knew about the new spell that she had developed. Her thorough prior research notwithstanding, her talent was such that she had been able to create a spell that no other researchers had been able to craft—and only a few days after seeing the magic formula on the door to Filiel's room. Bernard had seen what she could do up close, and there was no conceivable way he could deny her ability.

"Yes, that's why the church and the guild are so desperate to recruit her..."

Despite Kieran's earlier talkativeness, he was now hesitant to speak.

"Is there a problem?" Bernard asked.

"The grandmaster, the cardinal, and I all went to speak with her...but she refused, saying that she wanted to take over her grandfather's bakery."

"She did?!"

"She instantly said no..."

Only specially chosen, outstanding individuals could be part of the army, the church, or the guild. As such, they were popular occupations, and people who worked there were afforded a great deal of respect by those around them. It was normally unthinkable for someone to refuse an offer from any of them.

"I went to speak with her many times after that, but I've never received a favorable reply," Kieran continued. "But apparently, the guild and the church haven't given up. They're refusing to let someone as brilliant as her go underutilized at a small bakery, and they've attached some very appealing conditions to their offers."

"What kinds of conditions?" Bernard asked.

"I'm not aware of all the details, but there's a signing bonus that would normally be impossible for a student to get, and a guaranteed high position. And, taking into consideration her desire to take over the bakery, they've said that they'd allow her to simply be a member in their organization while still working at the bakery."

"And she refused that too?"

"Yes."

Bernard was surprised that the guild and the church were willing to give Yui such good terms, but he also couldn't hide his shock that Yui had lightly brushed them aside. Someone as young as Yui normally would've been elated to receive invitations from the country's top three organizations at once; they would've jumped at one of the offers and signed without thinking of the future consequences. The grandmaster and the cardinal might've been aiming for that when they'd flashed a load of money before her, but they had miscalculated Yui's unwavering determination—she wouldn't be convinced in the slightest by any of that.

Alexis was nodding in agreement. "She chose to have father promise to keep people silent about her involvement, rather than take money or anything valuable. I'm sure she wasn't swayed at all by their offers."

"Keep who silent? About what?" Kieran asked, tilting his head in confusion.

"That's right. Is it okay if I speak to Kieran about it, father?"

"Yeah, Kieran already knows a bit about it, so it's not an issue."

With Bernard's permission, Alexis explained. "Kieran, I'm sure you know about the new spell that lets people come into physical contact with Filiel."

"Yes, I heard from the commander in chief that an outsider created the spell when none of the palace researchers had been able to. He was quite pleased—he had been gravely concerned about His Highness, who will one day be his successor. However, right after that, the gag order came down, which deeply perplexed him. The fact that Your Highness is bringing that up here means..."

Bernard nodded, a serious look on his face. "Yes, the one who created that spell was the girl you spoke of: Yui. When I offered a reward, she requested not

money, but anonymity. I wanted her to go into service for the kingdom, but with Layce standing in the way, even I can't force her."

Kieran suddenly looked disheartened. He also looked tired, somehow. "Oh, Prime Minister Curtis...?"

"Did something happen?" Bernard asked.

Kieran nodded. "Yes. I visited Yui's house many times to try and get her to agree to something, but once, Prime Minister Curtis appeared there. He wasn't yet married then, so he wasn't officially her father, but the way he doted on Yui was abnormal, even then, and he stopped me with a terrifying, threatening look."

Kieran would've never expected Yui to have any connection with Layce. He had been so surprised by Layce's entry that his knees had almost buckled. That had been the first time Kieran had ever felt afraid of someone with a smile on their face—he had experienced firsthand why Layce was called the Prince of Darkness. The grandmaster and the cardinal had probably been driven away in exactly the same manner. From that point onward, the three of them never approached Yui's house or showed their faces around her.

"But!" Kieran was fired up with enthusiasm. "I haven't given up yet! The prime minister is at the palace, so without him in the way, this is the perfect opportunity! I'll definitely persuade her to join this time!"

Despite Kieran's attitude, the others watching him were relatively calm.

"What do you think, Alexis, Gaius?" Bernard asked.

Alexis smiled awkwardly at his father's question. "The possibility is virtually zero, I imagine. It doesn't look like her determination will ever falter. And besides, if she was going to so easily accept one of their invitations, she would've demanded more from you, father, and would probably be working for you too."

"More than anything, I can't imagine the prime minister allowing her to enter the army, where there's a high change of her getting seriously injured," Gaius added. "If anyone could manage to interfere with that, it's him, no matter how far away he is." Bernard and Alexis nodded in agreement. They were completely certain that Layce could stop someone from trying to recruit her, even if he was in another country. If anything, they were terrified that Layce might be able to overhear even the contents of this conversation.

Soon that prediction of Gaius's would come to pass.

All of Yui's resistance was ultimately in vain. Berg brought her to where the other students were gathered.

"Listen up, all of you. Watch over Curtis. You'd better not let her get away!" Berg said to her friends. Then he left.

Even that wasn't enough to discourage Yui. As soon as Berg disappeared from view, she tried to slip away. However, Ivo faithfully heeded Berg's words, and he captured her before she could escape.

"Ivo, let go of me," Yui said.

"If I do, you'll just go off somewhere!"

"Of course." She looked at him as if to say, "What's so bad about that?"

"I wish I could let you go, but not today," Lyle said. "We have the group matches, and it'll be a real pain if you skip out on us, you know?" He was usually lenient on Yui, but this time was different. That was no wonder—today was the day of the mock battles. If someone was gone, their team would be at a numerical disadvantage, and all the more so if it was *Yui*, who was the strongest one in their group.

"You have Ivo, don't you?" Yui said. "You'll be okay if I'm gone."

"We would wipe the floor with anyone from our year, but there's also a match against upperclassmen today. Even with Ivo in our group, there'll be more of them, and we can't afford to underestimate their strength. I want this to be as sure a thing as possible, okay?"

"Give up and participate," Ivo chimed in.

Despite her friends' efforts, Yui had absolutely no desire to take part in the matches. She was still biding her time and waiting for her chance to escape.

With Yui liable to run away at a moment's notice, Finney saw that it was his time to act. "How about this: if you participate while the observers are here, I'll give you something nice."

"Something nice? Like what?" Yui asked, intrigued.

Finney showed her a pouch, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Inside were several wrapped bite-size pieces of candy. "These are limited-edition chocolates from a chocolatier that's a purveyor to the royal household. They only sell ten a week. Do you want them?"

"I do!" As soon as Yui heard what they were, her eyes lit up. Finney was referring to a famous specialty chocolate shop in the royal capital. The legendary chocolate he held in his hand used rare ingredients, so only ten pieces were sold each week. Yui had once tried lining up to buy the chocolate, but she had given up when she'd learned that the people in line had been there since the moment the previous week's chocolate had sold out. She did wonder if Finney had lined up for an entire week, but that wasn't important right now.

"So you'll participate while the observers are here?" Finney said.

"Yeah, I will!" Yui instantly replied.

Lyle and Ivo both sighed, irritated by all the time they had just wasted arguing.

Meanwhile, Clois had his eyes locked squarely on Yui's reward, and he muttered, "Maybe I should throw a tantrum about participating too..."

"You aren't cute when you whine, Clo," Lyle said.

"Yui, give one to Clois. If you don't, he might try to run away too," Ivo said wearily. Clois's eyes sparkled in the exact same way Yui's had just moments earlier.



"Okay," Yui said. She took out the chocolate and gave a piece to everyone, including Clois.

"It's okay if we have one too?" Lyle asked.

"Yeah."

After Yui handed out the chocolate, everyone popped it in their mouths. It was smooth but not too sweet, and it instantly melted completely. It was simply superb.

"Whoa!" Ivo exclaimed.

"You don't have any more, Finney?" Clois pressed Finney, not satisfied with just a single piece.

"Unfortunately, that's the last of them. If you want more, line up yourself."

Yui basked in ecstasy from the chocolate's aftertaste, only to be brought back to reality by multiple piercing gazes. She looked around at her surroundings. Many students were glaring at her. Their eyes held a mixture of scorn, hatred, and even outright hostility.

This wasn't because she was a Liefe. For them, it was an honor to be able to participate in the training camp, and they were all working the absolute hardest they could. Compare Yui's actions up until then: skipping classes, running away, and skipping more classes. Quite a few of them already didn't take kindly to the fact that a Liefe had been selected for the camp, and with her flippant behavior added on top of that, many were outraged at her. All of their futures were on the line, and they were earnestly trying to succeed. Their disdain was, in a way, to be expected.

Yui's friends knew this was her own fault, so they did nothing to try and counter the angry gazes. Yui herself had known how her actions were going to be perceived by others, and she had gotten used to nasty looks long ago, so while they were a bit annoying, she hardly paid them any mind. Besides, there was a more pressing issue at hand.

"Hey, Finney, is it true that the guild's grandmaster plus a church cardinal are here to watch today?" she asked.

"Yep, they are. Speaking of which, General Kieran, in charge of army personnel, is also here," Finney replied. By this point, no one questioned why he knew something like that—it was because he was Finney. That was all they needed to hear to satisfy their curiosity. "I'm sure you know better than anyone why they're here, right, Yui?"

He was quite right. Unfortunately, Yui knew their reasoning well, and her expression spontaneously darkened.

It had started right after the previous year's tournament, when an obviously high-status person had shown up at her home. This unthinkably important person was General Kieran, who was the second most powerful in the army after the commander in chief, and the man who managed the army's personnel. He'd appeared there to try to recruit her. Yui thought it odd that he'd come, even though she hadn't fought in the tournament once. However, he'd apparently been to the qualifier at her school before the actual tournament. He had originally wanted to see the famous prodigy, Ivo, who had instantly defeated every one of his opponents. After that, Kieran had accepted an invitation to watch Ivo's mock battle to humor the boy, only to witness Yui easily beat him. That'd been when Kieran had first thought that he wanted to have Yui join the army, and why he'd gone to her home to recruit her.

Yui had been genuinely glad that he'd noticed her ability, but she had absolutely no intention of joining the army, and she'd turned Kieran down on the spot. But he'd refused to back down—he'd shown up countless times to try to convince her otherwise. Things hadn't stopped there either; the grandmaster of the guild and one of the church's cardinals had both joined the fray, each for the same reason as Kieran. No matter how many times Yui refused, the three of them wouldn't give up, so at a loss for what to do, Yui had sought help from her mother's powerful then-fiancé, Layce, the prime minister. Yui had just wanted some advice, but when Layce heard everything, he drove the three away, and they hadn't shown their faces around Yui since. The clever way Layce had spoken with them then had been quite fitting for the prime minister, and it had changed Yui's perception of him.

The cardinal, the grandmaster, and Kieran had probably come to the camp thinking that they had a chance while Layce was gone. However, Layce was always several steps ahead. Yui checked her pocket, making sure that the charms he had given her were still there. They were. She felt relieved, knowing that she'd be all right as long as she had them, and at the same time, she was grateful for how thorough Layce was.

"The army, the guild, and the church, huh?" Lyle sighed, impressed. "That's some lineup. You don't want to work for any of them, Yui?"

"Not at all," Yui replied instantly, sounding uninterested. "I'm going to take over the bakery."

"With your ability, you're not interested in anything bigger? Well, I do think it fits you, Yui. It's like you're going your own way, without being influenced by others."

"You could also say it's being unable to read the room, airheaded, and inconsiderate," Ivo remarked.

"How rude," Yui said indignantly. "I can read the room. I just don't care what it says."

"That's even worse!"

After they chatted for a while, the teachers entered the hall. Berg was among them. The instant he came in, he fixed his eyes on Yui and glared at her, as if to say, "You'd better not run away."

With the arrival of the teachers, the students automatically began lining up in front of them. Their expressions were all a mixture of anxiety and determination. The third-year students and below still looked somewhat calm—they always had next time—but the fourth-years had to decide their future courses next year, so they were much more tense and motivated than the other students. The fifth-years who were present were only there to help out the teachers and manage the large number of underclassmen, and the only ones who had been selected to attend had already chosen where they were going after graduation. That meant that this was pretty much the last chance the fourth-years had to show their strength and receive offers.

When the students finished lining up, the teachers began to explain the camp's main event: the mock battles that the observers were going to watch.

"We're about to move to the arena, where each of your groups will participate in the mock battles," one teacher began. "In the morning, your groups will be fighting against a preselected opponent, one group at a time, and in the afternoon, there will be two fights—battle royale style. Half of the groups will participate in one, and the other half will be in the other. The last group with members left standing, even if it's only one person, will be the winner."

"There's a special prize for the victorious groups, so please do your best," added another teacher.

At the word "prize," the quietly listening students got excited. Hushed discussions about the contents of the prize could be heard everywhere.

"Quiet down! We aren't done talking yet! The mock battles have been designed with actual combat in mind, so there are real risks involved. We have excellent healers at the ready, and we're prepared to step in and interrupt the fight as soon as we see things getting dangerous. Still, keep your wits about you, and do as much as you can to avoid hurting anyone."

"Finally, there are many important individuals that will be observing today, so be sure to not make any careless mistakes. Be courteous."

With that, the explanation was over, and they began heading to the arena. Among the sea of stiff expressions, Yui alone looked annoyed, but she *had* gotten chocolate, so she gave up and moved along with everyone else. When they got to the arena, they all lined up. Both the students and the teachers turned to the seats where the royal family was sitting and bowed. They then turned to the observers and did the same.

"Stay safe, and show me your best," the king said. "I'm looking forward to seeing everyone's efforts."

With that, they began. The group that was set to go first remained on the field, and the rest of the students went to the seats around the edge of the arena. For safety's sake, a powerful defense spell had been cast—it was centered on the arena, and it divided the spectators from the competing students. When everyone had taken their seats, the entrances to the arena closed. A wave of tension washed over the first group of students.

"The mock battles will now begin! Your time limit is fifteen minutes."

After the teacher spoke, a door separate from the entrances opened. Two four-legged magic beasts that resembled wolves came rushing out.

The students hadn't known what they would be fighting against in the mock battles. Apparently, the academies had analyzed each group's test results and past performances—they'd then decided on which magic beasts would be appropriate for the groups to fight. The magic beasts had been captured from the enchanted forest surrounding the training facility. Everyone figured that the first-time students would be surprised when they heard they would be battling against magic beasts, but they seemed to have already heard about past training camps from the upperclassmen, so there had been no noticeable confusion. However, magic beasts rarely, if ever, appeared in towns and cities, so this was the first time nearly all of them had seen one. Now that the students were face-to-face with them, many felt overwhelmed and afraid.

The students in the first fight were a mixed-gender group from Dyne composed of five third-years. At the outset of the match, they were tense and moved clumsily, unable to smoothly coordinate their actions. One student hurt their arm. However, they managed to recover and successfully defeat the wolves.

Following their match, each group went down to the arena one after the other and fought against magic beasts. Students were constantly getting hurt, but there were only minor injuries. These students had all been strong enough to win a spot at the camp, so everyone was able to defeat their prescribed opponents and attain victory within the established fifteen-minute time limit. Cecil, Carlo, Filiel, Luca, and Zeke's group had to face the most magical beasts at once, but even then, there weren't enough to put up a real fight against them. Cecil and Luca together defeated every magic beast without even giving the other three a chance to fight, and they were showered with the loudest cheers of the day.

When all of the upperclassmen's matches were over, it was the first-years' turn. They had observed the previous matches and spent the time elaborately working out strategies among their groups, but now that their matches were approaching, they all started to look anxious and panicked—quite a few of them looked ill. However, Yui's group, who was the first up, didn't show a single shred

of fear as they entered the arena.

They finished preparing, and the magic beasts appeared. There were ten of them in total. The venue started to get noisy when spectators saw the sheer number of opponents Yui's group was facing. Soon there was a large commotion. The upperclassmen had generally only fought somewhere between five and ten magic beasts, so it was no wonder everyone was surprised to see a group of inexperienced first-years going up against ten at once.

"Wow, this is way too many for beginners like us!" Lyle complained. He turned to Ivo. "This is your fault, Mr. Child Prodigy."

"Yeah, Ivo. Take some responsibility," Clois said bitterly.

"Shut up!" Ivo shouted angrily. "Look who's talking!"

Despite the fact that their battle was about to start, their exchange lacked any sense of nervousness.

"From my perspective, you three are pretty much the same," Finney said.

"But for us humble class H students, this is a real pain. Right, Yu—" He looked back to seek Yui's agreement, but when he did, he saw something outrageous.

Though they were in the middle of their fight against magic beasts, she had sat herself down on the ground, leaned back against the wall, cast a defense spell around herself, and opened up a book.

Finney had been expecting something like this, so he just smiled awkwardly, but when Ivo saw Yui relaxing, he started screaming at her. "Yuiii! What the hell are you dooooing?!"

"I'm reading Read This and You'll Be Unbeatable! All Must-Eat Treats! The Complete Expert's Guide to Popular Bahal Confectioneries," Yui said casually.

"Still?! Throw it away, burn it, and scatter the ashes! I never want to see that stupid book again!"

Yui calmly pointed over Ivo's shoulder. "Ivo, behind you."

"Huh?" Ivo turned around. "Aaah!" He saw that a magic beast was about to attack him, and he was so surprised that his anger completely disappeared. Despite this unforeseen situation, he dodged the attack and landed a

counterattack of his own, vanquishing the creature. His title of "prodigy" wasn't an exaggeration.

Still, there were a lot of beasts for them to handle, even with him, Lyle, and Clois all working together. On top of that, they were all city dwellers, born and raised, so this was the first time any of them had ever seen a magic beast, let alone fought one. They sorely lacked experience, and they were struggling so much that they didn't even have time to pay attention to Yui. Finney had a bit more freedom, and he cleverly maneuvered around the beasts, dodging attacks and occasionally using Lyle as a shield as he made attacks himself, but they were lacking the decisive advantage that might turn the battle in their favor. Luckily, thanks to Yui casting defense spells on all of them, none of them sustained any injuries, and they weren't afraid of the magic beasts, so they didn't freeze up or flinch.

Yui was thinking that she'd be able to use her application of defense magic as an excuse if Berg got angry at her for not participating. Still reclined against the wall, she rifled through the book for information on confectioneries in anticipation of the free time they'd have in a few days. Seeing her motionlessly sitting there, two of the magic beasts set their sights on her and charged, but their attacks were blocked by the defense magic. Without a single scratch on her, Yui continued to read. The beasts kept up the attack, clawing and tackling the barrier around her. Someone in her position would've normally been terrified at a scene like that unfolding right before their eyes, but Yui was unconcerned and kept flipping through the pages of her book.

Meanwhile, the other four were struggling more than expected. Ten minutes had already gone by, but they had only defeated around half of the magic beasts, and it seemed impossible for them to beat all the others in the time they had remaining.

"Yui, put your book down for a bit and help uuuus!" Lyle shouted.

"I don't wanna."

"An instant reply! Finney, do you have any more of that limited edition chocolate?!"

"Hmm, that was all I had. I wish I'd specified that she had to fight, not just

participate."

As they continued this exchange, Berg, in the seats with the other teachers, was shaking with rage. "Curtis! Take this seriously!" His yell echoed throughout the arena, but Yui pretended she couldn't hear and ignored him. However, when a teacher from Dyne Academy spoke up, she couldn't afford to brush off what he had to say.

"You over there, Curtis—the one making plans to see confectioneries in Bahal. In case you didn't know, any groups that don't manage to defeat the magic beats within the time limit will have their free time"—he paused for effect —"revoked!"

Revoked... Revoked... That word reverberated throughout Yui's head. It took some time for her to completely comprehend its meaning.

"Ah, seriously?" Lyle exclaimed.

"Whaaat?!" Clois yelled.

Lyle had already secured dates with some older female students and was looking forward to going out with them; Clois was just as excited as Yui to splurge on sweets in Bahal. This news hit them especially hard. Many other students were also eagerly anticipating their free time, and a shock ran through the first-years whose matches were still yet to start. The upperclassmen had all defeated their targets within the time limit, so they remained calm, but the first-year students raised sorrowful cries of "I was looking forward to that!" and "It's over..." and "I got an advance on my allowance for this!"

Meanwhile, during that commotion, time continued to elapse, and the teacher announced, "Thirty seconds remaining!"

Yui stood up. Finney saw Yui move and shouted to the other three, "Heeey, it looks like Yui's finally motivated!"

They all turned to look at Yui, who was blasting away a magic beast that had been trying to break through her defense spell.

"Yikes. Ivo, Clo, you'll get caught up in it if you don't run away!" Lyle warned, taking the chance to put some distance between himself and the magic beasts. Ivo and Clois followed suit and quickly moved away from the beasts.

The beast that Yui had sent flying hit the wall, but it instantly got up and growled low, looking for an opportunity to strike.

"Ivo, I don't care what it is, just fire off a wind spell," Yui said, staring at the creatures.

"Got it," Ivo replied.

Liefes were unable to activate any fire, water, wind, or earth spells. The spell Yui was trying to cast needed someone else's support for it to work.

Yui had said she didn't care which, so Ivo chose the weakest wind spell possible, which he could activate quickly with a short chant. Because he had prioritized speed over power, the spell activated and shot toward the beasts in the blink of an eye. In concert with his spell, Yui simultaneously finished chanting her own. Ivo's weak spell instantly expanded—the wind turned into countless, invisible blades that rained down on the five magic beasts. The next moment, their bodies had been cut cleanly in two; they had been unable to take a single step to avoid their fates.

The students, teachers, and observers were so taken aback by how abrupt this was that the shock rendered them speechless. Some of them looked disappointed by the anticlimactic ending, and they just sat there, mouths hanging open. The other members of Yui's group weren't even happy that they had finished within the time limit. Their faces went stiff.

Ivo spoke first. "It was over in an instant..."

"We were struggling so much, and she just..." Lyle's words trailed off.

"What was the meaning of all our hard work?" Clois asked.

"I guess she didn't need us," Finney said.

Those around Ivo, Lyle, and Clois constantly made a fuss over them, praising them as brilliant, as geniuses, or as prodigies. None of them ever let it get to their heads, and they never slacked in their efforts. Still, they might've felt some sense of pride in their strength, which they had gotten from listening to others' compliments. But, while four of them had been unable to defeat even five magic beasts, Yui had wiped out the rest of their remaining foes in an instant. They had always been aware of the fact that Yui was stronger than them, and it

wasn't as if Yui hadn't done it alone either—Ivo had helped—but this wasn't a match that was all in good fun with no winners or losers. It had been a pure, real fight, and seeing the difference in their abilities had torn their pride to shreds like a dirty old rag.

Taking no notice of Ivo, Lyle, and Clois's quiet depression, Yui earnestly celebrated having finished within the time limit. "Finney, it ended within the time limit, right? Right?"

"Yeah, I'm happy for you. But because of that stunt you pulled, three members of our group might not recover..."

Everyone within the royal family's box was also awash with surprise.

"Is she the one who just did that? But Liefes shouldn't be able to use wind magic..." Seeking an explanation, Bernard looked to Kieran.

"She cast a nonelemental amplification spell," Kieran said. "Liefes can't activate elemental spells, but using certain nonelemental spells, they can interface with any of the four elements. She used a relatively simple amplification spell, as far as nonelemental magic goes. She cast it on Ivo Arman's wind spell to boost its power."

"And it can boost the power of that wind spell that much?" Alexis asked. Ivo had cast the most basic wind spell—the first one that anyone learns when studying wind magic. It was very beginner-friendly and did hardly any damage, but with Yui's amplification, it had been powerful enough to cut all five magic beasts in half. Alexis's doubt was completely natural.

"I don't think there are any students who could amplify a spell that much," Kieran said. "After all, nonelemental magic requires a correspondingly large amount of magic energy and control to cast. However, it isn't impossible. Among the army, I believe the blue commander would be able to do it. But her strength goes beyond what she just showed us. She could have defeated those beasts without borrowing someone else's power."

Bernard couldn't help but wonder whether Yui, who was only capable of casting nonelemental magic, could really do that on her own. But if General

Kieran declared it so, then it must've been the truth. Many people, including Bernard, who had always been able to use the four elements, hardly studied nonelemental magic, if at all—it was unnecessary—so Bernard had no choice but to believe Kieran.

"Then why didn't she?" Bernard asked. "This was the perfect opportunity for her to demonstrate her own power."

"I don't know. She somehow seems to avoid using her power around others. She's certainly powerful enough to qualify for class A at the academy, but both her written and practical test results are below average, and she makes no effort to openly show her real strength." Kieran sighed quietly, troubled, then continued. "However, when she was in middle school, she had the top scores in both areas. They were even higher than her classmate Ivo Arman's."

"What's the reason for this?" Bernard asked. Yui had scored higher than the widely acclaimed prodigy, Ivo. All of them could see that her current scores were intentionally bad. But they didn't know why she felt the need to do that.

"I don't know. However, I do know that she began hiding her power after the middle school tournament."

"Then...did something happen at that time?"

"I tried asking her, but she's smart, so she nimbly dodged the question. If I knew why, I might also know why she keeps stubbornly refusing any recruitment offers..."

"I see. Maybe I'll indirectly ask Layce about it," Bernard said. Then he quietly mumbled, "Though I don't think he'll give me a straight answer." Nevertheless, he understood quite well why the church and the guild were so eager to recruit her. None of them wished to let her talent and ability languish in anonymity in some small neighborhood bakery. Even Bernard would have definitely used his kingly authority to compel Yui to work for the government if Layce weren't protecting her.

As they spoke about Yui, the first-years' matches proceeded one after the other, and in the end, Yui's group was the only one that was able to defeat all the magic beasts within the time limit. Many first-years froze up at the sight of these never-before-seen monsters, so they weren't in a state to move or fight

properly. Several even ran away. There were also many more who got hurt compared to the upperclassmen, and their injuries were more serious. Some seemed to have some combat experience against magic beasts, and a few students fought bravely, but these weren't individual matches, but *group* matches. The other members of their groups dragged them down, and even when they were able to defeat all their foes, they couldn't within the time limit.

This was a pitiful result for the first-years, but the magic beast fights came to much the same end every year. None of the upperclassmen or the observers ridiculed them for it. They looked upon the frustrated first-years warmly; the upperclassmen fondly reminisced on years past, and the observers eagerly anticipated what the newcomers' futures held in store. At the end, when all the matches were complete, they gave the first-years a loud round of applause for their efforts.

With the morning matches over, the students all took a break for lunch in order to recover lost magic energy and stamina for the afternoon's matches. Students everywhere got together and ate with their groups, where they discussed strategies for the match. The first-years were especially motivated after their poor results in the morning, and the depressed mood they'd been in right after the matches had completely vanished. They were intensely driven and determined not to shame themselves this next time.

In the middle of this atmosphere was Yui's group, who, excluding the frequently complaining yet serious Ivo, leisurely ate lunch as if they were on a vacation.

"Your fried chicken looks good, Lyle," Yui said. "I should've gotten combo A." "I'll give you one if you'll give me a bite of your hamburg steak," Lyle replied. "Okay."

Finney turned to Clois. "I hear dinner is going to come with the custard pudding you love so much, Clo."

"What?!" Clois exclaimed. "I'm looking forward to that."

As the first-years around them earnestly discussed strategy with serious looks

on their faces, Yui's group was just happily chatting. "You guys should follow the lead of everyone around us!" Ivo yelled. "At least be a *bit* more tense!"

That morning, their match had only been against unintelligent magic beasts, and they had managed it thanks to Yui's participation. However, the afternoon would be a fight for survival with upperclassmen thrown into the mix. They were lacking in experience, so they would inevitably struggle. They really *should* have been talking about strategy like everyone else, but with such delicious food before their eyes, Ivo's serious worry was meaningless.

"We'll be fine, Ivo. What's more important is enjoying our food," Lyle said.

"Exactly." Yui nodded. "If you don't eat soon, your food will go cold."

"Is there any dessert for lunch?" Clois asked.

"I saw gelatin, so I took the opportunity to get some for you," Yui replied. "They were almost all out."

"I knew you'd have my back, Yui. You're the only one who truly understands me."

Concern over food overrode any concern for the match, and by the end, Ivo wasn't even pretending to listen to the two sweets lovers' conversation.

Dejected, he gave up on having a discussion and slumped over in his seat.

When their lunch break was over, the students again gathered in the hall. Berg explained the afternoon matches, and as he did, magic items that looked like wristwatches were handed out to everyone. The clock part seemed to have been replaced by a round, off-white piece of glass with a small magic circle drawn on it.

"There will be two matches in the afternoon," Berg began. "The magic items you've been given are made so that, after they sustain a certain amount of damage, the glass automatically breaks. If that happens, make sure you leave the field immediately. The last group with members left standing will be the winner. Students of all years will be participating in both matches, which makes this a good opportunity to gauge your current ability, so try your hardest. Finally, if anyone has any questions—"

Before Berg could finish speaking, Yui's hand shot up. Instead of being pleased

to see that she was finally showing some motivation for once, he furrowed his eyebrows and looked at her suspiciously. "What is it, Curtis?"

"Will there be a penalty for not winning this match, like the one in the morning?" Yui asked.

The morning's sudden, mid-match announcement about the penalty of losing free time—right as her match had almost reached its time limit—had put Yui on her guard. She wanted to be aware of any similar stipulations regarding the next match. When the other students heard Yui, they also realized that possibility, and they all stared desperately at Berg. They were already on the verge of crying after losing their free time, and they wouldn't be able to take it if they had to deal with something more on top of that.

"Don't worry. There's only a reward this time, no penalty," Berg replied. At that, the students felt reassured, but they had originally come to the camp to get noticed by the observers, so none of them let that feeling show on their faces. But Yui, who didn't care at all about that, was clearly relieved.

"So I can go to the town even if I lose. That's good to hear..."

"Why did you even come to this camp? Do you think this is some sort of culinary tour?"

Yui was about to instantly reply that yes, she did think that, but those around her were all eyeing her coldly, so she swallowed her words and made an insincere, proper-sounding reply. "Why, of course not. I came to be recognized by our honored guests in the audience."

"Don't make it sound like you're reading off a script, you idiot!" Berg yelled angrily, his voice echoing throughout the hall. He clutched his stomach in pain, probably thinking that he was sincerely grateful to not be Yui's homeroom teacher.

Right before the first match of the afternoon began, the previously mentioned reward for the winners was revealed.

"The two winning groups will be allowed to take a special class—one personally taught by an army general and the guild's grandmaster," a teacher

said.

The students raised screams and battle cries when they heard this. Hardly anyone got the chance to be taught by those people; it was an extremely rare and elusive opportunity. Eager to win the reward, the students filled the hall with an aura of abnormal spirit and enthusiasm.

The first match began before their excitement cleared. Cecil and Carlo's group was among the teams participating. Luca and Zeke were there with them, but Filiel was nowhere to be seen. He was royalty, and it was thought that it might be difficult for anyone to raise a hand against him, so he was just observing. That left their group with one fewer member, but a handicap like that wasn't an obstacle to them at all.

As soon as the match began, Cecil, who was especially good with wind magic, fired off a spell with a large area of effect. It was powerful magic—something that even a high-level magician would have trouble casting—and it struck everyone in the arena besides his own group. No one had expected a student to cast such a difficult spell. The wind's invisible pressure instantly weighed down their opponents, none of whom were able to defend themselves. Then, almost as if a boulder had crashed down on them, they were slammed with an immense force, and in the blink of an eye, each of their glass magic items shattered. Only Cecil, Carlo, Luca, and Zeke were left unharmed by this overwhelming display of strength.

The venue erupted with excited cheers after seeing the area-of-effect spell in use, but this wasn't an ordinary match—its main purpose was to showcase the students' strength to the observers. Every other group had been instantly defeated, without any chance to perform, and the match had ended with them as mere losers. Flustered, the teachers immediately discussed the possibility of this affecting the students' futures, and they quickly decided to hold a rematch with all the same students—except for Cecil's group.

During the rematch, the defeated students, not wanting to be seen as losers again, gave a great demonstration of their abilities. Ultimately, the match ended as it usually did, with a group of fourth-years making it to the end and defeating the final remaining third-years. The teachers all breathed sighs of relief.

"It's finally over. And this time, it ended normally," Ivo remarked. Despite how he sounded, the match still bothered him. He was still looking at the field with a frown on his face, probably calculating possible responses to that area-of-effect spell.

"I feel bad for them. No one expects a student to cast an area-of-effect spell, so I can see why they couldn't raise their defenses in time," Finney said sympathetically.

"Is it just me, or is something up with those siblings?" Clois asked.

"Normal rules don't apply to any of them," Lyle agreed. The four furtively glanced at Yui.

"Hey..." Yui objected. "You can cast area-of-effect spells too, can't you, Ivo? You can't complain about my brothers."

"I certainly can, but the effective area of the spell depends on the caster's ability," Ivo explained. "I couldn't cast one that covers the entire arena that quickly, and it'd be weaker too. At my current level, I can't use area-of-effect spells in a real battle." That was how he put it, but thinking about it reasonably, anyone would say that having the ability to cast area-of-effect spells at all as a first-year put him well outside the bounds of normalcy. Still, his standards were somewhat off. Yui was undoubtedly the cause of this.

Next up was the match in which Yui's group would be fighting. Unlike the first match, no one's glass instantly broke, and smaller battles unfolded everywhere throughout the arena. Some fought individually, while others coordinated together with their groups against their opponents. Students continually broke glass and had their glass broken. For some reason, in the middle of it all, there was an area around Yui that was completely empty—no one tried anything against her.

Nearly everyone had been instilled with the idea that Liefes were useless failures. As such, she might've normally been their first target, but the students had personally witnessed her instantly defeat the magic beasts that morning. The way they looked at her had clearly changed—their gazes had changed from disdain toward someone weak to cautious. Even so, their long-held prejudices weren't going to be reversed in a day, and they had all concluded that she'd just

been lucky. Of course, none of them were confident enough in her weakness that they were able to work up the courage to attack her head-on. Everyone was hesitating and biding their time.

Additionally, far from feeling attracted to the special class as a reward for victory, Yui saw it more as a punishment. She made no effort to actively fight. Instead, she was waiting by the wall for the match to end with a lollipop in her mouth. If the reward had been, say, cheesecake with her dinner, she would have scrambled to join the fight—she might've even knocked everyone out right when the match began, just like Cecil had. In a sense, that meant the teachers' choice of reward had been correct. Also, by this time, Berg's anger at Yui for not fighting had faded away. He had reached the point where he'd given up.

The match was nearing its climax, and there were only three groups left. One group had two members and the other had four; they were all fourth-year students. The last group was Yui's.

They hadn't developed any set strategy, but Ivo, Lyle, and Clois all coordinated well together and managed to break the upperclassmen's ranks. If anything, they're better off for not having discussed strategy, Yui thought. Everyone in her group, including herself, was very individualistic—for better or for worse. Each of them had their own way of doing things. It fit them the most to do whatever they thought was best in the moment, rather than restrict their actions beforehand with poor planning. They also all had a good grasp of one another's personalities and could predict pretty well what the others were going to do next. That made it easy for them to understand their own roles in the fight. Even so, the three of them were quite fatigued. They were out of breath and stretched right to the breaking point.

The two groups of fourth-years must've thought that this exhaustion would make them easy targets, so they exchanged looks. As if it'd been arranged, the fourth-years all turned together to target the three first-years. Ivo, Lyle, and Clois were quickly surrounded on all sides. Their faces went stiff when they understood the situation they were in.

"There's nowhere to run! This is impossible," Lyle complained. Despite his timid-sounding remark, there was no trace of defeat in his eyes. Ivo and Clois were much the same—they tightened their expressions and prepared for an attack.

One of the fourth-years shot off fire that flared up high like a wall, and Ivo, Lyle, and Clois scattered to avoid it. That seemed to have been the fourth-years' aim, and they split up as well, two of them each teaming up against one first-year. They were trying to crush them individually, without giving them a chance to work together.

"It isn't right to be bullying your juniors," Lyle said to the boy and girl facing him.

"We're just teaching you how harsh the real world can be," one of them replied.

In the midst of this tense face-off, Lyle moved first. He charged straight at them, not caring at all how it looked. The fourth-years seemed to think this was just the final, desperate struggle of someone cornered, and they looked annoyed and disappointed by Lyle's recklessness. The female student chanted, and a mass of earth came up from the ground. Then she shot it at the charging Lyle.

The lump of soil closed in on him. If it hit, it would definitely pack a punch, but Lyle didn't defend against it at all. Instead, he leaped at the female student. He hadn't even tried to avoid the attack, so naturally, it hit him head-on—or at least, it should have. Just before the clod of earth made contact with his body, it was repelled by something, and it broke into pieces.

The student's eyes widened in surprise when she saw that. She hadn't sensed any defense spells on Lyle, and it didn't look like he'd cast anything at the last second, so she had assumed that her single attack would end things. Taking advantage of her loss of composure, Lyle got right up in front of her and smashed her magic item with a wind-wrapped fist, shattering her glass. One of the fourth-years had now been defeated, but within a split-second lapse of attention on Lyle's part, the male student had been able to hit him with an attack. Lyle's glass tragically broke.

The lump of earth had been repelled by a timely defense spell from Yui. The spell had clung right to the outline of Lyle's body, which had made it hard to tell that it was there. However, one eagle-eyed fourth-year had noticed that just before the earth spell hit Lyle. Lyle had shot a look at Yui, and she had quietly mumbled something.

The fourth-year shouted, "The Liefe! Go for the Liefe in the back first!"

One of the fourth-years instantly fired a spell at Yui in response, but before it landed, she abruptly vanished.

"Huh?!" the student exclaimed, astonished. This left him wide-open, which Ivo didn't overlook. Because one student had been looking at Yui, Ivo had only a single opponent. That opponent had also diverted their attention when Yui disappeared, which allowed Ivo to easily get out of sight and fire a wind spell at the dumbfounded student's back.

A loud gale and the sound of broken glass on his arm brought the student back to reality. "Ah!" he shouted.

"All right! Nice, Yui!" Ivo said, looking at Yui, who was now in a different spot from before. She still had a lollipop in her mouth and was leisurely waving her hand.

The student who had pointed out Yui was shocked. "No way, teleportation magic?!" he exclaimed. Teleportation spells were a type of nonelemental magic that anyone could learn, even if they weren't a Liefe. However, being a nonelemental spell, it required a great deal of control over one's magic energy, and for anyone who wasn't used to it, a teleportation spell took some time to cast. There were hardly any students, let alone first-years, who could cast one instantly like Yui had. However, being a fourth-year, the student quickly regained his cool.

Ivo's joy at having defeated one of them lasted only briefly. Sensing magic energy from behind, he dodged to the side, and the spot where he had been standing just moments ago burst into flames. The attacker had been one of the students who had been up against Clois.

What happened to Clo? Ivo thought, a bit irritated. He looked around for his friend, only to see that he was already outside the arena, next to Lyle. "Clooo!

Why'd you let yourself get defeated so easily?!" he shouted.

"Don't be ridiculous. After Lyle got knocked out, one of them came over to fight me. How was I supposed to defeat three fourth-years at once?"

"Gah," Ivo groaned. The situation had gone from bad to worse. Now he had to fight against four fourth-years. "You still don't feel like fighting, Yui?"

"A special class with a bunch of battle-addled buffoons sounds dangerous, so I'll pass."

"Don't reply so quickly! And who are you calling a buffoon? You have the chance to receive instruction from a general and the grandmaster! You won't get that opportunity again!"

Yui ignored Ivo's frantic pleas. "I don't wanna."

However, Ivo wasn't going to let things end there. A chance to learn from those two wasn't something that happened often, even if you were a part of the army or the guild. He could turn that opportunity into a reality if he could just defeat the four people in front of him. Lyle and Clois were also shouting at Yui from the sidelines, trying to motivate her, but she was acting like she couldn't hear them.

"Umm, can you guys finish this up?" one of the fourth-years asked, irritated.

"Just hold on!" Ivo yelled. The fourth-years were politely waiting for them to speak with each other. Ivo, who was thinking at top speed trying to come up with some way to get Yui to fight, didn't have any spare time to deal with them.

"Gah... This is the one thing I didn't want to use..." Clois said, his expression twisting with deep frustration.

"Cloey?" Lyle asked.

Clois took a piece of paper out of his breast pocket and showed it to Yui. "If you win, I'll give you this coupon to the sweets buffet at a high-class capital restaurant!" he shouted.

Yui twitched. That got a response. As always with Yui, sweets were the answer. Clois knew that sacrifices were sometimes necessary, but he loved sweet things too, and the difficult decision to offer the coupon to Yui had been

enough to bring him to tears.

Ivo and Lyle understood what Clois was trying to do, and they chimed in.

"I'll treat you to pancakes at that place you've been wanting to go to!" Ivo shouted.

"And a parfait!" Lyle added.

Yui had seemed so unhurried moments earlier, but they could tell that she was now filled with determination. They were confident that victory was certain.

"All right, let's continue," Ivo said.

"Finally..." the fourth-year replied. "But are you sure? I don't want to attack a Liefe who can't fight. It'll be like I'm bullying her."

"That won't be an issue. If you don't take her seriously, you'll get hurt."

"I see. Then let's begin."

The match restarted with Ivo and Yui at a disadvantage, each facing two opponents. The fourth-years moved to attack, but the next moment, the two facing Yui were blown backward. Their glass broke on impact, instantly changing the shape of the battle. The two remaining fourth-years were stunned.

"Wha-?!"

"Whoa, what did she do? She didn't even chant... Was it chant cancellation?!"

The two students had been sent flying without any time to recite a spell. Chant cancellation was one possibility, but there was no way a first-year could use that technique. They blankly looked at Yui with disbelief on their faces.

"All I did was hit them with magic energy," Yui explained.

"Hit with magic energy...?" the student repeated.

It was nothing impressive. She had just gathered energy in one spot and released it, then strengthened it with an amplification spell. Because she had simply released it, she hadn't needed any time to chant or activate a spell, and from the start of the match, she had made it so she could activate an

amplification spell at any time. But to the students who didn't know that, it seemed as if the fourth-years had been suddenly blasted out of nowhere. Yui's spell had instantly knocked out two opponents, and they'd been unable to put up any resistance. That being said, Yui could also cancel chants—she just hadn't done it then. There was no need to reveal all of her secrets, so she'd remained silent.

"Amplify not a spell, but energy itself... I didn't know nonelemental magic could be used like that," the fourth-year student said. He seemed astonished by Yui's use of magic energy. After all, to them, nonelemental spells were meaningless. But the usefulness of magic all depended on how it was used—even if Yui could only use nonelemental magic.

"I see. So the morning wasn't just a fluke. If I don't take her seriously, I'll get hurt—quite right." The two fourth-years seemed to have gained a new understanding of Liefes. "Then, Liefe or not, I won't hold back."

They gave off a terrifying, overpowering aura, just as if they were in a real fight and not a mock battle. It was clear that they had the strength and the ability to last until the end. The next moment, they targeted not Ivo, but Yui, whose actions they were less able to predict. Yui opened her mouth to chant a defense spell, but one of the fourth-years had physically enhanced himself and increased his speed, and he rushed at her without giving her any time to speak. Yui then tried the same instant energy release that she had done earlier, but it was easily neutralized.

"It's easy if you know the trick. I can cancel it out if I just hit it with my own energy." As fourth-years, they had plenty of real combat experience, and they weren't soft enough to get tripped up by the same attack twice.

Yui tried to avoid the approaching foe as quickly as she could, but the physically enhanced student was faster, and he broke the glass on Yui's arm. Ivo used that moment for his attack, and he was able to successfully knock out the student who had defeated Yui. This left one remaining on each side, but then the final fourth-year unceremoniously knocked Ivo to the ground.

"Too bad. But I bet you guys can win next time, so keep at it." With victory in his grasp, he consoled the losers, but Yui and Ivo responded with a pair of bold

smiles.

"That's our line," Yui said.

The fourth-year looked at them quizzically, confused by what they were saying, but the next moment, there was a cracking sound, and his glass shattered. Unable to comprehend what had just happened, he silently stood there in a daze.

Yui waved at someone behind the fourth-year. "That was perfect, Finney."

At that moment, the fourth-year finally noticed that there was one more first-year student, but by then, it was already too late. He turned around to see a boy wearing the same class H tie that Yui was wearing. Yui and Finney were the only low-ranking students at the camp.

Finney had been out of sight the entire time, but he had actually been staying right next to the rest of his group. He had just cast a barrier spell that made him blend in with his surroundings—this had enabled him to avoid the fighting, and he'd waited for an opportunity. However, that didn't mean that he had been impossible to see, just difficult to see. Anyone who could sense the presence and location of magic energy would've been able to see him if they had just focused their eyes hard enough. He would've been hard to notice when there had still been many students casting spells all over the place, but that hadn't necessarily been the case when there had only been a few of them left. In fact, Yui and Ivo had known where Finney had been, and Yui had taken that into her calculations and behaved flashily in order to draw their opponents' attention toward her. The fourth-years were strong enough to have noticed Finney, but they had been distracted from their surroundings by Yui's unexpected power.

Finney had let them think they'd won, then he'd taken the last, best part for himself. The fourth-year students had been so certain of victory—it must've made them all the more frustrated to have it so anticlimactically taken away. This was a very fitting strategy for the truly nasty Finney.

The fourth-year student who had remained until the end dejectedly crumpled to the floor.

Chapter Six: A Summons

"We won! I knew you could do it, Finney," Lyle said.

"It's thanks to Yui and Ivo distracting them," Finney replied. "I'm happy—it went better than I expected."

With the match over, they were in the middle of returning to their quarters with satisfied looks on their faces. Lyle was ecstatic, having won the match and the right to take the special class. Finney just smiled as he usually did, and they couldn't tell what his internal feelings were. Ivo and Clois were trying to remain calm, but the corners of their mouths were twitching. They were probably doing everything they could to keep down their overflowing feelings—they were definitely happy enough to burst into laughter and start dancing.

Meanwhile, Yui felt somewhat detached as she watched them. She looked ahead and noticed someone standing there. Yui's mouth twisted into an obvious grimace.

He was a muscular man with unruly hair and a sharp, agile air about him, almost like a wild animal. When he met Yui's eyes, he grinned like he had spotted his prey and walked up to her. He was only standing there, but he gave off an overwhelming, intimidating aura. It was enough to make Yui's friends feel as if they were right in the middle of a battlefield. Cold sweat ran down their backs and they straightened their postures.

"It's been a while, missy," the man said.

"What is it?" Yui asked irritably. Lyle silently screamed at her for her disrespectful attitude. But even if he wanted to stop her, no one could speak, not while within the man's oppressive presence. They were all frozen. Their fear of being eaten if they carelessly made a sound took precedence over everything else.

"So unfriendly. I was dying to see you, you know."

"You're a bother. Please say what you have to say and get out of my sight. I'll

tell my papa that you're stalking me, and he'll get rid of you."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. I want to have a nice, long chat with you, so do you mind tagging along?" the man said pushily. He glanced at Ivo. "The same goes for boy genius over there. I'm sure I don't have to explain why. The other guys are all waiting to see you. You're quite popular, missy."

Yui paused. "Very well." She held back the urge to click her tongue in frustration and quietly did as he asked. She could've probably run away if she'd really wanted to, but it would've caused trouble for Ivo, and it was very likely that the man would hound her for the rest of the camp. No, she was certain that he'd bother her until she listened to what he had to say, "Let's go, Ivo. Everyone else, go back to the room without us, okay?"

She started to leave, but Lyle hurriedly stopped her. "W-Wait, Yui!"

"What?"

"Who is that guy?! He's definitely dangerous."

"That's the grandmaster of the guild. And he *is* dangerous—in all sorts of ways."

"The grandmaster?!" Lyle shouted. He was shocked to see such an important person there, but at the same time, they all understood why. They could tell from his intense, intimidating air that he had probably braved death countless times, and that was enough to make it clear to them that he was no ordinary person. "Why did the grandmaster come for you and Ivo?" Lyle asked.

"Probably to talk about our future plans. He's approached me a bunch of times to recruit me, but papa always got in his way. Without papa here, he probably thinks he has a chance. I just wish he'd give it up already. Ivo, let's get this over with quickly and get back to our rooms."

"Yeah..." Ivo said.

Yui took the still-shaken Ivo with her and followed after the grandmaster.

"All right, go inside," the grandmaster said to Yui. "Today's the day—I'll make you say yes."

Feeling sick of the grandmaster's smile and his overflowing enthusiasm, Yui entered the room he had led her to. As soon as she did, she saw who was already there, and she instantly wanted to turn around on the spot and run away. The first two people she caught sight of were General Kieran and a kind-looking man with a clean appearance wearing a pure white robe—he was a cardinal of the church, and he looked the part. Judging by the grandmaster's presence at the camp, Yui had predicted that those two would be there, however, she was surprised to see that the king and the crown prince were in attendance as well. Gaius was there too, standing behind Bernard and Alexis.

Yui started to feel a headache coming on. No matter how much she tried to refuse, a single order from the king would make all of that pointless. If Bernard said anything, Yui's only choice was to obey. It'd be bad if, because of her refusal, Layce was removed from his position as prime minister. Of course, it wouldn't be nearly that easy for Bernard to fire Layce, and Layce would use every means at his disposal to prevent Bernard from forcing Yui into something she didn't want to do, so her worry was unnecessary. Still, with her thoughts racing, she frantically tried to come up with an excuse just in case. As she did, she and Ivo bowed deeply to the king. Then, seeking help, Yui looked to Filiel, who was also there for some reason, but all she got in response was a forced smile.

"I was able to watch your matches today," Bernard said to Ivo and Yui. "You both fought wonderfully."

At this direct compliment from the king, joy appeared in Ivo's tense expression. Yui, beside him, was behaving deferentially, and both of them simultaneously said, "Thank you very much."

Next, the general spoke. "It must've been a surprise to get such a sudden summons. You've been called here for no other reason than this: we want to hear what you both intend to do after graduating. First, Ivo Arman. You're only a first-year, so this is still several years in the future, but I, as well as the grandmaster and the cardinal, all hope that you will join our organizations. We'd like to hear what you're considering."

"I am greatly honored to have received such high praise, despite my age and inexperience," Ivo replied, bowing. "However," he continued, "there are still so

many things I want to experience and challenge myself with, and I am unable to make a decision at this time. Starting in our second year, students are able to take classes to study more specialized topics, so I want to decide everything once I've had the opportunity to learn more." Surrounded by so many important people, including multiple members of the royal family, Ivo was completely stiff, and his voice shook slightly, but he was still able to firmly convey his intentions. His answer seemed to satisfy them, and they all looked content.

"I see. But you do wish to get a job in something related to magic, yes?" "Yes."

"I'm glad to hear that. Then let's have this conversation again another time. Is that all right with both of you?" Kieran asked the cardinal and the grandmaster. They nodded in agreement. "Then, our talk with you is done. We don't mind if you head back first."

"Ah..." Ivo glanced at Yui. He was worried about leaving her there alone, but there was no way for him to argue against it. He just said, "Yes sir," and headed to the exit. Yui stealthily tagged along behind him, trying to leave in secret.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" said the grandmaster in a rather threatening tone. "We haven't even started, missy."

Of course, there was no way that they would fail to notice her. Disappointed, Yui gave up and watched Ivo as he anxiously left the room. Then she turned around once more. She tensed herself to keep from being overwhelmed by the pressure of all the powerful people in the room.

"I'll ask this right away—"

"No thank you," Yui said, rejecting whatever Kieran had to say before he could say it.

Silence reigned for a moment. Kieran reflexively grimaced, then spoke up once more. "I haven't said anything yet."

"I don't need to hear it in order to know what it's about. I've said this countless times already, but I'm not going to join the army, the church, or the guild. I'm going to take over my grandfather's bakery, marry an ordinary

husband, and live an ordinary life."

Filiel was shaken by the words "ordinary husband," but luckily, the only people who noticed this were those who were right next to him: Bernard, Alexis, and Gaius.

"I've said this already, but you can stay at the bakery and just join on paper," the grandmaster said.

The cardinal nodded. "Yes, it is as the grandmaster says. As long as you make an appearance at the church just once a week, I don't mind if you work at the bakery as usual."

Neither he, Yui, nor the grandmaster were willing to give an inch. They'd had this exchange an endless number of times in the past, and Yui was quickly getting fed up with it.

"We'll give you a salary just for that. You'd normally never get a deal this good," the grandmaster said. Just about anyone would've given up and accepted one of their offers, but Yui stubbornly refused to nod in agreement. "What else could you want? The guild is willing to grant whatever you wish, if at all possible."

"The same goes for the church," the cardinal said. He and the grandmaster both held a great deal of authority within their respective organizations. Kieran, on the other hand, worked for the government and had to comply with various laws and regulations—he was unable to make any statements that hadn't been prepared in advance. For the time being, he just stood there, silently spectating.

"Then please go away and never speak to me again," Yui said.

"Rejected," the grandmaster said forcefully.

"Didn't you just say that you'd listen to whatever I asked? Take responsibility for your own words."

"There has to be *something* else! You could have money, status, or precious magic items!"

"I'm not interested," Yui replied briskly. "Besides, my father arranges everything, so I have no inconveniences in my daily life. A high position means a lot of annoying responsibilities, and I'm confident that if I take classes on magic items, I'll be able to make all the ones I want myself."

No one could say anything in response. After all, Yui's father was Layce, who had the wealth of a prime minister—she'd never be strapped for cash. On top of that, back when he was still a student, Layce had started a trading company with a friend using some extra money. It had been wildly successful, and he was earning quite a lot of money from it. And, just as Yui had said, she'd easily be able to make her own magic items; there was no doubting her ability. In short, their offers contained nothing that could tempt her.

"And," Yui continued, "you've said that I'd only have to drop by once a week, but so long as I'm part of one of your organizations, I'll have some sort of obligation to work there, won't I? Don't you think you're being awfully cruel, trying to cleverly trick an innocent, helpless girl?"

That flustered the cardinal and the grandmaster. By belonging to their organizations and receiving a salary, there was a duty to do work. There was no way she'd be able to get away with just an occasional, brief appearance. They had probably been planning to say that Yui wouldn't have to do anything at first, but later on, they would pressure her into working for at least the minimum required amount.

"Tch," the grandmaster clicked his tongue in frustration. "A normal sixteenyear-old kid would've jumped at the offer."

Yui shot him a withering glare. She was the one who had the right to be angry, not him.

Noticing her look, the grandmaster awkwardly laughed, "Aha... Sorry, I feel bad for trying to trick you. Well, only a bit... But still, you're worth enough to make me want to do anything I can to acquire you. Why won't you take advantage of that? Why are you trying to hide your own abilities?"

The guild was a pure meritocracy, and the grandmaster had ascended to his position on only his own ability. He strongly believed that power only had meaning if you showed it. It was precisely because he had such a high appraisal of Yui's ability that he was unable to understand why she wanted to hide it. In contrast with his usual, somewhat carefree attitude, the grandmaster was

speaking seriously, so Yui decided to answer him in kind.

"I'm glad that you, and the general, and the cardinal think of me so highly.

And..." Yui paused. "And for not making my identity public or raising a big fuss over me. But, that's exactly why you should understand my reasons for refusing very well."

Normally, a rumor about people like the grandmaster, the general, and the cardinal all coming to recruit her would instantly spread, but only those very close to them knew about it. It hadn't ever come up at the academy either. That was because they had taken the proper precautions and had made sure to prevent Yui's existence from coming to light. That was partially because they wanted to keep anyone else from taking her, but more than anything, they knew exactly how dangerous it could be if the wrong people found out about her. Not everyone would have respected Yui's wishes as much as they had, and not everyone would have patiently negotiated with her either. Some might've used their power and authority to engage in dirty recruitment methods; others might've tried to coerce her to work for them. Still, others who were more prideful might've been incensed by her refusal—these types would've held a grudge against her. So, the three of them had kept information about her and their ongoing negotiations under wraps. That was just further evidence that Yui was all the more likely to be caught up in some sort of trouble.

"I don't like being bothered, so I want to live quietly," said Yui.

"Isn't that exactly why you should join one of us?" the grandmaster asked.

"Yes, no one would try anything foolish if they knew they were dealing with one of our powerful organizations," the cardinal pointed out. "You want to avoid being bothered, and the church can protect you from that."

The grandmaster and the cardinal were falling over themselves trying to win Yui over, but she knew that the positives they mentioned weren't the whole story, and she didn't let herself be tricked by them.

"Certainly, that would make it harder for people to mess with me... But it wouldn't be guaranteed," Yui said. "If I belonged to one of your organizations, more people would learn about me, and there would definitely be someone willing to take a risk and actually come after me. What will you do if that

happens? Your entire organization won't mobilize to protect a single girl every time, will it?"

She was very confident, and no one corrected her. They all thought that Yui was valuable enough to take on some risk. However, just as she'd said, they wouldn't be able to spend twenty-four seven protecting an ordinary employee without any status. Also, if it was found out that they were giving someone new such favorable treatment, there would be complaints from inside the organization.

"Rather than take the risk, it's much safer for me to live quietly," Yui insisted.

The grandmaster was fed up with Yui's unflagging determination. "You're so worried about everything! I feel like I'm talking to my grandmother. We'll do as much as we can to prevent any information from leaking, so just join *somewhere*. Leave future problems to the future. Maybe try a bit of carefree thinking—think like a kid! And stop being so negative." He was unfazed, even after Yui's unwavering refusal. The general and the cardinal were racking their brains trying to think of some way to change Yui's rigid mind.

Yui was getting increasingly annoyed—this was quickly turning into a pointless back-and-forth—so she pulled out the charms Layce had given her. Those charms were actually three letters that Layce had told her to give to the general, the grandmaster, and the cardinal if there was nothing else she could do. "Please take these," she said as she handed one of the letters to each of them.

"What's this?" the grandmaster asked.

"They're letters from my father to each of you."

Letters from the Prince of Darkness—that was an ominous phrase. All of their faces went stiff as they looked at the letters in their hands. There was also one addressed to Bernard, but the king had only been spectating, so she hadn't handed it to him. Bernard, who didn't know this, felt relieved that there wasn't a letter for him.

As soon as the three timidly opened their letters, they were stunned. Yui didn't know what was written in them, but judging by how shaken they looked, the messages must've been quite threatening. Layce was probably the only

person who could frighten people like the general, the grandmaster, or the cardinal. The fact that he was on her side was a massive help.

"Then, should we continue our conversation?" Yui asked. None of them made a sound.

Kieran tried to break the silence by looking pleadingly at the most powerful man in the kingdom, but Bernard just said, "It's regrettable, but I can't have Layce quitting on me. Sorry."

The Prince of Darkness had already gotten to him. They were sunk.

Disheartened after Layce's interference, Kieran, the grandmaster, and the cardinal exited. This left only Yui, Bernard, Alexis, Filiel, and Gaius in the room.

"You said earlier that no organization would go out of its way to protect one specific young girl," Bernard said to Yui.

"Yes, I did," Yui replied.

"Well, if you were to work for the government, it certainly would be impossible to give you special treatment, even though you are the daughter of a count. But, if you married a member of the royal family, that would put you among royalty. Royalty have guards and round-the-clock protection. Very few fools would try to lay their hands on you."

Yui felt a trace of Theodore in Bernard's mischievous smile. Though she'd kept her cool earlier, she was greatly shaken by what he said. "R-Regarding that matter, I believe I've properly conveyed my refusal to the person in question..."

"I never said I gave up," Filiel said nonchalantly, driving Yui further into a corner.

Yui wanted to loudly protest, but she couldn't do anything in front of the king that might be seen as disrespectful to royalty. She just shot Filiel a reproachful look, begging him to shut up.

"Well then, I suppose Filiel will just have to work harder," Bernard said.

"Yes, leave it to me, father."

Yui couldn't stand the warm looks everyone was giving her. The details of the complicated relationship between her and Filiel—he had proposed to her, but she had turned him down—had even made their way to the king. Filiel was a prince, so getting married would require Bernard's consent, both as king and as his father. In that case, it was probably only natural that Bernard knew. But Yui still felt embarrassment welling up inside her.

"Um!" Yui felt herself blushing slightly, and she changed the topic. "The fact that I'm still here means that Your Majesty has some sort of business for me, yes?" She wanted to do what she could to move away from all the marriage talk.

There was a huge contrast between her current, shyer demeanor and the way she had confidently spoken with some of Garlant's most powerful people just a short while ago. This made not only Bernard but even Alexis and Gaius want to burst into laughter.

"Hm, that's right," Bernard said. "Actually, we found an issue with the formula you gave me, and I wanted to ask you a question."

"Was there a mistake in the data I provided?" Yui asked. "Everything should be correct." Those who studied magic on their own, like Yui, often had idiosyncrasies in the magic formulas they created. Additionally, every time researchers wrote down their work on paper, they often recorded a part of it in code to prevent their results from being plagiarized. As such, they were the only ones who could understand it. However, when Yui had handed over all of her materials, she had fixed the formula so it would make sense to anyone. There shouldn't have been an issue. She sifted through her memories, trying to remember whether she had overlooked something.

"No, there were no problems with the materials you gave us. The issue is finding a person who can use them."

Yui didn't understand what he meant, and she tilted her head, puzzled.

"I had someone in the army who is excellent at magical manipulation use the spell, but it didn't go well," Bernard explained. It had been the blue commander, who was reputed for his ability to manipulate magic, even in the royal palace.

After Yui had healed Alexis at the palace, the commander had learned of the spell she'd used to suppress one's magic energy. He had tried to meet with her, but Layce had prevented him from getting close. Even after that, he had been patiently waiting for an opportunity, but by then, the king's strict order not to speak of Yui had come down. For a man who was pretty much ruled by his thirst for knowledge, this had been unacceptable, and he'd raised quite a stink. Bernard had already been looking for someone with the skill necessary to cast the spell, so he'd told the blue commander about it to satisfy him.

However, even though the commander was one of the best at magical manipulation in the palace, he hadn't been able to successfully cast the spell. Yui had cast it like it was nothing, so Bernard hadn't expected the commander to struggle as much as he had. He and Alicia had been sorely disappointed when they'd learned of the commander's failure; Alexis had been even more upset, since he hadn't gotten the opportunity to be a subject of the spell due to his poor physical condition at the time.

"How were you able to acquire such a knack for magical manipulation?" Bernard asked Yui. "If possible, I'd like to know your secret."

Yui didn't know what to say. She couldn't really explain it. "I'm a Liefe, so might it be because I've focused my studies on magical control from a young age in order to handle nonelemental magic," she suggested. She had been truly young when she'd begun to study and use magic. Normally, people first learned magic when they entered elementary school, but Yui had started training to use difficult-to-handle magic at a much earlier age. Perhaps this was why she could use magic at such an advanced level. After all, young children had a greater propensity for learning new things.

"If that were true, it should've been possible for Filiel," Bernard said. "My father strictly instructed him in magical control from a very young age—practically since Filiel could speak in complete sentences. But even he couldn't cast the spell."

Bernard was right—if age were all that mattered, then Filiel, who had begun training to control his magic earlier than anyone, would've been second to none. His early start had been necessary; he had broken things around him simply by crying, getting angry, or exhibiting other outbursts of emotion. Filiel's

attempt to use Yui's spell had ended in failure, and he'd gotten pretty much the same result as the blue commander.

Unfortunately, Yui was unable to offer them any more insight. She had a feeling for how to do it, but it was incredibly hard to put into words. "I wish I could be of service, but it's an intuitive thing, so it's difficult to explain... My apologies for not being of any help." She could only frown and apologize.

Bernard looked disappointed too. "Hm, is that so? Then, could you create a magic item imbued with the spell's effect instead? The blue commander is training intensively in hopes of one day being able to cast the spell, but I don't know when he'll be able to do it."

For the second time, Yui apologized. "I'm very sorry, Your Majesty. I cannot create the magic item."

"Why not?!" Bernard exclaimed. He hadn't expected Yui to refuse, so he spoke somewhat intensely. When she'd been at the palace, Yui had concerned herself with Filiel the entire time, and in the end, she had even released her precious magic formula to Bernard. The king had thought that Yui would cooperate this time too if it meant helping Filiel. "I see. Is it money you want? I'll prepare a suitable payment, of course."

He seemed to be thinking that Yui had refused because she was after money. She quickly corrected his assumption. "No, not at all. You see, I'm still only a first-year..."

"And what about it?" Bernard asked, not understanding.

With an awkward smile, Alexis, who was standing next to Bernard, bailed him out. "Father, students have to be in their second year, take the necessary electives, and then get permission before they can create magic items. She's still in her first year, so she couldn't create one even if she wanted to."

"Ah... I see. Now that you mention it, that's right. I jumped to conclusions, sorry."

"No, not at all," Yui said. Bernard's respectful apology for his own ignorance made a good impression on her. However, she thought like a commoner in many ways, and she felt completely undeserving of his apology. Yui could feel a

stomachache coming on.

Danger went hand in hand with magic item creation, and there was always the possibility of disaster, like a magic explosion. One had to first pass an exam, be assessed on knowledge and magical control, and then get a license in order to create magic items. There were two ways to obtain this license. The first was to attend a special technical school to study magic items. The other was to choose the magic item elective, starting in one's second year at a magic academy, and obtain the necessary knowledge. Yui wasn't in her second year, so she couldn't take those classes. Additionally, in the beginning, the classes only involved study; it took years before students could actually *create* magic items. If someone tried to make one without permission, they'd be expelled from the academy as punishment. This might have seemed like a harsh rule, but when considering the danger of a magic explosion, it was as strict as it needed to be.

"I see, so you're still a first-year..." Bernard gazed at Yui, deeply impressed. She had a wealth of knowledge, and she'd displayed unwavering courage in front of himself, the grandmaster, and the cardinal. Bernard had completely forgotten that she was much younger than either of his sons. "I guess there's nothing else to be done. Then, when you can make magic items, will you be able to make the one I asked for?"

"Your wish is my command," Yui replied without hesitation. Bernard was satisfied by her answer, and that was the end of their talk.

After leaving the room, Yui sighed deeply. "I'm exhausted..."

"How was she, father?" Filiel anxiously asked Bernard after Yui was gone. One of the reasons Bernard had come to observe the training camp was to ask Yui about making the magic item, but the biggest reason was to see whether Yui was worthy of becoming a princess.

Filiel was second in line for the throne. If anything happened to Alexis, or if he was never blessed with children, Filiel might become king. In addition, if Alexis and his wife only had girls, and Filiel and his wife had a boy, Filiel's wife might eventually become queen mother—only men could inherit the throne under

Garlant's laws. Bernard couldn't approve of Filiel's partner just because Filiel loved her.

"Few could stand in front of so many powerful people and speak so confidently," Bernard said. "Her ability to stick to her own beliefs without being overwhelmed by the grandmaster is especially worthy of praise. She's smart and pretty. And, because she was raised in a count's family, she comports herself well. There are some points that could use some work, but she has all the fundamentals down, so I'm sure she'll improve with further instruction." Filiel held his breath as he waited for Bernard's final answer. "Very well. If she gives you a positive reply, I'll approve your engagement."

"Thank you very much," Filiel said, relief dawning on his face.

"If there's one issue, it's that perpetually blank expression of hers... Not that Alicia won't find a way to deal with it. She's always said that she wanted a daughter."

A brief silence fell as everyone imagined, in the backs of their minds, a joyful Alicia turning an exhausted Yui into her toy.

Filiel collected himself and looked at his father with a serious expression. "As such, please officially decline the talks of engagement with Eliza and Marquess Chamberly's daughter."

"You haven't gotten a positive reply from Yui yet, have you?"

"I'll definitely get her to say yes, so it won't be necessary."

After hearing such a clear declaration, Bernard said nothing more. "I see. All right. And regarding Eliza, both Alicia and Elise were against her, so it was unlikely that she was ever going to be your fiancée."

Elise was Eliza's mother and the wife of Duke Favis. She was also related to Alicia, Filiel's mother. She and Alicia had always been as close as sisters, and they understood each other very well. They had both been fiercely opposed to talks of engagement between Filiel and Eliza.

"Is that so? But why?" Alexis asked. "I think Eliza would be a fine choice as princess."

Bernard seemed to have remembered something, and he looked tired somehow. "Who knows? Even if I ask, those two just get angry at me and say, 'I can't stand you men sometimes; you're so insensitive to women's matters.' They won't give me any specific reasons. Do you two know anything?"

"I'm drawing a blank." Alexis looked to Filiel. "Do you know why, Filiel?" Filiel shook his head. "No."

"When everything's settled, I'll ask them again. By the way, Filiel..." Bernard suddenly took on a serious tone. "I have one last thing I need to ask you."

Filiel straightened his posture, expecting something important.

"What does she like?" Bernard asked.

Filiel paused. "Huh?" He had been prepared for the worst, but Bernard's question had been so unexpected that he momentarily couldn't parse what had been asked.

"Right, well, there's a high chance Yui will become my daughter, yes?"

"Haaah..." Filiel sighed. "Yes, that's right."

"I've wanted a daughter just as much as Alicia! And I'd love it if she could call me 'father!'" Bernard was speaking with more energy and enthusiasm than he usually ever did. "She seemed nervous the entire time she was in front of me, but she smiled cutely at you and father. She has to get used to me first! And presents are the best if I want her to like me, right? Layce might know more about her preferences, but there's no way he'll answer me if I ask, 'What's the best present to give to my future daughter to get her to like me?' If I did, he'd abandon his duties, and you'd be in danger."

Filiel and Gaius looked thoroughly fed up, but Alexis muttered, "A little sister..." He looked happy, somehow.

The next morning, the two victorious groups attended the special class taught by the grandmaster and General Kieran. Many students unable to take the class had asked to at least be allowed to observe, but the grandmaster and the general had refused, saying that it'd interrupt the students' concentration. So, the only other people there were Filiel's and Yui's groups, plus Bernard, Alexis, Gaius, the cardinal, and Berg, who was there representing the rest of the teachers.

The first-years were each taking turns receiving instruction from the grandmaster.

"Too slow! Focus and carefully stabilize your magic energy, right up to the end!"

"Yes, sir!" Ivo exclaimed.

The grandmaster frequently shouted at and berated his students, but for some reason, they looked to be extremely happy to be yelled at. It seemed to throw him off-balance.

A short distance away from them, Cecil was receiving instruction from the general. Cecil was a brilliant, outstanding student at the academy, but the general was more experienced than him by far. From his perspective, Cecil was still an immature kid. However, Cecil quickly picked up what he was being taught, and the general seemed to find joy in teaching him. He was zealously giving Cecil strict coaching, almost like he was leading army drills. Cecil was normally showered with praise at the academy, and he had probably never been so disparagingly scolded before. Carlo—the one who normally got lectured for his misbehavior—watched this novelty with great interest. Filiel, who was standing next to Carlo, also observed the scene.

"Seeing Cecil being so ruthlessly criticized is a precious sight," said Filiel.

"After all, he's the honors student at the academy, and the teachers never have a bad word to say about him."

"Right? Well, he *does* look like he's enjoying it. Are you not going to participate, Filiel?"

"No, I usually train directly under the captain of the royal guard and the commander in chief anyway."

"You lucky— No, never mind. Now that I look at you guys, I'm not so sure..." As Filiel spoke, and as Luca and Zeke listened to him, they all looked depressed. Any jealousy Carlo had felt disappeared.

"You'll know what it's like when you join the army," Filiel said. "The commander in chief sometimes comes for training, and when it's all over, it's like a scene out of a nightmare. He's almost as old as grandfather, but he's still actively serving... If anything, he's got *more* energy than everyone younger than him. You'd better brace yourself for when you join."

"I didn't really want to know that..."

"By the way, where's Yui?" Filiel asked.

"Over there—look." Carlo pointed to a grumpy-looking Yui, who was standing in the corner. "The grandmaster went in person to get her this morning, so she wasn't able to escape. She's been in a bad mood ever since."

Filiel smiled awkwardly. "She definitely doesn't look happy." He chuckled.

Luca squinted at her. "She doesn't?" Yui's emotions were hard to detect. She looked expressionless to him and Zeke, but Filiel could read her like a book.

"The grandmaster seems like he's willing to do anything to recruit her for the guild," Filiel said.

Carlo shook his head. "She's still insistent on taking over the bakery and living an ordinary life, though."

"Like I'll let that happen!"

"It's nice that you're motivated, but you should really be careful. According to information from our dad, many people have apparently already asked Yui out."

"What?!" Filiel was greatly shaken by the news that he had rivals.

"Don't worry, she's turned them all down." Carlo had been trying to lightly prod Filiel, but his joke had made much more of an impact than he'd expected. For a while afterward, Filiel just stood there in a daze.

Meanwhile, as Yui was observing the entire class from afar, the grandmaster abruptly turned her way and grinned, like a wild beast setting its sights on its prey. It looked like he had finished instructing her friends, and that was his way of saying she was next on the chopping block. She wouldn't have minded if he just instructed her normally, but she couldn't help but feel something bad

coming on.

She warily approached the grandmaster, and he instructed her friends to step back. When they did, the grandmaster pulled out a blue orb and tossed it into the air. The orb made a clean arc and hit the ground, shattering. In an instant, a dome-shaped barrier formed, with the grandmaster at its center. This sudden occurrence drew everyone's attention—even the general and Cecil stopped to look at them.

Yui's suspicions had been correct. She immediately tried to get outside the barrier in order to run, but it blocked her like a wall and prevented her from moving any farther away. Frustrated, she felt like clicking her tongue. She tried hitting the barrier with magic energy, but it was absorbed without being reflected away. The magic item that had created the barrier seemed to prevent interference from both the outside as well as the inside. This was the same kind of barrier that had been used at the arena to prevent spells and magic beasts from escaping, but it had been infused into a magic item. As long as the one who'd used it—the grandmaster—didn't cancel it, Yui's chances of escape looked slim.

"What's the meaning of this?" Yui glared at the grandmaster. "You don't need a barrier if you're just going to instruct me."

"Instruct you? I was never going to do that. I've been wanting to have a bout with you for a while now. But if I had told you that, you would've run."

"Of course I would have. A pile of gold couldn't convince me to fight with a battle-crazed buffoon like you."

"Don't be so cold. Let's have some fun." He looked elated to fight. He had a wild glint in his eyes, and he was eagerly waiting with bated breath for the instant he could bite into his prey. It was a giant, flashing warning sign signaling that he was no ordinary person—he was dangerous.

He was raring to go, but she was just filled with disdain. Yui wished he'd get something through his thick skull: her reason—well, one reason—for not joining the guild had nothing to do with her grandfather's bakery, but rather, she didn't want to join because he was the man in charge. Besides, the grandmaster stood at the top of the meritocracy that was the guild, and while Yui was strong for a

student, she was inexperienced, so she had absolutely no chance of winning.

"Don't worry," the grandmaster said. "I'll give you the minimum handicap."

Yui felt exceedingly doubtful that there was any way for her to retain her peace of mind when fighting against someone like him, but it didn't look like he'd let her go without at least a single match. I'll just do whatever I have to and lose quickly, she thought.

But then, she sensed a thick concentration of magic energy gathering around the grandmaster. Feeling an icy chill run down her spine, she instantly cast the most powerful defense spell she had. At nearly the same time, she was hit by a tremendous impact. Her spell couldn't stand up to the force of it, and her body was sent flying backward.

"Gah...ugh..." She let out a groan from the shock and pain that filled her entire body. Covered in scratches, she slid to the floor, her uniform dirty all over.

Yui's body ached, but she stood and brushed the dust off herself. Then, as she healed her injuries with magic, she turned to look at the cause of all this. Her eyes flashed at the grandmaster, and with a quiet anger, she said, "Are you insane? Using this kind of magic on a student—were you trying to kill me?"

"You say that, but you defended against it well," the grandmaster said.

"If I hadn't, I'd be lying on the ground covered in blood right about now." Not only had the grandmaster suddenly attacked Yui while canceling his chant, but the strength of his attack had been far beyond what anyone should use against an inexperienced student. What if Yui hadn't been able to cancel her own chant? What if her defense spell had been too late? What if she hadn't sensed the danger and cast a spell at all? She could've *died* if anything had gone wrong. The grandmaster's attack had been that powerful. Everyone watching had looks of shock on their faces after seeing him attack her without any hesitation at all. First Filiel, then Carlo and Cecil a moment later, approached to try and stop him, but the barrier thwarted their efforts.

"Dammit, it's not working," Carlo said.

"Carlo, get out of the way!" Cecil shouted, firing his own spell at the barrier to

try and break it. However, the magic was cleanly absorbed without leaving a scratch on the barrier.

Filiel saw this and turned to cast his own spell at the barrier, thinking that he might be able to break it, but the general hurriedly stopped him.

"Your Highness, you can't! With your strength, even if you shatter the barrier, it's possible that the two inside might be caught up in the blast!"

Filiel groaned. But if his spell was too weak, he wouldn't be able to break the barrier. Unable to do anything, he gnashed his teeth in frustration.

In the middle of this commotion, Alexis, who took after his levelheaded mother Alicia, casually looked at Bernard by his side. "Father, isn't this bad? I'm very interested in their fight, but if His Excellency learns that we were nearby and didn't stop the grandmaster's violence, he'll resign from his position. And if she's greatly injured by this, the grandmaster—and the entire guild—might not survive his wrath..."

Bernard hadn't considered the possibility until Alexis mentioned it, and his face turned as white as a sheet. If both the government and the guild ceased operating, the kingdom would fall into chaos. "That is bad! That's very bad!" he said. Then, in order to avoid an emergency, Bernard shouted at the top of his lungs, "Grandmaster! Dissolve the barrier at once! I won't be able to stop him, and if this continues, the guild will be in trouble! You're not all right with that happening, are you?!"

When Bernard's yell reached the grandmaster, the man froze for a split second. He then held his head in his hands and groaned. His earlier ferocity waned—he was visibly going through some sort of intense internal conflict. He was probably wildly swinging between his desire to fight Yui and his worry that the guild might suffer retribution because of his actions. After spending a while worrying, he must've ultimately accepted his responsibility as the head of the guild, because he dissolved the barrier. When everyone anxiously watching over the proceedings saw that he had lost the will to fight, they finally relaxed.

"And here I was, thinking you'd say you didn't care," Yui said, surprised by the grandmaster's withdrawal. "I figured you would force me to fight anyway."

"I've decided that the Prince of Darkness is the one man I won't make my

enemy."

"Is that so?" Yui had mixed feelings. She was curious, but at the same time, afraid to know what Layce had done in the past to make a battle-hardened warrior like the grandmaster say that.

"It is what it is. The fight is over. I'll instruct you normally."

"I'm a Liefe, so I think you'll have to make some adjustments to how you'll treat me."

"Liefe or not, you're still using the same magic energy. And I can cast nonelemental spells, just like you. As a test, use an attack spell against me. Any one of them is fine, and at full power, of course."

"That's easier said than done..." Yui knew the grandmaster was strong, but she was still reluctant to attack someone without holding back at all.

"Who do you think I am? I'm the grandmaster of the guild. And if I happen to get seriously hurt, the cardinal is right there."

The guild had many members who were highly skilled in combat, but the church had many who were excellent at healing magic. Among them, this cardinal was said to be second to the pope in healing ability. The cardinal's skills were widely known, and he carried out much of the church's practical business in place of the pope, who rarely made public appearances.

"Well, I suppose you're safe with the cardinal here... It's really okay, right?" Yui asked.

"Yeah, don't worry about it."

Yui started to fire a spell at the grandmaster, but before she did, she stopped to think about something for a short while. She always had the option of casting a safe choice and ending things quickly, but she still felt a vague, unresolved anger at the grandmaster for his earlier attack—a weak retaliation would be unsatisfying. She decided that he wouldn't complain if she gave him a little surprise. Intent on revenge, Yui fished in her pocket and removed the lighter engraved with the Elphie flower that Filiel had given her. She lit it, then began chanting a different spell than the one she'd first thought of.

After hearing Yui's chant, the grandmaster was visibly shaken. "Huh? H-Hey, hold on, that chant..."

Others who could parse the contents of the chant were just as surprised as he was, but they stood there and did nothing, not thinking that the spell would activate. They were confused about Yui's intentions. However, Filiel and Cecil were surprised for a different reason from the others, and they hastily rushed to cast defense magic in front of everyone.

Yui chuckled to herself. Judging by how the grandmaster looked, her revenge had already been a success. She swung sideways with the hand that held the still-lit lighter. When she did, the flame began to move as if it had a will of its own—fire combined with a gust of wind from somewhere, creating a large, spinning vortex that bore down on the grandmaster.



Those watching could feel the fire's scorching heat, even from a distance, but because of Filiel and Cecil's defense spell, they were unharmed. The grandmaster was saved because he was able to cast a defense spell right before sustaining a direct hit and because of the specially made defensive equipment he was wearing. However, he wore a stern look, and his frown made deep wrinkles on his forehead.

"Hey, are you trying to kill me?!" the grandmaster shouted.

"This, coming from the one who almost killed *me* earlier? I don't want to hear that from you," Yui said. "Besides, didn't you say I could use all my power? And y'know, I was holding back a bit just now."

The grandmaster grimaced. "So that was holding back... No, that's not the point! That just now was a composite spell, with fire and wind, right?!"

"Yes, that's right." Composite spells combined two or more elements at once, like the fire and wind spell Yui had just cast. They were more difficult to use than area-of-effect spells, but that wasn't the reason the grandmaster was so surprised.

"You're supposed to be a Liefe! What are you doing using elemental spells?!"

"There's no need to look so scary. Do you think I'll reveal my secrets that easily?" An average person might've instantly confessed everything they knew under the force of the grandmaster's glare, but unfortunately for him, Yui had seen it countless times and had built up an immunity. She also knew that he wasn't the type of person to use his strength to force others to do things, so she wasn't scared of him.

"Do. You. Know. What. You've. Done?! You've completely overturned all established concepts in magic history. I hope you know how massive what you just did was!"

"Of course I do," Yui said. It was indeed established knowledge—known by even children, both within Garlant and without—that Liefes could not cast spells unless they were nonelemental. This had been repeated from time immemorial, and as a matter of fact, no Liefe had ever been able to cast an elemental spell. This was an unchanging, unwritten rule—well, it had been. Yui

had just relegated all of that to the past.

If this got out, it would cause much more of a commotion than the grandmaster, the general, and the cardinal visiting Yui together to recruit her. First of all, someone from each and every research institution was sure to come find her. Even the grandmaster felt afraid just thinking about where Yui would be in the future, but Yui herself seemed to lack an appropriate amount of panic about that. It seemed like she didn't understand the situation at all.

"No, you don't! Do you know how big this'll be if I tell anyone? Didn't you hate being bothered? Didn't you just want to quietly bake bread? Missy, I'm trying to recruit you to the guild. What are you doing raising your value to me even more?!"

"You'll tell people?" Yui asked calmly.

The grandmaster flinched. "W-Well, I wouldn't do that..."

"I didn't think so. I know you aren't the kind of person to reveal something that you know is so serious," Yui said. Those in the room were her brothers and her friends. The adults present all had high positions and lots of authority—they could use their power to get things done forcefully if they felt like it, but they took Yui's will into consideration, and they had the discretion to hide information when necessary. She trusted them and was confident they wouldn't leak anything if told not to. And Berg wasn't reckless enough to tell anyone something that even the king wouldn't mention.

"The constant invitations are irritating, but I trust you," she added. The look in her eyes told the grandmaster that this wasn't flattery—she genuinely meant it. He felt a bit awkward. However, Yui's next words ruined that moment. "Well, I don't have many opportunities to practice, and you're resilient, which made you the perfect test subject. I just wanted to try it out."

"Hey!" the grandmaster said forcefully.

Yui hardly had any opportunity to test magic with large areas of effect because she couldn't let herself be seen by anyone. So, taking into account the possibility that she might make a mistake in the amount of force she used, she had just wanted to try out the spell on a suitably sturdy test subject—one that wouldn't die easily.

"So, how'd you do it?" the grandmaster asked.

"I just said I wouldn't reveal my secrets that easily."

"But you'll need to pay us *something* to keep our mouths shut... Right, Your Eminence?" The grandmaster smirked as he brought the cardinal into the conversation.

"I think that's fair. If you simply told me to stay quiet, I might just accidentally let it slip," the cardinal said. His pure smile befitted him as a clergyman, but his words were an undeniable threat.

I knew I messed up... Yui thought, but it was already too late. "Very well," she said. "In exchange, please don't tell anyone, no matter what. I like researching magic, but I don't like it when people make a fuss about me... And, my apologies for wrapping you up in this, but would Your Majesty and Your Highness also be willing to swear not to say anything of what happened here?"

Bernard and Alexis nodded meekly—they were afraid of Layce, and they already had absolutely no intention of telling anyone. Next, Yui got General Kieran and Berg to agree to stay quiet as well. She took out her lighter again. Since she had already been planning to explain the magic to them in exchange for their silence, she had no issues with telling them about it.

It was years ago when Yui had first suspected that she might be able to use elemental magic—even as a Liefe. Everything she had read said it was common knowledge that Liefes could only use nonelemental magic. However, as a young girl watching her brothers cast elemental spells, she refused to accept this, and she devoted herself to studying elemental magic anyway.

Still, no matter what she read, she got the resounding message that learning elemental magic would be impossible. She studied the magic formulas written in books and tried to charge them with her magic energy, but no matter how much she did this, the elemental spells wouldn't activate. She was unable to cast a single spell, even after reading every single book on magic in the mansion. Depressed, she read one of the books on nonelemental magic that she had been purposely avoiding up until then and tried casting one of the spells. When she did, the spell activated. It was so abrupt that she almost

believed everything prior to be some sort of mistake, which only made her feel even worse. *This isn't the magic I want to use*, she thought, but she still reluctantly continued reading books on nonelemental magic.

As she went on learning more spells, she had a sudden idea: amplification magic. Amplification spells interacted with other types of magic, increasing power or efficiency. Importantly, this type of magic was nonelemental, but it could affect the other elements. The existence of amplification magic was like a single bright ray of hope for her. If it really was true that Liefes couldn't wield elemental magic at all, then amplification spells—which interacted with and boosted other types of magic—wouldn't do anything. But amplification magic had an effect on every element. She had the idea that perhaps Liefes could use elemental magic, but they were simply unable to gather the base elements that existed in nature and make them take form as a spell. In that case, if she used amplification magic to affect an elemental spell and place it under her control, then even she, a Liefe, would be able to make use of elemental magic.

As a test, Yui asked her brothers to use a spell, and she then tried casting an amplification spell on it. She didn't, however, try to amplify it; she instead interfered with her brother's spell, overwriting his magic energy with her own. After pouring her own magic energy into the spell, the control over the spell passed to her, and her brother lost all input.

However, multiple problems remained. First of all, she had to have someone else cast the spell before she could do anything. Also, while she was able to overwrite the magic energy, it was difficult to overwrite the formula itself, and it was impossible to change an already completed spell into a different one. She might've found a solution with further research, but at such an early stage, it was impossible then. Still, even if she couldn't cast the spells she wanted on her own, her technique could perhaps defend against an attack. Ultimately, though, she couldn't say that she had actually been able to cast elemental magic.

Yui continued pondering the issue, but she couldn't come up with any good solutions. She was beginning to think that that was her limit, and resignation began to creep in. But one day, as she was casually watching rain fall from the sky, she had a flash of inspiration.

Yui looked at everyone in the room. "Rain is water," she explained. "It's what the basic element 'water' looks like when given physical form. So I wondered: what would happen if I cast an amplification spell on the element water itself? As I predicted, I was able to use a water spell as a Liefe without needing anyone else's help that way. Additionally, I can use naturally occurring elements for any spell I wish because they were never used in someone else's magic or under anyone else's control."

Yui held out her lighter in front of her and lit it. To demonstrate what she was saying, she cast an amplification spell on the fire. The flame abruptly flared up, increasing in strength. Then she dispelled her magic, put out the flame, and put the lighter back in her pocket.

"Fire and water are difficult. The elements need to already have form, so you need to have them prepared. The element of earth can't be used inside buildings because you need to be in a place with sand, soil, or some other kind of earth. Wind, which exists everywhere in the atmosphere, is easiest to use because you don't have to prepare it or be in a specific place. But fire, water, and earth are visible, which makes them easier to visualize and handle than wind."

The grandmaster solemnly listened to Yui speak, making sure not to miss a single word. As he did, he noticed something. "Wait, so you weren't just casting a composite spell, you were also using synchronous magic?"

Whereas a composite spell combined multiple elements into one spell, synchronous magic meant casting more than one kind of spell at once. It was just as difficult as composite magic. The magic Yui had used against the grandmaster earlier had been a composite wind and fire spell, plus she'd cast an amplification spell at the same time in order to be able to use the elemental spell, which had made it synchronous magic.

"Yes, that's right," Yui replied.

Her reply was simple, but what she was saying was unthinkable. The grandmaster was aware that others saw his power as monstrously abnormal, but Yui went beyond that. He far surpassed her in combat strength and experience, but he strongly suspected that she was more knowledgeable and

adaptable when it came to magic. Her discovery of a way to use elemental magic had come from a child's unique flexibility and willingness to think outside the box—it must've been an enormous effort to turn her idea into a reality. The wealth of knowledge she possessed belied her young age. Her skill at manipulating magic and the sheer amount of magic energy she had at her disposal let her use both composite and synchronous magic. It was terrifying to think that she was only a girl of sixteen.

"I'm done explaining, so is there anything you don't understand?" Yui asked her audience.

"No, I think I understand *very* well...just how abnormal you are!" the grandmaster exclaimed. Everyone nodded in sincere agreement. Then, he asked, "Actually, could other Liefes use that method?"

"Hmm, I wonder. As you know, nonelemental magic is difficult to handle, and being able to use synchronous magic is a necessary requirement..."

"So you have to be able to manipulate magic well enough and have enough magic energy to be able to cast a nonelemental spell and synchronous magic at the same time. But if they fulfill those conditions, can anyone do it?"

"I've never seen a Liefe besides myself doing it, so I can't say for certain, but I think it can be done. The only thing I can say is that you don't know until you try."

"I see. The logic behind it makes sense. But I want to know how far you can go using that method, so show us some other spells."

"Huh?!" Yui exclaimed, her mouth tightening.

She repeatedly and vehemently protested and resisted, but it was pointless against the grandmaster. General Kieran and the cardinal were just as interested in the level of magic she could cast, and they joined in too. In the end, Yui ended up having to cast spells, one after the other—from very basic, beginner-level spells to highly difficult ones. The three men were so excited that no one was able to stop them, and ultimately, Yui collapsed, exhausted, from casting too many spells. This ending was only to be expected; though she had used amplification spells to increase her magic energy and reduce her energy consumption, she had to cast difficult synchronous magic over and over.

Carlo turned white as a sheet. He shouted as he carried Yui to the infirmary, and a massive commotion ensued. The three powerful men who had made Yui cast so many spells all got a lecture from Berg, and one of them mumbled, "It's like being back in my student days." Standing off to the side, Cecil used his magic communicator to contact someone, and not a single person noticed him.

Yui quickly recovered after getting some sleep in the infirmary, but after that, tragedy struck for the grandmaster. Layce learned from Cecil about the grandmaster's potentially fatal use of magic against Yui, and he naturally exploded with rage.

Not even an hour later, the grandmaster started receiving messages from panicked guild members. The guild was a line of work that often involved combat, and guild members spent much of their money on weapons and armor. The guild purchased rare, high-quality ores from Orthyria, refined them, and sold the materials at a price lower than usual to its members. But out of the blue, the singular trading company in Garlant that imports ore from Orthyria suddenly said they would stop doing business with the guild. The guild didn't need those specific ores to make equipment, but the quality was certainly better with it. Losing access to that ore supply would be a hard blow.

And that wasn't all—the son of the Melphis family, which controlled the criminal underworld and had their own large intelligence network, said that he would restrict the information the guild could purchase. The grandmaster had a bad feeling that these two sudden problems had been planned, so he contacted the son of the Melphis family.

"I can't refuse him when he threatens me in such a scary voice, y'know? Oh, by the way, the trading company is our joint venture, so you'll have to do something about the Prince of Darkness first. He won't listen to me even if I ask, so go bow and scrape before Yui if you want to convince him, okay? Bye!"

The grandmaster was silent. After that, he continued to receive messages of protest, yelling at him to do something about it. He never would have thought that there was any connection between the Melphis family—which was influential both in public and behind the scenes—and Layce.

The grandmaster went right to Yui. He looked like he was about to cry, and he prostrated himself in front of her, not caring how it looked to anyone around them. Yui didn't know what was going on, so she just looked at the grandmaster with a greatly strained expression. When she learned of what had happened, she contacted Layce on the spot and everything ended without incident. Still, everyone there was reminded why it was never wise to defy the Prince of Darkness.

Chapter Seven: The Party

Starting early in the morning, the students and teachers were busily moving around the fortress, getting everything ready for the party in the evening.

The observers would also be attending the party. There, they would get in touch with students who had caught their eyes; on the other hand, some students would go to try and sell themselves to the observers. This was really a party in name only—it was actually a battle of behind-the-scenes negotiations, one where observers might obtain the best candidates and students might secure the best positions. With graduation soon approaching for the fourth-year students, they were motivated to an abnormal degree. They could be seen all around the training facility, eyes bloodshot, drilling into their heads information they had collected about the observers beforehand, or else practicing their approaches for when it was time to speak to them.

In the middle of all that, Yui was peacefully relaxing in her room. Berg had officially permitted her to skip out on the preparations after she had collapsed the previous day from using too much magic energy. Since magic energy was essential to life itself, using too much of it didn't just make it hard to move—it could be fatal. Luckily, though Yui had collapsed, her symptoms had been relatively light, so her magic energy had largely recovered after she'd gotten some sleep. However, she usually went through life making sure to leave plenty of power in reserve—about a fifth—so the backlash from using everything she had was large. Even though a day had passed, she was still lying in bed, feeling lethargic.

As she lay in her quiet room, her exhausted body and mind were overcome by drowsiness. She closed her eyes to go to sleep. But then, she felt the door to her room open, and someone entered. She sensed a slight depression form on her bed, then felt someone stroking her head. The gentle hand made her feel even sleepier, but she opened her heavy eyes to see who it was.

There, in her field of view, she saw the beautiful, elegant Filiel. His

appearance was only matched by his older brother, Alexis, who was also there as an observer. Many of the female students had been quite noisy when talking ecstatically about wanting to see the two princes side by side. If any of them had been in the same situation as Yui—opening their eyes to see a lovely, kindly smiling Filiel—they might've gotten excited enough to faint on the spot. Even Yui, who was used to seeing Filiel, vaguely thought, *Pretty*, as she looked at him. She blinked her eyes to fight off her sleepiness.

"Did I wake you?" Filiel asked.

"No, I was half awake," Yui said. Filiel continued to stroke her head, even as they talked, and Yui felt like she was about to drift off to sleep at any moment.

"How do you feel?"

"Just tired."

"I see."

Anyone hearing only their brief exchange might've gotten the impression that they were speaking somewhat curtly, but the mood in the room, as well as the expressions on their faces, were very peaceful.

"I went through a lot because of those three..." Yui mumbled.

"Yeah, they seem like they're really interested in you."

"I could definitely go without it."

Filiel chuckled. "If anyone at the camp were to hear you say that, they'd be outraged. Those three rarely concern themselves with anyone as much as they have with you."

Yui might've felt remorse for making the others angry, but from her perspective, she really just wished those three would give it a rest.

"You're not interested in entering any of their organizations?" Filiel asked.

"The army sounds strict, and the grandmaster is just annoying. And the church makes you live there, which I don't want to do. Over anything else, I've already decided to take over my grandfather's bakery..." When she said that, she put a bit of strength into her hand. "In the future, I'm going to take over my grandfather's bakery," she repeated for emphasis. Then she changed her

position so she was lying on her stomach and put her face into her pillow so Filiel couldn't see it. "That's why I can't give you the answer you want."

"Okay," Filiel said. In spite of her refusals, he hadn't given up.

After Bernard had hinted at marriage, she had resolved to firmly say no, but his simple reply took the wind out of her sails. She'd thought that he would try to stop her and oppose her taking over the bakery.

Filiel soon continued. "If it's really your wish to take over the bakery, then I won't say anything else... But that's not it, is it? That isn't really what you want to do." He spoke imploringly, and Yui's body quivered slightly—so slightly that it was impossible to detect unless you looked closely. "Are you still afraid of your father?" he asked.

Yui shivered, and it was obvious this time. She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip, as if she were trying desperately to withstand something.

"There isn't anything for you to be worried about. The prime minister is your legal guardian, so your father can't do anything. And of course, there's no way the prime minister would ever let anything happen to his precious Yui, right?" Filiel was speaking softly to comfort her, and his tone implied that he could understand what she was feeling. But even though Filiel's voice normally made her feel at ease, his sentiment rubbed her the wrong way.

"I know that!" Yui shouted, vigorously sitting up from the bed. She wasn't quite angry at him—really, she was only venting—but this type of reaction from her was extremely rare, and Filiel gazed at her with astonishment, his eyes widening slightly. "Papa will take measures before I even have to ask him, and he'll unconditionally protect me, no matter what happens. I know!" Her face twisted, and she looked like she was about to cry. "I know, but...but..."

Filiel drew the agitated Yui close and hugged her tightly, gently caressing her head to soothe her. His warmth and the feeling of his soft hand calmed her down, and just as she regained her composure, Filiel's voice echoed out in the quiet room.

"You met your father at last year's tournament, didn't you?"

Yui gulped. "How do you know about that?"

"Ahh... Well..."

Filiel was being evasive because he had been given the information by one of the Shadows that Theodore had attached to him out of an excess of worry. The Shadows were a secret organization that accomplished various tasks for the royal family, but unlike the royal guard, they never showed themselves in public. Yui didn't know about them, so he couldn't tell her, even though he wanted to. She didn't seem to mind him withholding this information though, and she didn't question him any further. Frankly, she was so overwhelmed by her emotions that she didn't have room to think about anything else.

"I thought I was fine—that I was going to be all right," Yui said. "At that time, it'd been a few years since their divorce, and I'd hardly ever had nightmares anymore. I also rarely recalled bad memories when I was just going about my daily life. I thought I was stronger, so I'd be fine..." I thought I'd be able to overcome it... she thought. She hugged Filiel to try and push down the crawling feeling deep in her chest, then continued. "And what do you think he said? 'I thought I didn't have a use for you, but I guess you aren't a failure after all." Yui scoffed. "I was only ever a tool for him. But that's all right. I've always known that." She had known it—she wouldn't feel hurt over something like that after so long. Something else had saddened and hurt her the most. "The real problem was that I couldn't do anything. I couldn't get angry at his selfish words, or talk back. I just stood there, trembling in fear, and I couldn't think about anything except running away." As she remembered how cowardly she had been, her tone grew harsher.

"That's why you withdrew from your match?" Filiel asked.

"I thought that was my only choice. I was scared that if I got good results in the tournament and he thought that I had value, he would bring me back to that house."

Attention from the army wasn't the only thing top finishers in the tournament earned. With her power, even as a Liefe, families could want her to marry their sons. Yui's father was the type of man to unhesitatingly use her as a tool and force her into a political marriage to create connections with other noble families. Layce had only been Sherina's fiancé back then, so as a stranger, he wouldn't have been able to intervene. Of course, being Layce, he would've

easily brushed that aside and dealt with the issue, but Yui hadn't realized that at the time. She just hadn't wanted to go back. She hadn't wanted to see her father again. The only thought in her mind had been how to get away.

"That's why I can't marry you, EI," Yui said. "When he learns that he's got a connection to the royal family, he'll definitely show up and try to take advantage of it. And even if he doesn't, there'll be more times where we might see each other, like at parties or at the palace." Layce had taken care to make sure she didn't have to attend parties or other noble social gatherings, but if she married a member of the royal family, there was no way she'd be able to selfishly refuse to go just because she didn't want to see her father. "Papa's there for me, so I know I'll be okay...but I'm scared. I don't want to see him..." She vomited out all her thoughts in a shaky voice.

Even if her father tried to assert his parental rights after all this time, Layce was already her legal guardian. No matter what he claimed, Layce would eat someone like Arthur for breakfast, and he'd probably make it so her father would never speak that nonsense again. There was nothing for Yui to be afraid of, but the fear that had been instilled in her at an early age was not so simple to overcome.

She insisted on taking over the bakery because she didn't want to stand out. If she entered the army, the guild, or the church, her father might see her as having some utility, and she wanted to avoid that. She didn't actually want to take over the bakery. Filiel could tell, even if she didn't say it. However, Yui couldn't admit it. She was too afraid of Arthur's lurking shadow. No matter what anyone told her—that she would be all right, or that there was nothing to worry about—her anxiety wouldn't disappear. This was a problem of the heart, and it was meaningless if she didn't overcome it herself.

"I know very well that you're afraid," Filiel said, "but at least tell me this: if that problem didn't exist, would you have accepted my feelings?"

"I..." An image of her father flashed through Yui's mind, and her voice faltered.

Filiel pulled back from Yui slightly and looked into her eyes. "Forget about Count O'Brian, and tell me what you really feel. Was it a bother for me to tell

you I loved you?"

His lovely green eyes peered into hers. She had a bit of a hard time dealing with Filiel's eyes. His gaze was always warm, and it made her feel at ease. But at the same time, those eyes always coaxed her into telling him about her weaknesses and her true feelings, even when she didn't want to. His eyes made her want to cling to him and rely on him. She found herself readily confessing her complaints to him, including her fears about her father. These were topics she had never brought up to anyone, not even to her mother or brothers.

"I love you, Yui. Do you dislike me?" Filiel said.

Her father was a big issue, and she knew she had to avoid marrying Filiel at all costs. That was why, if she had no intention of agreeing to an engagement, she ought to refuse him right now. It would be for Filiel's sake too. But his strong, serious eyes told her that he accepted her unconditionally, despite understanding how weak she was.

Before she could stop herself, she let slip how she really felt about him. "I don't... I love you too..." She had been happy when Filiel had told her how he felt. And she'd named her feelings for him long ago. What she felt for him was different than just friendship, and different from the affection she felt toward her brothers and her father. It was different from what she felt toward anyone —it was special.

But after she spoke, an image of her father appeared in her mind. "No..." she murmured. "It's still impossible..." Even though she had given voice to her feelings, she rejected him out of weakness. She felt selfish and inconsiderate. Unable to meet Filiel's eyes, she lowered her face.

However, Filiel was still reeling. For the first time, Yui had said that she loved him. Her words replayed in his mind over and over, and though he tried to keep a straight face through his joy and embarrassment, the corners of his mouth spontaneously crept upward. He hid his grin from Yui with his hand and internally agonized over it.



Yui was suspicious of his lack of a reply, so she looked up and examined his face. "EI?"

Filiel was somehow able to pull his expression back to something neutral. "Sorry. For now, it's enough for me just to be able to hear that. I promise I'll do something about Count O'Brian, so wait just a bit longer before making a decision." Despite what he said, he knew that this was Yui's problem—she had to overcome it herself. He knew he wouldn't be able to do anything about it on his own.

Still, Yui wanted to do something about it herself too, if possible. After some more worrying, she nodded. "Okay."

Relief spread across Filiel's face and he hugged her tightly. Yui gingerly wrapped her arms around him as well, and as she did, she felt a tinge of embarrassment. She blushed.

"Finally..." Filiel said. All sorts of feelings were contained in that single word, and he sounded as if he had finally been released from a nagging irritation. Count O'Brian wasn't the only issue; there was still a mountain of problems he had to deal with. Like the Prince of Darkness... Or the Prince of Darkness... And, of course, the Prince of Darkness...

After a little while, the magic communicator in Filiel's pocket started vibrating. He made a very unprincely click of his tongue. "It's probably Cecil. Unfortunately, it looks like it's time." He seemed incredibly unwilling to part from Yui. "Should I skip out on the party like you?"

"I don't think royalty should miss the party," Yui said.

Filiel sighed deeply. "Yeah, you're right... And I plan to introduce Cecil and Carlo to my father, so I guess I can't very well keep him waiting." He reluctantly let go of Yui and stood up. "What about you, Yui? Want to go together?"

Yui thought about it, then shook her head. "I don't want to be caught by anyone, especially not the grandmaster, so I'm shutting myself away in here." She was interested in the food that was going to be served at the party, but she wouldn't be able to enjoy it if any of the three from the day before detained her. She didn't think they'd try to recruit her in public, but she suspected that

they'd meddle in some way or another. If she locked her room, they wouldn't try anything. There was nothing else she could do except ask one of her friends to get her food.

"All right. But if you change your mind, I hope you drop by. The prime minister taught the grandmaster a lesson just yesterday, so he might've wised up and decided to behave."

"Okay, got it... But I find that hard to imagine."

"I'll come back if I have time," Filiel said. He took a lock of her hair in his hand and planted a kiss on it. Yui blushed and froze up, and Filiel calmly exited the room.

When Filiel went out into the hallway, Cecil and Carlo were there waiting for him. The moment they saw his face, they exchanged looks, then grinned.

"Filieeeel, what's going on? You look pretty happy," Carlo said.

"Did you finally get a good reply?" Cecil asked. As they questioned him, Filiel broke into a big smile. Then he quickly furrowed his eyebrows, looking worried, before instantly making a gloomy, depressed expression. The two of them assumed that it had gone well, judging from how he looked at first, but his subsequent expressions left them at a loss for how to respond.

"Did she harshly reject you?" Carlo asked.

"No, she pretty much said she liked me," Filiel replied.

"Then why do you look so down in the dumps?" Cecil asked.

"I was thinking about the count. It was something I knew about, but I didn't realize it was still such a burden on her. Yui still hasn't been able to overcome her past."

Cecil's and Carlo's faces clouded over. "So *he's* the main reason she's refusing to marry you," Cecil said.

"But she did speak frankly with you about it," Carlo said. "As always, she hasn't told us a thing. I know that it's because she doesn't want to worry us, but it still makes me feel a bit lonely." The two of them looked depressed again, this

time for a different reason.

In their younger years, before any of them had met Filiel, Yui had relied on her brothers, and she would tell them when she was feeling sad. But at some point, she had stopped speaking about her negative feelings with them or Sherina. They'd still known how Yui had felt about their father, Count O'Brian, but only because Filiel—who was the one person Yui was open with—had let them know. The same was true with Yui's father approaching her during the tournament; they'd learned about that from Filiel as well. That had been back when Yui couldn't meet with Filiel, so they'd expected that she would seek help from them in some way, but in the end, Yui had held her tongue and not told anyone about the incident. They'd been overcome by the desire to press Yui and ask her why she didn't trust them, but they'd known that this would only trouble her, so they had managed to suppress it. As long as she didn't ask them to help her, anything they did would only make things worse—this was their fear, so they had avoided bringing anything up.

And again, this time, Yui hadn't given them a single indication of what she was feeling, but she had readily revealed her inner feelings to Filiel. They were thankful that Filiel was an outlet for Yui when she normally wouldn't confide in others, but they would be lying if they said they weren't slightly jealous. They were her *brothers*, after all.

Filiel smiled awkwardly as he watched them. "You guys still live at the O'Brian house, so don't you think she just might not want to cause a fight between you and your father? That would make it harder for you to stay there. Especially you, Carlo. You seem like you might storm in and start shouting at him."

"Hey, I know how I am, but I'm not *that* short-tempered...I don't think." Carlo's lack of confidence in that moment said more than his words.

"Well, we're only staying quiet for now," Cecil said. "Next spring, we'll cut all ties with the O'Brian family. When that happens, we'll be able to vent all that bottled-up rage." He grinned wickedly. Filiel and Carlo knew they weren't the targets of that smile, but they still felt a chill run down their spines.

"Hey, Carlo. Don't you think Cecil's starting to take after the prime minister lately?" Filiel asked, whispering so Cecil couldn't hear him. "I've been getting a

certain demonic feeling from him."

"You think so too? I get the sense that they were already pretty similar in some ways, but he *is* slowly getting more and more diabolical, just like our dad," Carlo whispered back. "At this rate, he'll definitely end up just like him—the Duke of Darkness."

The Duke of Darkness—that wouldn't be very good at all, not for Garlant as a whole. Unlike Layce, Cecil didn't have any authority, so his impact was small, but with his ability, it was a guarantee that he'd climb the ranks in the army and obtain some sort of position of power. Then there'd be one of them in the army too.

As the two of them spoke quietly, Cecil smiled brightly at them. "What are you two whispering about?"

Filiel and Carlo shook their heads and said, "Nothing!" in unison.

Pulling themselves together, the three headed to where the party was being held.

The party had already begun by the time they reached the hall. Everywhere, students could be seen lightheartedly chatting with the adult observers, and some of the students were already receiving business cards and recruitment offers. As one might expect, many observers were gathered around the students who had performed well in the mock battles—each one called out to the students in turn. On the other hand, no one approached the students whose results hadn't been as good as they had hoped, and there was a clear division between the two groups. So, with an abundance of time, the students who didn't receive any offers spent it as they saw fit; some comforted their fellow students in similar situations, while some gorged themselves on food to dull the pain. Some swallowed the possibility that they might flop horribly and tried to aggressively sell themselves to potential employers.

When Filiel, Cecil, and Carlo set foot in the venue, the mood instantly changed. For the briefest of moments, everyone stopped talking. The conversation instantly resumed, but everyone was acutely aware that the three were present. Cecil's and Carlo's abilities put them in a league above everyone

else, and as always, nearly every observer wanted to talk to them. The observers hoped to be lucky enough to recruit one of the brothers, and quite a few had come to the party extraordinarily motivated.

However, no one actually approached them. Prince Filiel's presence definitely deterred the observers, but they stayed away for another reason too: they could sense that the twins trusted Filiel deeply because of the way they closely followed behind him. Those who had been waiting with bated breath for Cecil and Carlo's arrival lost heart—they could tell that the twins had already chosen their master, and there was no room for anyone else. The answer they'd receive if they tried to recruit them was as clear as day. So, giving up hope, they went to other students they'd had their eyes on.

As Filiel, Cecil, and Carlo made their way through the venue, people automatically moved out of their way, so they easily made it to Bernard, the person they were there to see. Alexis and Gaius were standing next to Bernard. Luca and Zeke, who were usually always by Filiel's side, were also there.

"Father," Filiel said to Bernard.

"Ah, Filiel. You took some time getting here." Bernard shifted his gaze to the two standing behind Filiel. "Are they who I think they are?"

"Yes. This is the elder brother, Cecil, and the younger, Carlo."

At Filiel's prompting, Cecil and Carlo put hands to their chests and bowed. "It is a great honor to meet you, Your Majesty," Cecil said. "And greetings, Your Highness. It has been some time," he said to Alexis. "My name is Cecil O'Brian, and this is my younger brother."

"My name is Carlo O'Brian."

Alexis had come to the training camp other years besides this one, so Filiel had already introduced Cecil and Carlo to him. They had also met several times at other gatherings.

Bernard looked the two of them up and down, appraising them, then gave a satisfied nod. "I appreciate everything you've done for Filiel. I've also heard about how outstanding you two are. As king and as his father, it's heartening to see people like you by Filiel's side. I'll be relying on both of you."

The twins respectfully bowed their heads, looking slightly tense. "Your gracious words are more than we deserve, Your Majesty," Cecil said.

"As we continue to train, we shall endeavor to be of service to His Highness," Carlo said.

"There's no need for you to be so humble," Alexis said affably. "You're famous among high society for leading the largest faction of young nobles. It's reassuring to know that you're Filiel's allies, especially considering your magical skills, your strength, and your personal connections."

Cecil and Carlo proactively attended parties and other events—they used their appearances, their quick wits, and their pleasant manners to their advantage. By now, they had built the biggest political faction among the young nobility. Those connections held a wealth of information and profit, and the faction was so large that even royalty couldn't afford to ignore it.

Incidentally, the person who had taught them all their tricks just so happened to be Layce. The two brothers had always been eloquent and well-liked, and they excelled at turning conversations and personal connections to their advantage. Despite this, Layce had still told them, "You're too soft!" He'd strictly drilled into them everything there was to know about taking advantage of people's weaknesses, effective threats, how to smile to elicit goodwill and induce fear in others, and so on. All that training from the Prince of Darkness himself had been tremendously effective at turning them into wonderful demonic henchmen. In fact, Layce's help had, as one might expect, led to their faction's rapid increase in size. Indeed, there was some basis to Filiel's nagging feeling that Cecil had come to resemble Layce lately.

"Count O'Brian must be quite proud to have both of you as his sons," Bernard said.

A complicated expression appeared on both Cecil's and Carlo's faces, and they momentarily hesitated. But there was a high possibility that Bernard would eventually be involved in this issue, so they concluded that they ought to speak with him about it here.

Cecil lowered his voice so those around them listening curiously and hoping to catch part of their conversation couldn't hear anything. "Actually, I'm afraid to

say that we'll only be taking the O'Brian name as our own for several more months."

"What do you mean?" Bernard asked.

"The two of us are planning to change our last names to Curtis when we become adults," Cecil explained. Changing their names meant leaving the O'Brian family and becoming Layce's adopted sons. It was already surprising enough to hear that both twins were going to leave the O'Brian family—after all, the family had no other sons—but Bernard was even more strongly affected by their mention of the name Curtis.

"Surely I'm mistaken," said Bernard, "but you don't mean the Curtis that I know very well, do you?" He felt like something horrible was rushing toward him.

Filiel landed the finishing blow. "You aren't mistaken at all, father."

Bernard's worst fear had come to pass. "Now that you mention it, Count O'Brian's former wife did get remarried to Layce," Bernard muttered. He recalled the report that contained all of Cecil and Carlo's personal history. When he'd had the two investigated, Theodore had purposefully hidden almost everything about Yui—he'd only allowed the most innocuous information to be recorded. Still, Bernard was aware that their biological mother had married Layce after getting divorced. "So that means that Yui..."

"She's their blood-related sister, yes," Filiel confirmed.

"Is that so...?" Bernard turned back to the twins and scrutinized their faces. He was seeing them in a new light—now that he knew the three were siblings, he realized that Cecil's and Carlo's facial features resembled Yui's.

First, there were the twins standing before him, and then there was Yui, whose knowledge and ability put the government's researchers to shame. Bernard now wanted to meet the mother of these three extraordinarily remarkable siblings—she also happened to be the woman who'd transformed Layce, the Prince of Darkness, into a loving and devoted husband. She was the prime minister's wife, so under ordinary circumstances, Bernard would've had frequent chances to see her, but Layce disliked taking her to events, so she rarely made an appearance. As such, Bernard had never seen her, not even

once. But still...

Layce would extend his family name to Cecil and Carlo, who had pretty much the largest amount of power and influence among the young nobility. If Yui and Filiel got married on top of that, Layce would be related to royalty, giving him an enormous amount of influence in Garlant. However, Bernard knew that Layce only cared about his wife and daughter—he was not even slightly interested in power. That was why Bernard wasn't worried that Layce might, say, wield his authority to manipulate the country's political situation as he pleased. Still, it was possible that some of the nobility might object to Yui marrying Filiel on the grounds that it would give Layce too much power.

"Hmm." Bernard pondered the situation. It seemed like it would become quite a pain... So, he secretly decided to let his father, Theodore, make all the hard decisions. As king, he was getting a headache just *thinking* about whether it'd be all right to give Layce even more power to go wild with, especially when the Prince of Darkness already made an outrageous mess of things sometimes. After all, the ones who always had to worry about cleaning up after Layce were the ones around him—including Bernard himself.

"Well, Layce could cause all sorts of chaos, even without any authority. He was able to make the grandmaster prostrate himself on the ground and almost cry. He didn't even need to use his power as prime minister," Bernard mumbled. Then he had a sudden thought. "However, I find it hard to imagine that Count O'Brian will willingly part with his two brilliant heirs."

Cecil and Carlo both looked troubled and unsure. With difficulty, Cecil spoke. "Ahh, well... We'll probably—no, definitely cause trouble for Your Majesty. Maybe."

"Why?" Bernard asked. He really didn't want to know, but he'd decided to ask anyway. It was best to be mentally prepared for what was coming.

"Well, he's completely willing to drag Your Majesty into it, so I think you may be forced into the situation, whether you like it or not..."

Without even asking, Bernard instantly understood that "he" meant Layce. "He'd bother the king about an adoption dispute between two nobles?" Bernard asked. If Layce got Bernard to recognize the adoption beforehand, even

Count O'Brian wouldn't be able to complain, since it was the king's decision. However, it was not typical for the king to concern himself with adoptions among the nobility, as long as the outcome had nothing to do with national interest. But all common sense went out the window whenever Layce was involved, so Bernard quickly gave up.

"My apologies," Cecil said. He and Carlo bowed their heads.

"Oh, even I can't stop Layce, so I don't think he'll listen to either of you, even if you try... I'm asking just in case, but you both wish to become Layce's sons out of your own volition, right?" Bernard asked. There were two implicit meanings to his question: he was asking to confirm that they weren't being threatened, and he wanted assurance that they wouldn't have any regrets about becoming the sons of a man like Layce. Bernard made sure to check because he would never want to have someone like Layce as his father.

"Yes, I wish it from the bottom of my heart," Cecil said.

"Though I am loath to admit it, he's far more of a father to us than our biological father, and he treats us like we're his sons," Carlo said.

They went to places together and ate dinner together while talking about, for example, what had happened at school. If they ever had a problem, he was always there to give them advice, and he always did everything in his power to help them. In contrast, Count O'Brian hardly ever ate with them or talked to them, and if he did, their conversations ended after only a few words—their real father was completely indifferent to his children, so it wasn't clear who was actually their real father. Cecil's and Carlo's respect for Layce was hard for Bernard to comprehend—he usually only ever saw the Prince of Darkness—but he had no choice but to lay his doubts to rest. The twins had shown just how sincere they were.

"Very well," Bernard said. "If Layce mentions anything to me, I'll do what I can to aid your family."

"Apologies for the trouble, Your Majesty."

Bernard smiled. "Oh, it's no trouble at all. Not when it's for Filiel's future brothers-in-law."

Everyone was taken aback by this. Carlo instantly understood what Bernard meant, and he turned to Filiel, spread his arms wide, and joked, "I don't mind if you call me 'big brother,' little bro!"

"Never!" Filiel exclaimed.

"I think it's a lot easier than calling him 'father,' though," Cecil said.

"Gah. You're right..." A thought flitted across Filiel's imagination: Layce bursting into flames of rage the moment Filiel called him "father."

"We'll try to convince the Prince of Darkness ourselves," Cecil assured Filiel. "Considering that we were the ones who told him to become prime minister, we do feel responsible."

"Yeah, I regret it a little. We meddled, and he ended up getting lots of power that he absolutely doesn't have the temperament for," Carlo added.

If Layce hadn't been prime minister, both Filiel and the king might've been able to assert themselves a bit more strongly. But actually, that concern might've been unfounded. Layce would've still been a big obstacle, even if he hadn't been prime minister.

Bernard tilted his head, puzzled. "You told him to become prime minister? What do you mean?"

"To tell you the truth, we told him that it was a condition of marrying our mother," Cecil explained. "We said that if he became prime minister, we'd assist him and act as go-betweens for him and our mother."

"Why that condition?"

"It was to protect Yui. As I believe Your Majesty is already aware, Yui is remarkably talented."

Bernard couldn't deny it. He nodded.

"We believed that someone would eventually notice Yui's ability, show up, and try to exploit her. And in fact, the general, the grandmaster, and the cardinal *did* notice—they were desperate to get her to work for them. Luckily, they were honest and approached her in good faith, so they never forced anything. But there was no guarantee that everyone would behave that way. It

was necessary that there be someone by Yui's side who could protect her, in case anyone tried to use force or their authority to get her to do what they wanted."

They're right, Bernard thought. A powerless girl like her wouldn't be able to do anything against someone with authority.

"As we wondered what to do, someone caught our eye: the Prince of Darkness. Even then, he was infamous for that moniker. His abilities were one thing, but even more well-known was the inhuman cruelty he showed to anyone who defied him."

The three royals, Luca, Zeke, and Gaius were reminded of all sorts of past incidents involving Layce. They all looked like they were trying to keep their internal feelings from showing.

"When we learned that he liked our mother to an almost abnormal degree, we believed that he would be good to her, but also that he would be able to protect Yui. Layce had absolutely no interest in power, but because he was completely devoted to marrying our mother, he fulfilled his promise and rose all the way to the rank of prime minister. To be honest, we were surprised the most by how quickly he actually *became* prime minister after we gave him that condition..." Cecil smiled awkwardly. He and Carlo had thought that it'd be a stroke of good fortune if Layce managed to become prime minister by the time Yui was an adult, but he had exceeded their expectations and done it in only a few years. It was even more surprising that, in his free time between diligently performing the duties necessary to become prime minister, Layce had also properly and proactively worked to curry Sherina's favor.

"I-I see," Bernard said. "I thought it was odd that Layce became prime minister when he'd never had any interest in power, but now I finally get it."

He remembered considering Layce for the position of prime minister—the man hadn't been especially ambitious. Bernard had considered the possibility that Layce might refuse, so it had been anticlimactic when Layce had so unexpectedly accepted the appointment instantly.

Layce always said that his wife and daughter were more important to him than his job, and he often complained about not seeing them enough. Bernard

had constantly wondered why, despite these protests, Layce still devoted himself to the busy position of prime minister. Now that Bernard knew it was all for his dearly beloved wife and daughter, he could understand why.

"He is unusually attached to our mother," Cecil said. "I don't know how many times I've second-guessed entrusting her to him." But still, whenever he and Carlo saw how happy and content she looked now that she was with Layce—a stark contrast to how she'd been in the O'Brian house—they knew that they hadn't been wrong.

"This just makes me even more interested in meeting her. I want to ask how she reins him in..."

"That may prove difficult. However, I believe Your Majesty will have opportunities once we take the Curtis name."

"Is that so? Then I'll look forward to it."

One reason Layce didn't take Sherina to any social events was because he didn't want to make her face Count O'Brian. But more than anything, Layce worried for her safety, because he had many enemies. He was also widely feared, so nearly no one was openly hostile, but he was concerned that they might turn their animosity against him toward Sherina. He couldn't always be by her side, and she didn't usually attend parties, so she had no acquaintances to help her. For these reasons, he never wanted to bring her to events.

However, if Cecil and Carlo were there with her, any hostility toward Sherina would mean making enemies of the leaders of the largest noble faction with the most influence. Considering the drawbacks of harming her, who would dare to do anything careless? Up until then, Layce had been taking his secretary to parties in Sherina's place, but once the twins' official adoption process was over, he'd probably start bringing Sherina with him. Cecil and Carlo hoped to see progress in Yui and Filiel's relationship by then.

After chatting about various things for a while, they were satisfied with the time they had been able to spend meeting each other. However, the party still showed no signs of ending. Their surroundings were abuzz with conversation.

"Father, Alexis, I think I'll get going," Filiel said.

"You're leaving already?" Alexis said.

"Yes. Places with this many people are tiring."

Filiel had to concentrate more than usual in crowded places to suppress his powerful magic. Staying in that tense state for so long was bound to lead to exhaustion. That was why he sometimes spent time alone at the academy without bringing Luca and Zeke with him. With so many students at the academy, he often wanted to make some time for himself without having to worry about his surroundings.

Most were understanding of this. As royalty, Filiel would normally be expected to be a model student, but even when he cut class, the teachers said nothing and looked the other way. If this event were being hosted by the royal family, he might've had to stay, but today's party was for the students. And since Filiel didn't need to find a job, he could leave early without any problem. He had already shown his face at the party, so no one would complain.

"All right, I guess that's fine. Rest up, Filiel," said Alexis.

"Thank you, Alexis. Goodbye." Luca and Zeke tried to follow Filiel when they saw him start to leave, but he held out his hand and stopped them. "Stay with my father and my brother. The other guards can't come into the venue."

The two had no other choice but to obey an order from their master.

The other guards were stationed outside the venue, and Gaius was the only person next to Bernard and Alexis right now. Only those whose identities could be confirmed were inside the fortress, so there was not even a slim chance of anything bad happening. Still, it gave Filiel peace of mind to know that Luca and Zeke were guarding his father and his brother—just in case.

Cecil and Carlo then tried to tag along with Filiel in his bodyguards' place, but Filiel rejected them too. "I'm fine. I don't think anyone suspicious is inside the fortress, and I'm strong enough to protect myself anyway."

"You say that, but you really just don't want to be interrupted, right?" Carlo asked with a grin. That cue made Filiel's intentions obvious—the prince wasn't planning to return to his own quarters. Bernard looked at him proudly.

"Now that's what being a man's all about!" Bernard exclaimed. "Now's the

time to win her over while he isn't here!"

"I'll make sure that His Excellency doesn't find out about it, so good luck!" Alexis said.

Filiel knew he should be glad that his family accepted Yui, but there was nothing more embarrassing than them cheering him on like this. They were so ready to help out, and if things continued without any progress, they were liable to move beyond encouragement and start making him take lectures on how to court women.

Just as Filiel left the venue and was about to head to Yui's quarters, someone stopped him.

"Please wait, Your Highness."

Filiel stopped walking and turned around to look at the person who had called his name. It was a girl he had met once before as a prospective candidate for marriage—Lady Charlotte Chamberly.

"My deepest apologies for suddenly stopping you, Your Highness," Charlotte said.

Filiel immediately put on his princely mask and smiled. "Not at all—I don't mind. More importantly, you seem to be in a hurry. Is something the matter? Can I help you?" Contrary to the way he casually acted and spoke around those he was close with, he used a practiced smile and a formal tone of voice when speaking with strangers. Inside, his mind was occupied by thoughts of Yui.

"Ah... Well, it's difficult to discuss here, so do you mind if we go someplace else?" Charlotte asked.

Filiel wanted to go see Yui as soon as possible, but he was unable to flatly refuse a lady's request. They went elsewhere.

After Filiel had left her room, Yui's drowsiness had completely disappeared. She was peacefully reading while leisurely stretching out on her bed when her magic communicator started making noise.

Yui answered, "Yes?"

"Get out of there!"

Yui was momentarily surprised by the sound of Carlo's panicked voice coming from her communicator. Her eyes widened.

"Carlo? What's wrong? Why are you in such a hurry?"

"The grandmaster threatened a Luster teacher and got his hands on the key to your quarters! He's heading there right now with the cardinal. He's had a bit too much to drink—actually, he's pretty drunk—so it won't be good if he captures you. Run away as soon as you can!"

Yui jumped out of bed. "Why has he been drinking?!" she shouted.

Under Garlant's laws, one had to be eighteen to consume alcohol. Some of the students were over eighteen, so they were technically allowed to drink, but many were still underage, so there shouldn't have been any alcohol served at the party.

Apparently, the grandmaster had brought in his own alcohol beforehand. And as he'd kept drinking, he'd gotten merry. He thought of going to meddle with Yui, but when he noticed she wasn't at the party, he went to Carlo to ask where she was. Then, learning that Yui was holed up in her room, he demanded a key from one of the teachers. Naturally, the teacher had refused at first, but the grandmaster made threats like a small-time mobster; he asked if it would really be all right if none of the students from Luster were given positions in the guild the next year. The teacher had sought help from those nearby, but everyone averted their eyes. No one was brave enough to challenge the leader of the guild. He then shook down the teacher, and they gave up the key like a small, scared rabbit. Next, with the key in his possession, the grandmaster triumphantly called out to the cardinal, who decided to accompany him. As a clergyman, the cardinal had judged that it would be unwise to let a bothersome drunk roam free.

The grandmaster was an infamously bad drunk, so Yui practically flew out of her room to avoid being caught. After warily surveying her surroundings, she put some distance between her and her room without making a sound. Just as she turned the corner, she heard a drunken yell of "Missy, I'm here!" and the cardinal's scolding, saying, "Don't be so loud! You're being a nuisance."

Yui breathed a sigh of relief. She'd escaped danger by the skin of her teeth. Still, it was too soon to relax. They would go around hunting for her as soon as they realized she wasn't in her room, so she quickly left the area.

Ever since coming to the fortress, she had been unable to walk the corridors alone, especially not when they got even eerier at night. But now she was in such a rush that she forgot her fear. She headed to the party venue to seek help from her brothers.

"If it was going to end up like this, I should've just gone with El," she muttered without thinking, even though she knew it was too late to change her mind now.

Yui took a detour to avoid her pursuers. She walked along a vaulted corridor leading to a courtyard. The fortress was situated farther north than the capital, so it was colder, but since it was summer, the weather still felt somewhat warm during the daytime. However, now that the sun had set, Yui could feel the chilly nighttime air on her skin, and she regretted not having put on a coat. She'd been in a hurry, so there had been no time to worry about that.

As she approached the large hall where the party was being held, she spied light coming from a second-story window, and she started to hear music. Then she heard a group walking toward her from up ahead. Judging from the sound of the footsteps, it was two or three people. Her mind immediately jumped to the grandmaster and the cardinal, and she quickly looked all around, searching for a place to hide. She went down into the garden and crouched where the greenery was particularly thick, held her breath, and motionlessly waited for them to pass.

However, they didn't pass at all—far from it. They came into the garden and moved close to the spot where Yui was hiding. She felt her heart beating loudly. Had they found her? But then, she heard a voice. It wasn't the grandmaster. This was someone completely unexpected.

"My apologies for suddenly bringing Your Highness to a place like this."

"Please, I don't mind at all. You had something you wished to speak with me about?"

Is that EI? And why's she...?

Yui was relieved that it wasn't the grandmaster, but as she peeked out at the familiar-sounding people from a gap between two trees, she was surprised to see Filiel and Charlotte standing there. She never would've expected them to be together. She also couldn't spot Charlotte's mindless flunky, Stella, anywhere.

"To tell you the truth, I have something I must ask Your Highness regarding the recent talks of engagement."

When she heard the word "engagement," Yui's face froze. Charlotte was the daughter of a marquess. She lacked none of the qualities required of a princess. In fact, Charlotte had learned everything there was to know about the rules of courtesy and etiquette befitting a noble lady—she had attended countless noble social events, she comported herself with refinement, and she had connections. Also, the marquess was a solid man that the king put his trust in. At Charlotte's age, it wouldn't be strange for talk of marriage to come up.

This was all in contrast to Yui. She was the daughter of a count, but he had expected nothing from her, so she had only studied the bare minimum amount of etiquette necessary to not embarrass him. There was no comparing the two of them. A thought crossed her mind: *I guess I wasn't worthy of El after all*. She felt her heart ache.

"My father contacted me today. He said that His Majesty was officially retracting all engagement talks." Charlotte hesitated. "I hoped that I might be able to hear the reason from Your Highness yourself, so I stopped you. Was there something I did to displease you?"

"No, not at all. You did nothing wrong. However, my heart has already decided upon another. My father and uncle were unaware of that when they chose you as a potential candidate for marriage. My apologies for causing you trouble."

To Yui, it sounded like he was saying that the talk of engagement hadn't been his own idea, and before she knew it, she felt relieved.

Charlotte's expression clouded over. "You've already decided... Of course... Is she, possibly, the daughter of Duke Favis?"

"No. Eliza is like a little sister to me."

"Is that so? I thought for sure..." Charlotte's words trailed off, and she momentarily fell silent. Then, working up her resolve, she opened her mouth. "Um, what kind of person is she? Your Highness chose her, so she must be a wonderful lady."

"Yes, well, I think she's somewhat different from the type of noble lady you're imagining. However, she's incredibly kind and cute. She's my moral and emotional support, and I wouldn't give her up for anything."

As Yui crouched in her hiding spot and listened to Filiel speak, she could feel her face grow warm.

After she heard Filiel's lovey-dovey talk about Yui, resignation crept onto Charlotte's face. "Your Highness must truly love her."

"Yes, more than anyone," Filiel instantly replied, without a trace of embarrassment.

Yui was actually the one who started to feel embarrassed—she put both hands to her cheeks and bowed her head.

"I see... Thank you very much for your frank answer. That was all I wanted to speak with Your Highness about, so please excuse me." Charlotte moved to leave, but then Filiel stopped her.

"Shall I escort you back to your quarters?"

Charlotte shook her head. "No thank you. I'll be fine on my own."

Filiel silently saw Charlotte off. Yui felt her footsteps grow distant.

Just as Yui was hesitating about whether to come out, Filiel suddenly spoke.

"Eavesdropping, Yui?"

"Eeek!" Yui squeaked, her heart leaping in her chest. She raised her face and saw that Filiel was peeking at her from outside the trees. "You noticed?"

"Yeah, midway through. What are you doing there? I thought you were going to shut yourself up in your room." He took her hand, and she climbed out of the bushes.

"My brother contacted me and told me to get out of my room because the

grandmaster got hold of a key and was heading there. As I was running away, I heard footsteps, but when I hid, it wasn't the grandmaster, but you two..." Yui's expression was awkward. "So that's why! I wasn't trying to listen in! Not on purpose!" She frantically defended herself, though she *had* been interested in their conversation.

"Yeah, I get it. It's fine, so calm down," Filiel said.

For just a brief moment, Yui felt relieved that he trusted her. But then she noticed the mischievous grin on his face. She reflexively took a step back, but he swiftly looped his arm around her waist and pulled her close.

"So, what'd you think?" he asked.

"Huh...? Think of what?"

"You heard what we were just talking about," he whispered into her ear. "You know who I was thinking of when I was saying that, right?"

Yui didn't need to ask—this was about how he'd spoken of her so lovingly in front of Charlotte. That was already enough to throw Yui off-balance, but his lips were practically touching her ear, and his sultry murmurs made the whole thing feel almost like they were a couple sharing a private conversation.

It threw Yui into a flustered panic. "Uh, I, that was... Um!" She was so confused that she didn't even know what she was saying anymore. She heard someone burst into laughter. After calming down somewhat, she looked at Filiel and saw that he had a hand over his mouth. His shoulders were shaking.

He had been teasing her!

When she noticed that, her gaze turned sharp. "El," she said admonishingly.

"Ga ha ha, sorry, sorry. I'll buy you some sweets as an apology, so cheer up."

Yui paused. "I'm not some kid you can trick with candy." There was a brief silence that was absolutely in no way due to her slight indecision. "I don't care about the candy, so can you tell me about the engagement she mentioned?"

"Are you curious?" Filiel asked. He had a nasty look on his face. Still, he seemed to judge that it wouldn't be a wise decision to worsen Yui's mood any further, so he answered sincerely. "A little while ago, she and her father, the

marquess, came for a visit. My brother told me to entertain her while he and the marquess talked. I was only told later that it was a meeting to decide on my engagement. My father and uncle apparently planned to find me a fiancée in secret. But my father has properly turned down the marquess now." Filiel was stressing that it wasn't his idea and making sure Yui wouldn't be left with any doubts. "I don't intend to marry anyone but you, Yui." He said once again what he had said many times, but instead of blushing or growing flustered like she usually did, Yui's expression clouded over. He examined her, doubt on his face. "What is it?"

Yui paused for a moment. "Why me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm not ladylike in any sense of the word, and I can't even keep up a smile around others. But I think *she* would be a perfect princess. And besides her, there are plenty of other girls who'd suit you, El. They'd be a much better choice than troubling yourself with me..." As Yui spoke, her feelings of inadequacy grew even stronger. She wasn't worthy of Filiel's attention. As that gloomy feeling slowly took over, her words lost energy.

"You're unusually self-deprecating today," Filiel said.

Yui was silent. She did things in her own way and rarely compared herself to others, and it wasn't often that she spoke in a way that degraded herself. Perhaps she was feeling this was because earlier, they had been talking about her father, who looked down on her for being a Liefe. Rather than seeming jealous, she looked depressed.

Filiel lightly patted her head to console her. "You sure are trouble. You have a villainous guardian and overprotective brothers. I clearly expressed my love for you, but you still didn't notice it, and when you finally did, you instantly refused on the grounds that you didn't want to see your father."

As royalty, Filiel had a wealth of options to choose from, all more beautiful or more advantageous to the royal family than Yui. There were other fit and willing candidates for royalty; there was no need for him to put so much desperate effort into convincing someone who'd said she didn't want to become a princess.

"And yet, no matter how troublesome you may be, I can't imagine ever being with anyone else," Filiel continued. "You're the only one for me. It isn't that someone else wouldn't work—there are other suitable noblewomen out there. But, speaking not as royalty, but as me...I need you, Yui. I don't need anyone else." The serious look in his deep green eyes pierced into Yui, and she gulped. "Besides, what about you is worse than Charlotte? You're stronger and more talented, and you work harder than anyone. And if you weren't worthy, then my father would've objected to you. But he didn't—actually, he's cheering me on, so there's no need for you to be so down on yourself." Filiel saw Yui's sad, wavering eyes regain their strength, and he put his hand to her cheek. "Also, I don't think you've realized it, but you express your emotions very clearly."

Yui's eyes widened. She was often told that she was unfriendly or that she always had a blank look on her face. This was the first time anyone had said that to her. "How?" she asked reflexively, feeling full of doubt.

"You don't remember all the times you've cried in front of me? When I teased you earlier, you got angry. And you're always smiling when you're with me. I've never thought that you were unfriendly."

"I'm showing my emotions on my face that much?" She couldn't grasp it at all.

"Yeah. You smile, you cry, you get angry—your expressions are constantly changing."

The reason she was so much more expressive than usual wasn't just because they were close; it was because he was Filiel. He knew that she trusted him more than anyone, so he hadn't given up on courting her after only a couple of refusals.

"So you don't have to worry about it," Filiel continued. Even if she was as expressionless as a doll, because it was Yui, Filiel wouldn't mind one bit.

"But that's only in front of you, right? If I'm a princess, I'll have to do it around everyone; otherwise, I won't be fit for the position. What am I supposed to do about that?" Yui asked. Filiel suddenly chuckled, and she looked at him with suspicion. "What?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking—you say you won't marry me, but you're already

worrying about what might happen after we get married."

Yui only realized it once he pointed it out. She was imagining a future with him without a single shred of dissonance, and she felt flustered. "I-I just misspoke a bit, that's all..."

"I'm glad that you're bringing yourself around to it, I really am. My father will be delighted to hear."

"El! That isn't it!"

Despite her fervent denial, Filiel just smiled happily and said, "I get it, I get it."

He didn't seem like he got it at all, and Yui tried frantically to explain herself, but he just grinned brightly.

As Yui and Filiel joked around in one corner of the courtyard, four pairs of eyes were watching them from the second floor.

"I thought she was taking a while to show up. So there she is," the grandmaster said, sounding somewhat irritated.

The cardinal frowned at the grandmaster, who reeked of alcohol. "If you dare to so boorishly interrupt them, I'll bury you before any horse has a chance to kick you," he scolded, not wanting to be dragged around by the grandmaster any longer.

"I know what I'm like, but even I can take a hint when it's that obvious!"

"Oho, that's the first time I've heard that. I would've preferred if you had taken the hint even earlier and quietly stayed here." The cardinal's words were dripping with sarcasm. He had been dragged by the grandmaster to Yui's room, only to find it empty, and then brought all the way back to the party. The grandmaster seemed to feel a bit sorry. He averted his eyes, looking embarrassed.

Bernard and Gaius just smiled awkwardly as the two of them bickered—they didn't want to be dragged into the argument.

Bernard was deeply moved to see his son talking happily with Yui. Filiel had always behaved maturely for his age. This was surely because of the strict

upbringing that came with being a member of the royal family. But Filiel was slightly tense around even Bernard, his own father, and he maintained a certain distance between them. Perhaps this was unavoidable; Filiel did it in order to keep his powerful magic from growing unstable. Bernard knew that Filiel loved him as his father, however, he couldn't help but sense a bit of loneliness in Filiel. But now, he was smiling like a normal boy his age. He could relax around Yui because he didn't have to worry about harming her with his magic energy.

"No matter what, I hope she becomes his wife. For his sake too," Bernard said.

"Indeed," Gaius agreed.

Of course, Bernard had to do something about Layce first and also deal with those who were after Yui for her talent. He returned his gaze to the two in front of him, and a doubt came to mind. "Grandmaster, Cardinal. Can I ask you something?"

The two suddenly ceased their arguing and fell silent. They looked at Bernard. "Yes?" the cardinal asked.

"You two want to recruit Yui, so why are you being so soft with her?" Bernard asked. "I know both of you have all sorts of methods you could use."

They had consistently behaved with good sense, and Yui saw them as annoying but genuine people. However, as king, Bernard knew very well that the two of them were not as easygoing as Yui thought. They were ruthless enough to unflinchingly take action if they really thought she was necessary for their organizations. And they needed to be like this—otherwise, there was no way they'd be able to unify such large organizations as the guild and the church. Even with Layce's protection, they could utilize coercive methods that would make it impossible for Yui to say no, and they could do this without Layce ever finding out. But they hadn't done anything of the sort.

"Oh, were you unaware, Your Majesty?" the cardinal asked, giving Bernard a wide-eyed look.

"Unaware of what?"

"The very day we first went to her house to recruit her, I got a letter from the

former king, saying that if I did anything against her will, His Majesty would take the appropriate measures."

"From my father?!"

"I got one as well," the grandmaster said. "At first, I thought it was strange that His Majesty was interfering in the affairs of a commoner girl, but..." He spoke to the king with an awkward politeness that he was unaccustomed to, and as he did, he looked out to the courtyard. Everyone else followed his gaze. Seeing Filiel, they understood what he meant.

"So that's it," the cardinal said.

The grandmaster and the cardinal seemed relieved to have their doubts cleared, but Bernard was internally agitated. "Grrrr, father..." he muttered. Anger boiled up within him—he'd been the only one left out. However, that feeling was dispersed by the cardinal's next words.

"Well, before then, His Holiness strictly ordered me to prioritize her wishes and not push her into anything, so His Majesty's worry was unnecessary."

"The pope?!" Bernard exclaimed. "He was involved too?"

"Yes. In fact, he was the one who discovered her."

This was so unexpected that it had gone beyond a simple headache; Bernard wished that he could faint right there.

"The pope..." the grandmaster muttered. "There are nothing but big shots around that girl. Even *they*..."

"They?" Bernard said quickly. He overreacted, sensing something disquieting in the grandmaster's words. The look in his eyes begged the grandmaster to not make things any more difficult for him.

"Yes... They're someone even trickier than His Majesty, the former king," the grandmaster explained. "I tried to push her recruitment through at first, but they firmly restrained me. That was the first time I had ever been so terrified that I was unable to act."

Whoever they were, they were able to strike fear in the heart of the battlehardened grandmaster. This was not something Bernard, as king, could afford to miss. "Who is this person?" he asked.

The grandmaster didn't answer, and he shifted his gaze to Gaius. When he did, Gaius seemed like he had an idea. "No!" Gaius exclaimed, his eyes wide with surprise. He hadn't said who it was, but the grandmaster nodded, confirming his suspicions. Each of them seemed to understand what the other was saying, but Bernard and the cardinal were unable to keep up.

"Are they someone you know, Gaius?" Bernard asked.

"Y-Yes, they—"

"Wait," the grandmaster interrupted Gaius before he could speak. "You'd better check with His Majesty first. They may not wish to be known, and you won't like what happens if you say who they are without asking."

Gaius abruptly clammed up. His face seemed to have grown somewhat pale.

Are they really that dangerous? Bernard thought. He felt anxious after seeing Gaius's expression and the grandmaster's unthinkably timid attitude.

"My deepest apologies, Your Majesty. May I confirm with His Majesty before saying anything?" Gaius asked.

"I don't mind, but are they someone dangerous?" Bernard asked. "Judging from how you're speaking, they're an acquaintance of my father too."

"No, they aren't dangerous. If anything, they're normally quite kind. However...there are some old memories I'd rather leave forgotten..." Gaius's mouth went stiff, and he looked sick. The grandmaster gazed at him with pity.

Bernard didn't know the reason, but the grandmaster's eyes told him that he absolutely shouldn't press Gaius, so he let him be.

Chapter Eight: The Festival

"Give this to Filiel for me," Carlo said to Luca as he handed over a large package. Carlo had summoned Luca here, and the bodyguard had just arrived.

"What's this?" Luca asked.

"Clothes. It's clothes. Yui told me to say that there are some in there for you and Zeke too. Put them on when you go out to Bahal tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Luca paused. "Oh, so he's actually going?" Luca remembered that Filiel had said he would go shopping with Yui during the camp. Unlike the other students, Filiel usually spent his free time in his room instead of taking advantage of the opportunities for shopping or sightseeing. Luca had thought that Carlo had been joking at first when he'd mentioned Filiel going out. "Lord Filiel knows, right?"

"Yeah. He always indulges Yui, so he couldn't bring himself to refuse— especially not when she was looking forward to it so much. I think it's great that he finally feels like going out for once. Ah, by the way, if Eliza tags along, tell her to wear some simple, plain clothing. And I'm certain she will come." Carlo then left the room.

As Luca looked at the package in his hands, he had mixed feelings about it all. Because of Filiel's powerful magic, he rarely went to places where many people gathered—in crowded areas, there was a high likelihood of him coming into contact with someone. He avoided those kinds of places. On many occasions, people like Eliza or Luca had invited him on a carriage ride where he could safely gaze outside without touching anyone, but he had never agreed to go. He had always apologetically turned them down, saying, "You guys go out, and don't worry about me." Lately, they had given up on even inviting him, and it had become the norm for them to stay in.

But his repeated, stubborn decision to seclude himself had been so easily altered by Yui. Luca was delighted to see that his master, who always declined people's invitations, was going to enjoy himself. However, as a bodyguard who

served at Filiel's side, Luca also felt a sense of defeat. He wasn't the only one who felt that way.

"I wonder how Lady Eliza will take it..." Luca wondered aloud. Every year, Eliza had stayed behind with Filiel out of concern. This time, once she learned he would be going out, she would definitely tag along. That in itself wasn't a problem at all—the problem was that *Yui* would be taking Filiel out. Luca was tempted to just go out in secret, but it wouldn't be pretty when Eliza found out.

Luca felt more and more depressed. Wondering what to say to resolve things peacefully, he returned to Filiel's room. By the time he arrived, he still hadn't collected his thoughts, but Eliza was already there.

"You were here?" Luca said.

"What, is there a problem with that?" Eliza asked with a sharp look.

After having known her for so long, Luca was used to this behavior. He didn't flinch at her intense glare. But also, his mind was completely occupied by something else. "Not at all," he said. "I was simply confused because you haven't been around lately."

"There are times when I'm busy too, you know," Eliza said after a pause. She huffily averted her gaze, not making any effort to hide her bad mood. Ever since the day Yui had used magic on the king and queen at the palace, allowing them to touch Filiel for the first time, she had abruptly stopped showing up.

Normally, she would come to see Filiel even if she didn't have any business to take care of. Perhaps she'd been busy with preparing for the camp, or maybe she'd been caught up in her social affairs as the daughter of a duke. Still, up until the moment Yui had cast her spell, Eliza had always found even the briefest of spare moments to meet with Filiel—even when she had other things to do. The same was true during the camp; Luca had seen her around, but she had never come to talk to them for some reason. It was obvious that Yui's presence had something to do with this. He could tell that Eliza had something on her mind, but he had no intention of saying anything about it.

Luca placed the package he had just been given on the table.

"Luca, what's that?" Filiel asked.

"Carlo just gave it to me. He said to wear what's inside when we go out tomorrow."

"What, so there are specific clothes we have to wear too?"

"Yes. There are apparently some for me and Zeke as well."

The only thing that Filiel had heard from Yui was that they were going to Bahal the next day, but whenever he'd asked her where in the town they were going, she'd just told him that it was a secret. That, too, seemed to be so exciting to Filiel that he couldn't stand it, and a smile crept onto his face.

Eliza looked at him like she couldn't believe what she was seeing—her surprise was clearly visible. "Fil. You're going out?"

"Yeah. I promised Yui."

Eliza paused for a moment, then muttered, "Again with that girl." Filiel was next to her, but he didn't hear her. Various feelings mingled together in her voice, though the two most prominent were sadness and irritation. "I've asked you countless times and you've never gone out, but now that *she* invites you, you're obediently going along. That blank-looking, homely girl isn't fit for you, Fil, so why—"

"Eliza, that's enough," Filiel said, angrily interrupting her. "You don't know anything about Yui, so I won't allow you to attack her. And it's not just me—you'll make the twins angry too."

Filiel was criticizing her so harshly precisely because he knew the reason for Yui's expressionlessness. However, to Eliza, it just looked like he was covering for her, and this made Eliza even more irritated. Additionally, unlike Luca and Zeke, she wasn't surprised to hear the twins mentioned, probably because she had done some investigating into Yui already.

Always adept at reading the room, Luca detected that things were going in a threatening direction before anyone else, so he hurriedly changed the topic away from Yui. "What will you be doing tomorrow, Lady Eliza?"

"I'm going! If Fil's going, then it's only right that I go too!"

"All right, then Carlo has said he'd like for you to wear simple, plain clothing. Please do so."

"Do you think I own anything like that?"

Luca was silent. Ever since the day she'd been born the daughter of a duke, every single one of Eliza's personal belongings had always been of the absolute highest quality. In addition, Eliza had always preferred showier clothes, so she had few outfits that were plain and simple. She certainly hadn't brought any to the camp.

Without warning, Eliza stood up. "I'll borrow an outfit from someone." Then she left the room.

It was early the next day—so early that even though it was summertime and the sun rose early, it hadn't quite risen fully. Each person present was wearing clothes that, while of fine quality for commoners, were cheap and simple enough that royalty and members of the nobility would hardly ever have an occasion to wear them. Though their current attire couldn't compare to what they normally wore, Filiel's clothes were specially made with magic-blocking material.

And so, at the crack of dawn, when all the other students were still in a deep slumber, they all pushed past their sleepiness and gathered in front of the gate to the fortress. Alexis was already there waving at them, and the lively smile on his face belied the early hour. He was wearing a simple outfit, just like the rest of them.

"You guys sure took your time," he said. "I was exhausted just waiting for you."

"Alexis?!" Filiel exclaimed. "Why are you here?"

"I happened to hear that you were going into town, and I thought I'd tag along with you, so I was waiting here. I've had more work as crown prince lately, and we haven't had as many chances to be around each other." Alexis looked at Yui. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not," Yui said.

"You're not going to tell me that father's here too, are you?" Filiel asked warily. He restlessly glanced around, but the guards were the only other ones there, and Bernard was nowhere to be seen.

"Unfortunately, he got a message from the palace late last night, so he went back," Alexis replied. "He was grumbling about it right up until he had to leave."

"Did something happen at the palace?"

"I imagine grandfather made a mess of something or other again. Father sure is unlucky; he hardly ever has an opportunity for something like this."

Theodore's antics were practically a part of their daily routines. One time, he had destroyed part of a castle; another time, tired of the summer heat, he had used magic to cover the palace in snow, and he'd built snowmen all over the place. Those were only a couple of examples, but every time, *Bernard* was the one who had to deal with the aftermath, so everyone was satisfied by Alexis's explanation. However, two of them—Filiel and Cecil—noticed something. For a single fraction of a moment, Alexis's eyes glinted harshly.

Going over to Yui, Filiel changed the subject. "So, where are you taking us, Yui?"

"Today is Bahal's summer festival," Yui replied. "There's a parade of people in fancy costumes, and a bunch of stalls, food carts, and all sorts of stuff!" She couldn't quite control her excitement; it was clear from the enthusiasm in her voice. However, only two of them seemed happy to hear that there was a festival: Alexis, who had gotten the general idea of things from Theodore, and Zeke, who was simply happy to get the chance to go to a festival.

"Wait, Yui. How am I supposed to go to a festival with all the crowds of people everywhere?" Filiel asked.

"Don't worry, I thought of that," Yui replied, brimming with confidence. However, that wasn't the only issue.

"Apologies, but I cannot allow you to bring both Lord Filiel and His Highness, the crown prince, to an insecure location," Luca said, and everyone nodded along. His worry was quite reasonable. They had several guards with them, but that wouldn't be nearly enough at a crowded festival.

"That'll be all right too," Yui said. "As a reward for everything at the palace, I asked Grandpa Th—His Majesty, the former king, to arrange security for a visit to the festival. The guards are already in position around town."

"Oh, so *that* was what he contacted you about," Carlo said. He and Cecil seemed to finally understand what Yui had secretly begged Theodore for. The only remaining mystery was what she had asked Layce for for her birthday, but they expected that to soon become clear as well.

"If grandfather got everything ready, then there won't be any issues," Alexis said. "We can talk to each other later, so let's head out now. Filiel, Yui, and I will take one carriage, so the rest of you should take the other."

"No, I can ride with my brothers," Yui said. She could count the number of times she'd met Alexis face-to-face on one hand, so riding with him for several hours in a cramped carriage was more than she could handle. She tried to give up her seat, expecting that she'd feel mentally exhausted by the time they made it to the town, but Alexis was already a step ahead of her.

"I was thinking we could eat together on the way there, so I ordered a light meal from the palace. Let's eat and chat! How about it?"

"Of course, gladly!" Yui replied. She cheerfully got in the carriage with Alexis, excited for a second opportunity to eat some of the palace's fine cuisine. Filiel, Cecil, and Carlo all looked at each other and smiled awkwardly. Then, separating from the two brothers, Filiel followed after Yui with a sigh. Eliza looked displeased about having to ride in a different carriage from Filiel. However, she didn't look resigned and unable to object to the crown prince's decision. Instead, she seemed to understand that she'd just be talked into accepting it anyway. She quietly climbed into the other carriage.

The carriages soon departed. Including the one with their guards, three carriages headed toward Bahal. Yui had been worried that she'd get an upset stomach from tension during the long journey, but contrary to her expectations, the inside of the carriage was friendly and peaceful. This was probably thanks to Alexis—as crown prince, he had had many opportunities to interact with foreign dignitaries and all sorts of people from various cultures. He was easy to talk to, and he had a calm air about him. His conversational skills made even those who

were meeting him for the first time feel like they were talking to someone they were already close with.

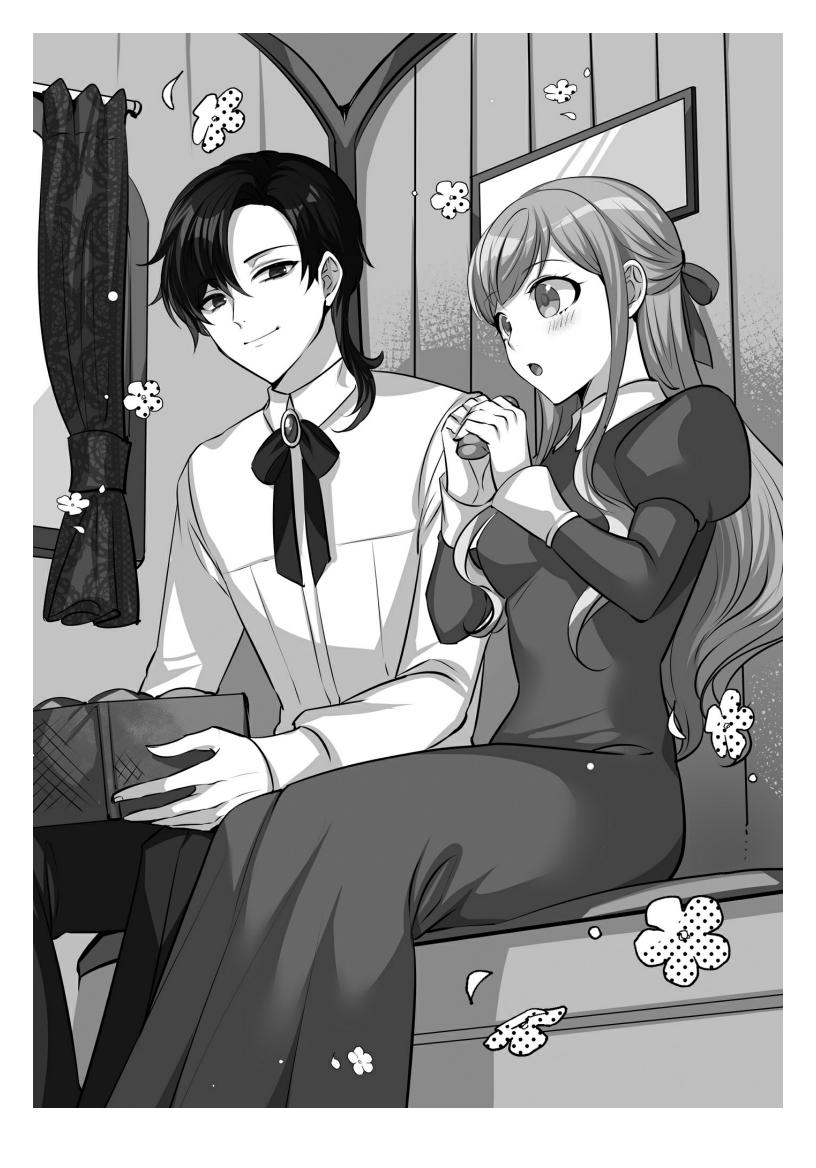
However, the greatest contributor to Yui's mood might've been the food Alexis had prepared. He held out a basket to Yui, and inside, there was a selection of foods that were easy to eat in the carriage with just one's hands.

Yui plucked a meat pie from the bunch and took a bite, then put a hand to her cheek. "Mmm!"

"Is it good?" Alexis asked.

"It's incredible!" Yui replied.

"They are, aren't they? That meat pie is popular in the palace as well, and there's always a scramble to grab one whenever it's an option in the staff cafeteria. Ah, you should also try one of the scones. The milk jam is made with locally sourced milk."



Yui chewed the meat pie. "Ahh, this is pure bliss!"

As she happily ate, Alexis gave her one piece of food after another, almost as if he were desperately trying to get an unfriendly cat to like him. But thanks to that, by the time they arrived in Bahal, Yui's initial distant tension had faded away.

Later, tales of this event would reach even Bernard's and Alicia's ears, and it became established knowledge among the royal family that food was the shortest way to Yui's heart.

They arrived in town a good while before the festival was set to begin. Few stores were open, and while the main street was lined with market stalls and tents, nearly all of them were still setting up or hadn't started preparing yet. There were also very few people walking around. The carriage Yui was on stopped before an inn that faced the main street, and they all piled out of the carriages.

"Yui, is this it?" Filiel asked.

"Yeah. I said to my papa that I wanted to watch the festival from inside, so he rented out this inn," Yui said. "He reserved all the rooms, so it'll be quiet, and no one will accidentally brush past you while you're inside. You can enjoy the festival without worrying."

Cecil and Carlo looked up at the inn, impressed. "So *this* is what her present was," Cecil said. "I'm surprised he was able to reserve an entire inn right in the middle of the festival."

"It's a good location, and a nice building too," Carlo added.

The inn was no luxury hotel, but it was a well-maintained building, and it had balconies with a good view of the main street. With the festival going on that very day, it wouldn't have been strange for it to have been fully booked.

Yui frowned, embarrassed. "Ahh, yeah. I was fine with just a single room, but papa went all out..."

"That's all I needed to hear," Carlo said.

"Yeah, dad seems like he'd have a bunch of connections," Cecil said. There was no way Layce wouldn't enthusiastically give Yui whatever she asked for, and especially not when she requested things from him so rarely.

"All right, let's go inside," Alexis said. He started to head into the inn, and the others followed after him, but Yui hurriedly blocked their path.

"No, please wait!"

"What is it?" Alexis asked.

"If you all go inside now, then there won't have been any point to leaving this early!"

"Do you have something planned?"

Yui ran over to one of the guards, who was unloading the carriages, and got something from him. When she returned to the group, she placed what was in her hand on the top of both Alexis's and Filiel's heads.

"A hat?" Alexis said.

"What's this, Yui?" Filiel asked.

Everyone tilted their heads, confused by Yui's behavior.

"If you're going to the festival, you have to see the stalls!" she said.

"So why the hats?" Filiel asked.

"It's because your faces stand out!" Yui said, as if it were only natural. Everyone, including the guards, was at a loss for how to respond. Certainly, if the two handsome brothers walked down the street with their faces exposed, they would attract attention, no matter how few people were outside. Cecil's and Carlo's looks were also eye-catching, but not as much as the two princes'. Also, with the knowledge about commoners' lives they had gained from helping out at their grandfather's bakery, they were able to act less noble than they usually did. However, Filiel and Alexis clearly comported themselves like nobles —they oozed an elite aura that clearly distinguished them from ordinary commoners. The hats were Yui's solution to that problem, and she hoped to make them stand out just a bit less. However, from Filiel's perspective, that wasn't the issue.

"Hey, Yui," Filiel said with a troubled look on his face. He was speaking like he was trying to reason with a small child. "You know that I can't touch other people with my powerful magic. It may be early, and there might not be many people out, but there's no guarantee I won't bump into someone." It was clear what he thought—because Yui had no problems with touching him, he figured that she didn't fully understand the risks.

"I know! You don't have to tell me again," Yui said, irritated by Filiel's assumption. She took his right hand and chanted a spell, and a magic circle appeared. Next, she etched a magic circle into her left hand.

Filiel gazed curiously at the magic circle on the back of his hand. "Yui, what is this? It's similar to the one you used back then at the palace."

"It isn't similar—it's the same. It's a magic-blocking spell, and not letting magic come in also means keeping it from getting out," Yui explained. "So, like I said, if you use this, you'll be fine, even if you bump into someone. I spent all night before camp working on the spell, but I haven't fully improved it, so it still has a pretty strict time limit. Still, there's more than enough time to enjoy the stalls, so let's go eat!"

Filiel was both exasperated and impressed that Yui had pulled an all-nighter in order to enjoy the camp to the fullest. It also showed just how excited she was to go out with him. Now that he looked like he understood the spell she'd cast on him, his gaze moved to Yui's left hand, which he had also been wondering about. "Did you cast the same spell on yourself?"

"No, mine is a way to secure a continuous transfer of magic energy." This spell was often used in a medical context—practitioners could share magic energy with patients experiencing severe side effects due to expending too much magic. Transferring energy required them to be touching each other, so Yui took Filiel's hand. "If I hold your hand like this, your magic energy will flow into me."

Now Carlo had a question. "If you've blocked all magic energy from escaping, then is it really necessary to transfer it to you?"

"Everyone always unconsciously emits magic energy, and completely blocking all of it means that magic energy will accumulate in the body," Yui explained. "A

normal person might be fine with that for a while, but El's magic is too powerful, and he'll quickly hit his limit, which is why I'm taking it in. Think about it this way: what happens if you keep pumping air into a balloon?"

"Well, it won't be able to take it, and it'll blow up..."

"And it would be terrible if that happened to El."

Everyone imagining that scenario fell silent and looked unsettled. Filiel was especially terrified, and he gripped Yui's hand like he never planned to let go.

"It'll be okay, El," Yui said. "That won't happen if you only let go for a bit."

Regardless of what she'd said, there was no way he'd be able to remain calm now that he knew there was a possibility he might pop.

In contrast to his scared brother, Alexis, who had been calm, was worried for Yui. "Will you be all right? This means that you'll be continually receiving Filiel's magic energy, right? I've heard that taking in magic can be quite tough. Isn't it possible that *your* magic energy will increase too much, and your body won't be able to handle it?" He had just recently experienced the power of Filiel's magic energy firsthand, and the unimaginable pain and suffering it had caused made him more worried than the others.

"I'll use the extra magic to maintain the spell, so I'll be fine. And..."

"And?"

"Well, more importantly, let's go to the stalls. We don't have forever."

Alexis thought it odd that Yui had cut the conversation short, but she was right—their time was limited. They all followed after her and headed toward the open market stalls.

"Tell me right away if you feel ill," Alexis said. "Some of the guards have medical experience."

"All right," Yui said. *Good, nobody noticed that I changed the subject,* she thought, relieved.

Normally, when transferring magic, the one receiving tended to feel unpleasant due to the encroachment of foreign magic energy. In fact, Yui had tested the spell with Cecil and Carlo, and their energy had felt unpleasant and

strange—she had even felt nauseated. That was magic energy taken from her *siblings*, whom she was in a close relationship with. But despite that, receiving Filiel's magic energy didn't make her feel bad at all. If anything, it made her feel fulfilled, like something that she had been lacking inside was being satisfied. This didn't appear to be normal, and she'd tried looking into it, but she still didn't know why it happened. There was no particular need to hide this, but somehow or another, she was hesitant to talk about it.

After that, they went around and visited the stalls while the spell's effect persisted. Yui and Filiel held each other's hands the entire time. Eliza usually would've been in the spot next to Filiel where Yui was, but she just watched them as they amicably held hands. The others knew how she was and about her history of intimidating women who had tried to approach Filiel in the past, so they were on guard for her to raise a fuss. Yet contrary to their expectations, she quietly tagged along with everyone else. There was a severity to her gaze, but she just quietly watched Yui and Filiel.

Rather than caring about the stalls, Filiel looked like he was happy just being able to walk around town without worrying about his surroundings. Alexis was enjoying himself more than anyone. Filiel had been taken to go out to the city dressed like a commoner several times by Theodore, but this seemed to be Alexis's first time ever leaving the palace for anything other than official duties. He was admiring the fresh spectacle of a commoner festival, looking around everywhere, and curiously asking about various things. Whenever he spotted some food that caught his interest, he picked it up, bought it, and ate it. He showed no hesitation toward eating things he'd never seen before, and he was not at all reluctant to eat the same things that commoners ate.

"That's Grandpa Theo's grandson for you," Cecil remarked, impressed.

"Curiosity must run in the family," Carlo agreed. Members of the upper class usually ate tender, high-quality meat; they wondered how many nobles would be able to take a big bite of cheap, tough skewered meat and say, "Delicious!" Quite a few would probably wrinkle their noses at it.

Seeing Alexis blissfully eating, the stallkeeper said, "You must've been hungry, sonny." He gave him another skewer on the house, and everyone smiled.

As Yui was running around and getting her fill of all sorts of food—from grilled meat to cotton candy to ice cream—she heard a cute squeaking sound. She stopped in her tracks. With Filiel in tow, she walked up to the stall where the noise had been coming from.

"So cuute!" she exclaimed. Peeking inside a wooden crate on the counter, she could see a bunch of round creatures that looked like balls of fur about the size of her fist. The pure white fur that covered their entire bodies looked as soft as high-quality down. Two black, round eyes peeked out from each creature's fur, making them look all the more adorable. There had to be about twenty of them in the crate. Yui noticed that out of all of them, one was staring intently at her, and she stared back into its cute eyes. Then, after they gazed at each other for a while, Yui said, "El! I want to take this one home with me!"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on," Filiel said, trying to calm her bursting excitement. He looked to Cecil and Carlo, seeking help. They looked up at the sign on the stall, which had the words "Ploom Fishing" written on it.

"They're plooms. Do you want one?" Cecil asked her.

Yui nodded. "Yeah, I want this one!" She pointed at the one she had locked eyes with.

Plooms were categorized as magic beasts, but they had absolutely zero fighting capability. Due to their calm nature and cute appearance, they were kept as pets. They were weak, but they had the ability to transform the fur that covered their bodies. Sometimes, they used it to defend themselves, hardening their fur like a sea urchin's spines; other times, in order to get around, they softened their fur like feathers and rode gusts of wind, or entangled it with other animals' fur. The stall seemed to be a game that took advantage of that trait. Players dangled a pole wrapped in an animal pelt and tried to get the plooms to stick to it—in order to win, players needed to successfully fish one.

Noticing that Yui, Filiel, and her brothers had stopped in front of the stall, the others gathered around too.

"Plooms, huh? A lot of people keep them as pets, even some noble ladies." Alexis said. "Is she going to get one?" he asked Cecil.

"It does look like she wants to, but they're living creatures, so I think we

ought to talk with our mother or father before—"

"Hey, Cecil," Filiel said, tapping Cecil's shoulder. "She isn't listening."

Cecil shifted his gaze back to Yui and saw that she was excitedly paying the stall employee. "Hey, Yui!" he said.

"Well, isn't it fine?" Carlo said. "She hardly ever shows this much interest in anything besides her research." It was hard to imagine Layce or Sherina saying no to Yui, not when she was so motivated to keep one. Also, in order to take one of the plooms home, she needed to catch one within the time allotted, but it was possible that none of them would stick to the pole. It all depended on how the plooms were feeling. Additionally, there were a lot of plooms inside the crate.

"There's no guarantee you'll get the one you're after, Yui," Filiel warned, but she was fired up.

"Don't worry, I'll definitely get it."

"Just where does that confidence come from?" Filiel asked, sounding exasperated. He wasn't alone.

In the face of their doubts, Yui got a pole from the stallkeeper and dangled the end into the crate. The instant she did, the ploom that had been staring at her zipped over faster than the eye could see, pushed the other plooms aside, and bit into the end of the pole.

"Eh?" the stallkeeper exclaimed, and the others watching expressed their surprise along with him.

"Hey, mister, I thought plooms used their fur to stick to things," Carlo said. "That one just bit the pole, and it blew away the other plooms around it."

"Yeah, and it seemed seriously persistent, like it was saying, 'I won't give this up to anyone,'" Cecil said.

"Did you forget to feed it?" Filiel asked.

"Now isn't that odd?" the stallkeeper said. "I just gave them their food. And plooms are omnivores, but they don't eat fur." The three of them raised numerous questions, but the stallkeeper was just as perplexed as them, despite

his decades of experience dealing with plooms. After all, plooms were gentle, quiet animals. Apparently, they never attacked their fellows or, as the one had just now, moved quickly. "Well, I guess some of them are just like that," said the stallkeeper, and everyone had no choice but to accept that explanation.

Yui, meanwhile, took no notice of the others' confusion. She was overjoyed to have caught the ploom she wanted, and she was rubbing her cheek against its fluffy fur. "So cute," she said.

"Pweeee," the ploom squeaked.

"I have to give it a name. Hmmm..." Just then, a name spontaneously appeared in her mind. "Sully." Something inside of her screamed that the ploom's name was Sully. "Sully..." When she repeated its name, it made a happy-sounding squeak and nestled up to her. It was almost as if it could understand what she was saying. Curious, Yui tried asking the stallkeeper. "Um, excuse me. Can plooms understand human speech?"

"Plooms? Well, you can train them like dogs and tell them to 'shake' or 'wait,' but they don't know what the words actually mean. They aren't as smart as people—they're just magic beasts, after all."

"That makes sense."

"They're omnivores and will eat anything, so they're low-maintenance pets. Take good care of it."

"Okay." Placing Sully on her shoulder, Yui left the stall behind.

By the time the magic Yui had cast on Filiel was about to wear off, more shops had opened for the day, and there were more people walking by too, so they hurried back to the inn. It wouldn't be good if Filiel got separated from Yui.

When they got back, they went up to the balcony overlooking the main street and took a short break. Then, as if it had been planned, tea and various light meals were brought out to them. Yui gave Sully some of her food, but it didn't try to eat any of the meat, vegetables, or bread she offered.

"It won't eat any... Hey, Carlo, are plooms really omnivores?" Yui asked.

"They should be, but maybe it's full."

"But it's been a while since then... Sully, is there anything here you want?" "Pwee?"

They all knew that there was no way Sully could actually answer, but they watched Yui and the cute ploom's exchange with smiles on their faces. However, what Sully did next rendered everyone speechless. It surveyed the table full of food, then bounced over to a jar of honey. It hopped up and down in front of the jar and squeaked like it was trying to get Yui's attention. "Pwee pwee."

"That's what you want to eat, Sully?" Yui asked.

"Pwee," it peeped happily, as if to say, "That's right, it is."

Yui scooped some honey into a spoon and held it out to Sully, and the ploom started licking it.

"You must like honey, Sully," Yui said.

"Pwee."

Watching the pleasant conversation between human and animal, Carlo asked his twin to confirm what he was seeing with his own eyes. "Hey, doesn't it look like they're actually talking to each other?"

"No, that's impossible... Plooms don't have that kind of intelligence," Cecil said.

"Right, you're right. It must be a coincidence." Despite what he said, whenever Yui spoke to Sully, it surprised everyone when it responded and acted —it was like the creature could understand what she said.

Cecil shrugged. "It looks like it's taken a liking to her, so I suppose it's fine..."

"When we get back to the palace, I'll ask someone who knows about magic beast behavior," Filiel said. There was always the possibility that this was some new variety of ploom. Cecil was worried about letting it be near Yui, but it didn't give any indication that it would cause her any harm, so they decided to wait and see how things turned out, then later ask an expert at the palace.

After a while, they heard loud wind instruments, and people began shouting and cheering.

"Oh, looks like it's started," Yui said.

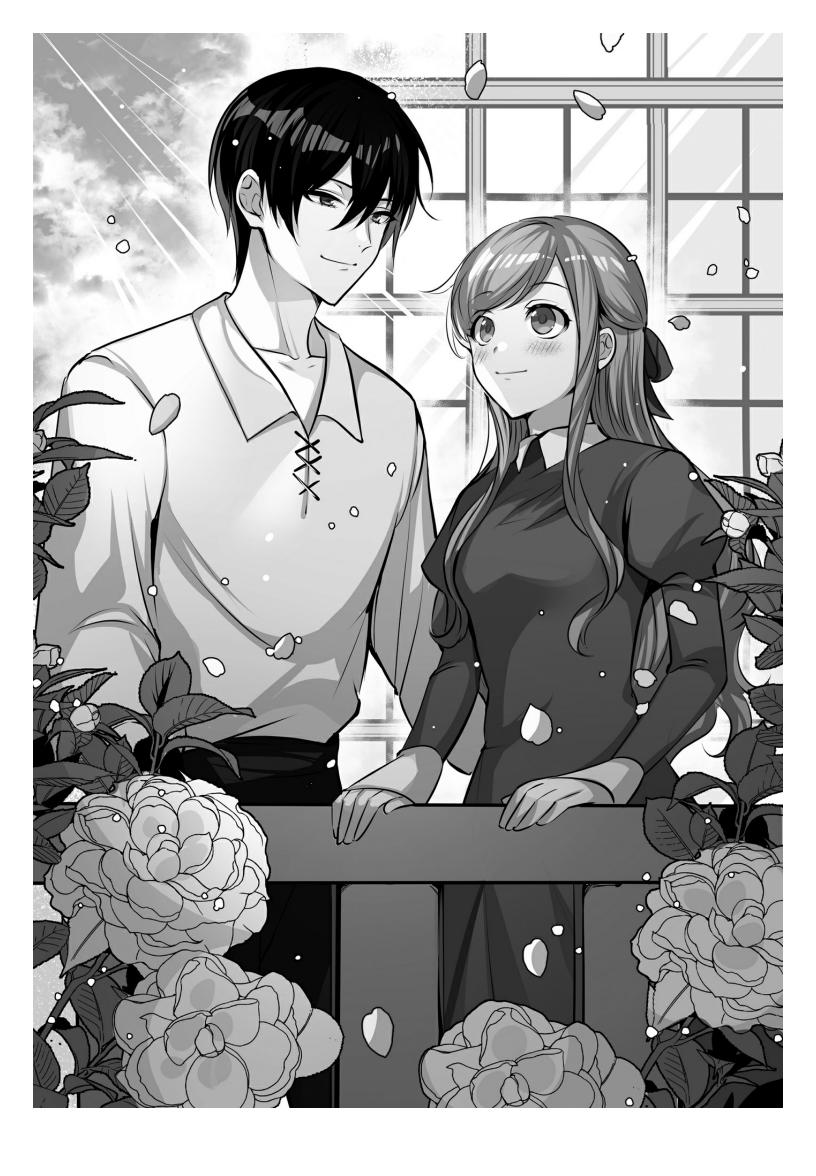
A bunch of people in costumes paraded down the street, marching to the beat of a band playing on horns and drums. Large crowds of people had formed lines on both sides of the street to get a look at the costumed people, but those on the balcony were able to enjoy the parade without anything blocking their view.

They all gazed at the street where they had just been walking around, and Yui quietly took Filiel's hand.

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"Yui?" Filiel said.

"This is fun," Yui said.

"Yeah..."
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Filiel looked toward the street, just like Yui.

"Umm, El. I've been thinking about a lot of things. Like about him, and about you. And also about the future." Yui hesitated for a moment. "Look, I still don't have an answer. But you're special to me, El. I don't just want to end things. So can you give me just a bit longer? I've been running away this whole time, so I think I need some time to properly think things over." Yui shifted her gaze away from the street and looked at Filiel. "Is that okay?"

"Of course it is. Don't sell my attachment to you short. I'll wait for as long as you need."

Filiel smiled tenderly, and that brought a smile to Yui's face too.

Epilogue

"C'mon, hurry!" Ivo yelled.

"I'm running as fast as I caaaan!" Lyle shouted back.

The training camp was over, and it was the day they would be returning to the capital.

Ivo, Lyle, and Finney were running like no one was watching through the Bahal train station. Lagging behind them was Clois, who was panting while carrying a bunch of packages, and Yui, who had Sully on her shoulder. It was the final day, so Yui and Clois had gone around to a bunch of stores to buy local sweets to take home. But they had pushed their last-minute shopping all the way up to their train's departure time, and they were now having to make a mad dash through the station.

"It's because you guys took so long to decide!" Ivo shouted.

"That's easier said than dooone!" Yui replied.

"Ivo, Yui, stop moving your mouths and start moving your legs!" Lyle chided before they could start arguing. Meanwhile, as they ran, their train came into view. But then the whistle for departure echoed throughout the station, and their panic reached its highest point.

"Whoa, that's not good!" Lyle said.

"Are we even going to make it?" Finney said.

"Finney, don't say that! We can still make it, we just have to have guts!" Ivo shouted.

"Pwee pweeee!" Sully squeaked, cheering them on.

Wringing out their last bits of energy, they leaped onto the train at full speed. The instant they all somehow managed to get aboard, the doors closed and the train began to move.

"We made it by an inch..." Clois said. They were so winded that it was hard to

take a breath, and they all plopped down on the spot. However, their brief moment of relief quickly ended when Berg found them and started scolding them.

"You idiooots! Don't ever do something dangerous like that again! You aren't small children, so get your act together. Next time, keep track of the clock!"

They were not in the right place to be able to properly listen to Berg's lecture, but they were forced to hear his angry yelling in the middle of the aisle until the conductor came to stop him.

And so, having made both good memories and bad, their training camp came to an end.

Side Story: Their First Encounter

The inside of the rattling carriage was filled with an unusual tension.

Yui's older brothers, Cecil and Carlo, were sitting in front of her. Next to her was the source of this tension—their father, Arthur O'Brian. None of them spoke. Yui felt uncomfortable in this silent space, and she flattened herself against the door to be as far away from her father as possible.

She had ended up in this situation because of a tea party that was being held at a certain noble's mansion. Normally, Arthur would've had only her two outstanding brothers come with him. He hated to bring Yui out in public, so he usually left her at home with Sherina. But this time, a client of an O'Brian business had said that he wanted to see a Liefe, so with no other choice, Arthur had made her come with him. This was incredibly rude—the man was telling Arthur to show Yui off to him like she was an exotic animal—but Yui had no right to refuse.

The mansion where they were heading was significantly more imposing than the O'Brian mansion, and the garden they were led through was amazingly beautiful. The garden had many tables laden with simple foods, and there were already people everywhere with plates in hand having friendly conversations. Yui rarely participated in noble gatherings, so all of this seemed to glitter brightly. However, her fun mood was soon shattered by her father's next words.

"Don't do anything without my permission. Only answer what is asked of you. If you do anything to tarnish the O'Brian name, you won't like what happens. Got it?"

Yui paused for a moment. "Yes, understood."

"I'm going to go around and greet people for a while. Don't move from this spot."

"Okay."

Arthur left. Cecil and Carlo, who had been by her side the entire time, glared hatefully at him as he went. When he disappeared into the crowd, the expressions on her brothers' faces changed so completely that she almost doubted that they were the same people. They smiled gently at her.

"You don't have to worry about him," Cecil assured her.

"I know, Yui," Carlo said. "Do you want any sweets?"

"Yeah, sure," Yui said.

"All right, we'll be right back, so just wait here for a bit."

Her brothers both left to get some food and sweets they thought she'd like, and then they enjoyed a meal together. Thanks to that, her gloomy mood improved somewhat. After a while, one corner of the garden got noisy.

"What's that? Did someone just arrive?" Carlo wondered.

"Are they important?" Yui asked. As they examined their surroundings, Cecil, who had left his seat to get drinks, returned.

"It seems like His Majesty, the former king, and His Highness, Prince Filiel, have arrived incognito," Cecil explained.

"I get why the former king might be here, but His Highness too?" Carlo asked. "Yeah."

Carlo seemed surprised, but Yui didn't quite understand the situation. She tilted her head. "Saying 'His Majesty' and 'His Highness' means they're important people, right?" she asked. She was only eight years old, and she didn't attend noble social events often, so while she knew of the royal family, she didn't quite know how important they really were.

"That's right," Cecil said. "You can't be rude to them, so don't approach them, no matter what."

"If you do, you'll be tarnishing the royal dignity, and you'll be decapitated!" Carlo said jokingly.

"Decapitated?!" Yui exclaimed.

Cecil sighed, exasperated. "Carlo, don't teach her words she doesn't need to

know..."

Yui paid them no regard and swore in her heart that she would never get near the two royals.

As the three of them were having a fun time talking, Cecil's and Carlo's faces suddenly stiffened. When Yui followed their gaze, she saw that their father was approaching them—he was with a fat older man with a large, hanging belly. Her expressionless face tightened even further.

"You two, go somewhere else," Arthur demanded.

"We're with Yui," Cecil said.

"Can you hear me? Get lost." It was hard to imagine that he was speaking to his own children with such a cold, inhuman voice.

Cecil and Carlo gnashed their teeth so loudly that even Yui could hear them, but they nonetheless turned their backs and walked away, unable to stand up to Arthur.

"So this is one of those Liefes?" the older man said.

"My name is Yui." She curtsied so as to not be disrespectful.

"Light brown hair, pale blue eyes, and porcelain skin," the man said. "It really is a beautiful, doll-like coloring. However, she's awfully distant."

Arthur shot her a harsh glare that said, "Smile!" She made an effort to obey, but her face wouldn't move as she wished.

"My apologies. Liefes have all sorts of various defects," Arthur said obsequiously.

"Oh, it must be awful. You're quite compassionate indeed to be raising a defective girl as your daughter, when she's not fit for even a political marriage. I would've shipped both her and her mother off to an institution the day she was born."

Yui strained to empty her mind, trying desperately to withstand the unending insults that flowed from the men despite her being right there in front of them. After a while, she didn't know whether the man lost interest, or if he just gave up because of her lack of response, but she was finally released.

Yui walked around the garden, searching for Cecil and Carlo. She quickly found them, but she stopped in her tracks, unable to move a single step forward. There were a bunch of other children their age surrounding the two of them. She saw her brothers in the center, smiling and chatting lightheartedly. However, Yui felt unable to enter the circle, so she turned back.

Without anything to do or anywhere to go, she wandered aimlessly around the garden. Suddenly, a girl caught her eye. The girl was about her age, or slightly younger, and she was laughing joyfully as her father picked her up in his arms. When Yui saw how the girl's father looked at her with a kind, loving gaze, she felt like she was going to cry. Arthur had never, not in her entire life, held her in his arms or looked at her that way. She had come to the party with the faint hope that maybe, if she was able to be of some use to him, he'd treat her like how that girl's father treated her. But in the end, her father was the same as always.

If only I weren't a Liefe... If only I were as talented as my brothers...

As she repeated these words in her head, tears welled up in her eyes. But she couldn't cry here, not with so many people around—her father would scold her. She moved deeper into the garden, searching for a place without any people. Yui felt fed up with herself. She had tried to be good so that he wouldn't hate her, but he had still been cruel. It was disappointing.

Finally, she found somewhere quiet where no one could interrupt her, and there, she shed her tears alone.

"How much longer are you going to pout for, Filiel?" Theodore asked, smiling awkwardly. He was looking at Filiel, who didn't answer. The prince just silently sulked as he gazed at the passing scenery outside—he was trying to rouse Theodore's sympathy.

The two of them were currently inside a carriage. They were on their way to make an informal visit to a tea party being held at a mansion of one of Theodore's acquaintances. Filiel had vehemently refused to go, all the way up until the very moment it was time for them to depart. However, he was still no match for Theodore's strength, so his grandfather had just tossed him into the

carriage and forced him to come along. Filiel refused to accept this, and he was still angry at his grandfather.

"I said I didn't want to go," Filiel muttered.

"You're royalty too, so you'd better get used to going to social events, sooner rather than later," Theodore said. "You hardly ever attend."

"So what? Even when I want to go, everyone else hates me," Filiel mumbled sadly.

"Filiel..."

Silence fell.

Filiel's control over his magic energy was still weak, so he constantly emitted a powerful aura. This appeared to produce an instinctual fear and awe in others. Whenever he went to events, it was practically certain that people would stand in a wide circle around him and watch him fearfully, so he absolutely detested going to those kinds of places. He was royalty, so none of them could be openly fearful around him, but their attempts at smoothing things over were just further torment.

"Filiel, it's not that I don't understand, but in just a few years, you'll be going to the academy. You should get to know more people now because it'll help you later on. It's your only chance to attend school, so wouldn't you rather enjoy your life at the academy with friends?"

"There's no way I'll ever be able to make friends. They'll all be afraid of me. Everyone will run away." Filiel maintained his self-deprecating attitude, and Theodore patted his head somewhat roughly.

When they arrived at the mansion and were led to the garden, those around them immediately noticed who they were and started to get noisy. Nobles gathered around to greet Theodore one by one, and he gave practiced responses to all of them. However, the nobles were visibly afraid of the magic energy overflowing from Filiel as he stood at his grandfather's side. Some found it so difficult to be near Filiel that they gave up on greeting the former king and left. Filiel knew that all the adults were so scared they could hardly stand it, so their attempts to smile and talk with him like everything was normal seemed

ridiculous.

"Grandfather, would you mind if I went for a short stroll around the garden?" Filiel asked.

The adults were obviously relieved, but then instantly put their facades back up. Though Theodore frowned, he gave Filiel his permission.

As Filiel wandered around aimlessly, people nearby automatically moved away—this formed a large, empty space around him. Despite how it made the prince feel, this was only natural; not only nobles, but all citizens of Garlant knew that touching him was dangerous.

No one here is willing to sign themselves up for what's essentially suicide.

At least, that was what Filiel thought, but now there were people standing in his way—several boys and girls around his age. The nearby adults were shocked that they would do something as disrespectful as blocking the path of royalty, but Filiel was more surprised than anyone by the fact that some people had come near him.

"It is an honor to meet you, Your Highness. I am the son of Baron Ballue. Would you be so kind as to join me for some conversation?"

He's probably doing this because he wants to make acquaintances with royalty, Filiel thought. Unfortunately, all of them were afraid of his magic energy. He could see them trembling, and they looked ill. None could move any further or speak another word. As he stood before them, Filiel worried about whether he ought to leave, but then, there was a timely intervention.

"Excuse me, it is a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I am the son of Count O'Brian, and my name is Cecil O'Brian."

"My name is Carlo O'Brian—I'm his younger brother."

Filiel glanced back and forth between the identical faces of the two boys who had abruptly appeared. "Twins?" he asked.

"Yes, we are, Your Highness," Cecil replied.

"I've never seen twins before."

"Then, I shall consider this an honor," Cecil said. He glanced at the other

frozen children, and Filiel looked back at them too, having momentarily forgotten they were there.

"Uh...umm, uh..." With Filiel's attention back on them, they lost all composure and were unable to speak properly.

"It appears that, in the presence of Your Highness, they are too tense to speak," Cecil said.

"If you wanted to talk with His Highness, you should've properly studied your etiquette first," Carlo said to them. "Blocking His Highness's path is inexcusable. Got it?"

The boys and girls around them nodded silently. They took a cue from Cecil's and Carlo's words and scurried away.

"You helped me out there," Filiel said. "My thanks."

It had been clear to everyone that the children had been so afraid of Filiel's magic energy that they'd been unable to move, but Cecil had covered for them, attributing their actions not to fear, but to tension. This might've been an informal appearance, but the children had behaved disrespectfully toward royalty. So, if their failure had been due to tension instead of fear, they wouldn't be punished very severely. They'd probably get away with, at worst, a harsh scolding from their parents.

"Not at all. If I happened to be of service to Your Highness, then there can be no greater joy," Cecil said. He and Carlo both had unbroken smiles on their faces.

Filiel stared at them. He quickly realized that they weren't visibly shrinking back from him. "You aren't...afraid of me?" he asked.

"Why, of course I am." Cecil's carefree words belied their true meaning.

"However, I can't imagine that Your Highness would ever think to use your tremendous power to hurt anyone. No one who intends to hurt others would anxiously ask whether we're afraid."

Filiel was taken aback. No one had ever said that to him.

"Of course, we may end up in the same class at the academy, so we also had

the ulterior motive of making your acquaintance before then."

"Are you my age?" Filiel asked.

Cecil nodded. "Yes, we are. I am greatly looking forward to the day we can pursue our studies together at the academy."

"Now, we'll be taking our leave. I'm looking forward to meeting again, if we ever have the chance," Carlo said.

Filiel watched them as they bowed and left, and he made sure to burn the names Cecil and Carlo into his memory. For a brief moment, the student life he'd thought he would hate so much seemed like something to look forward to.

Filiel resumed his stroll. He took off his gloves, yielding to the heat of the sun, then headed deeper into a deserted part of the garden.

Yui was quietly crying in a secluded area deep in the garden. Suddenly, she felt someone's presence, and she turned to look.

Her eyes widened in surprise—so did the pair staring back at her.

She stared at the sudden visitor, and then, through sobs, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Ah...umm, I'm Filiel."

"Filiel?" Yui repeated. She had a feeling she'd heard that name somewhere before, and when she searched her memories, she remembered the name of the prince her brothers had mentioned earlier. "You're royalty...right?"

"Yeah, I am, but anyway, what are you doing in a place like this? You look like you're crying. Did something happen? You must be a lady from one of the families invited to the tea party. I'm going to call someone—I'll be right back." Filiel turned around to get help. He had absolutely no idea how to comfort a crying child, and he clearly didn't want to get involved.

However, Yui didn't want her father or her brothers to find out that she was crying, so she hurriedly stood up and tried to stop him. But, due to excess momentum, she crashed into Filiel, and they both toppled to the ground together.

As they were on the ground, both of them went pale, each for different reasons—Filiel, because he'd touched someone else, and Yui, because she'd remembered Carlo's words.

"Ah..." Filiel said blankly.

"Decapitateeeed!" Yui wailed.

"Huh?" Filiel exclaimed hysterically, shocked by Yui's sudden, nonsensical shout.

"My brother said I'd be decapitated for disrespecting royalty if I approached them! Oh... By the way, what does 'decapitated' mean?" She had heard the word from Carlo, but she didn't quite understand the meaning.

"It means cutting off someone's head, doesn't it?"

"My head's gonna get cut off?!"

"No, not just for approaching me."

"Really?"

"Of course. You'll be fine..." Filiel then recalled his initial panic. "Wait! That's not important! Are you okay?!"

"Ah, sorry for landing on you. Thanks to you, I'm all right." Yui figured that Filiel was worried because she'd fallen, so she apologized. However, that wasn't what he wanted to ask.

"You touched me, but nothing happened?"

"Is something supposed to happen when I touch you?" Yui asked. She reached out and gently placed her hand atop his. He could feel her warmth, but she was perfectly all right. He wasn't even wearing his gloves.

"How...?" Filiel mumbled, unable to come to grips with the situation.

Yui was confused as to why he was so dumbfounded, and she tilted her head. She had already stopped crying, but the tears that had collected in her eyes fell, and Filiel returned to his senses. He had been thinking of leaving as soon as possible earlier, but now, he was interested in the girl in front of him. He wanted to try talking with her a bit longer.

"Why were you crying?" he asked.

The sadness Yui had forgotten immediately returned, and her tears started flowing again, which startled Filiel.

"Wh-What?! Did I say something that hurt you?"

"No. If only I were as talented as my brothers, I... Father..." She choked up. "Waaaaah!"

"C-C'mon..." When Yui started to cry loudly, Filiel felt greatly flustered. If I'd known this was going to happen, I would've tried being around some kids closer to my age, he thought, feeling incredibly regretful. He had no idea how to comfort her. Then, he remembered what his grandfather had done when he had cried as a young boy. He cautiously extended a hand and patted Yui's head. Her eyes momentarily widened, but she did nothing to push away his hand as he tried to comfort her—she just went along with it. Filiel was relieved that nothing had happened, and he felt both shaken and happy about this fresh experience. He also cradled a faint hope: Maybe she can accept me without being afraid.

After Yui cried herself out and calmed down, Filiel learned from her about what had happened.

"Your father doesn't treat you well, so when you saw a girl and her father getting along, you were jealous...?"

Yui nodded.

"So what about it? If your father's like that, then just ignore him."

Yui was shocked by Filiel's bluntness. His direct manner of speaking made tears come to her eyes again. When Filiel noticed this, he panicked. One of the ill effects of having few opportunities to talk to others was that he wasn't very good at conversation.

"Ah, hold on, I said that wrong. I didn't mean it like that! What I want to say is, wouldn't you be happy, even without your father?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't touch people because of my powerful magic energy. So, my parents

have never hugged me, and I've never held my brother's hand. Because of this power, everyone around me is afraid. They all stay away from me."

As he spoke, Yui's eyes turned to the hand that was on top of her head. "But you're touching me now..."

"Oh, well, that's right, but just put that aside for now. Even if you and your father are on bad terms, your mother and your brothers are different, right?"

"Yeah. They're all nice."

"Then isn't that enough? Rather than feeling sad over what you don't have, I think it's better to be happy about what you do. I can't touch my parents or my brother, and because I can't completely control my magic energy, we can't see each other often, but they really care about me, and I care about my family too. A lot of people are afraid of me and won't come near me, but I think I'm very happy because I have people I love—and who love me back. You love your mother and your brothers, don't you?"

Yui nodded emphatically.

"Then isn't that all you need? Even if your father doesn't care for you, there are others who will love you more than he ever will."

Yui felt a comforting warmth growing inside her as she listened to him. *Am I actually happy? Is there really no need to force myself to get him to like me?* Those thoughts lightened the weight on her heart to a surprising degree. "Yeah...you're right...!"

Yui's tears fell freely, but this time, Filiel wasn't shaken; he kindly watched over her. "Oh, right. I haven't asked you for your name yet," he said.

"I'm Yui."

"Yui, huh... I get the feeling that it's a bit late saying this now, but it's nice to meet you."

"Yes, it's nice to meet you too." With bright red eyes, Yui smiled happily.

"Grandfather, would you mind if I went for a short stroll around the garden?"

After his grandson said that, he hurried away, and Theodore watched him go. Theodore sighed, disappointed. So it was pointless after all.

In contrast with his older brother Alexis, Filiel had attended so few noble social events that Theodore could count them on one hand. A child of Filiel's age would've usually accumulated a fair amount of social experience—he would've even formed familiar relationships with others. However, the only people Filiel was close with outside of his family were adults like Gaius, the captain of the royal guard, and also the commander in chief of the army. Theodore had been worried that if Filiel didn't make friends with children his age soon, he'd be isolated at the academy, so he'd forced him to come along...

Filiel emitted enough magic energy to make even adults afraid, so there was no way children would be able to withstand it. Additionally, Filiel was afraid of coming into contact with others, so he also didn't try to talk to anyone. There was no way he'd be able to make friends under those conditions.

I have to come up with a new strategy, Theodore thought. But suddenly, he was surprised to see Filiel talking to two boys his age. They were far away, but they looked to be conversing normally. Theodore considered asking about the boys, but those around him had noticed that he was observing them, and they told him everything before he could even ask.

"Those are Count O'Brian's sons," said one of the nobles. "They're the same age as His Highness. Apparently, they're incredibly brilliant and are already forming a faction."

Another noble nodded. "I've heard that as well, but it's a shame about their father."

"Yes, I don't hear very good rumors about him. I believe there are others who may be more worthy of His Highness."

They seemed to be panicking about Theodore's interest in the boys, and they were desperately trying to give him a bad impression of them. However, Theodore couldn't care less about the boys' family. There were finally some people who could be Filiel's friends. A grin spontaneously appeared on Theodore's face at this fortunate encounter.

For a while, Theodore continued to receive the succession of nobles who

came up to greet him, but slowly, he got sick of the never-ending line of them. He said his goodbyes to the host and searched for Filiel. The last time he'd seen his grandson, Filiel had been walking off into the garden, so he followed. As Theodore went deeper in, there were less and less people, and then suddenly, someone appeared at Theodore's back.

There had been absolutely no inkling of their presence before their appearance. They were wearing all-black clothing from head to toe, and they had an odd presence that clearly distinguished them from the average person. However, Theodore didn't show even the slightest surprise. As he calmly walked ahead, he spoke to the person behind his back.

"Where's Filiel?"

A calm, featureless voice offered a reply. "His Highness is just slightly farther in."

"Now what in the world has he been doing here for all this time? Good grief."

"He..."

The tone of the voice changed—it sounded perplexed. Theodore stopped walking for the first time and turned around. "What, did something happen?"

The person standing before him—the head of the family of Shadows who had served the royal family for a long time—was always calm and collected. Theodore had done all sorts of things to try and make them crack a smile, but they had never so much as let an eyebrow twitch, so it was incredibly rare to see them shaken. Theodore didn't think that Filiel was in danger. If there'd been any trouble, he would've already gotten a report. However, there had definitely been some sort of unforeseen event, enough for the Shadow to lose their composure.

"It may be best for Your Majesty to confirm it with your own eyes. I don't think you'll believe me if I just tell you."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?" Feeling suspicious, Theodore continued ahead. Then, he heard a voice. He held his breath and slowly approached.

"'Filiel' is kinda hard to say."

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"Really? My mother always calls me 'Fil.'"

"Hmm...how about 'El'? You look like an El!"

"How do I look like an El? Well, all right."

"Okay, El."
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Theodore heard a truly pleasant-sounding conversation, mixed with the sound of laughter. When he realized that one of those voices was his grandson's, his eyes widened in surprise. Filiel had spent all his days surrounded by adults, and this may have been the first time his grandson had experienced such a relaxed conversation with someone. Judging from the other voice, the person speaking with Filiel was a girl.

In the end, the party seemed to have been a rich source of new meetings for Filiel. Theodore smiled, unable to hide how glad he was to have brought his grandson with him. Then, in order to see what kind of girl Filiel was talking to, he appeared in front of the two. She had light brown hair and pale blue eyes. *She's a cute girl*, Theodore thought, but an instant later, he was so surprised that his jaw dropped. He was petrified.

Wary of Theodore after his sudden appearance, Yui had moved behind Filiel. Though it was over his clothes, she was grabbing his arm.

Filiel was worried about Theodore, who had frozen solid without saying a word. "Grandfather, is something the matter?"

Theodore finally returned to his senses, but his mind was still chaotic. "Filiel, that girl looks like she's touching you. Have my eyes given out on me?"

Filiel immediately understood why Theodore was acting so strange, but he didn't seem like he knew how to explain it. "No, you're seeing it correctly. For some reason, it's completely fine if she touches me... Look." He grabbed Yui's hand with his bare hand and held it up so Theodore could see.

Theodore paused. "I certainly wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes." He understood why the head of the Shadows had been so shaken—Theodore was hardly able to believe it himself, even though he had seen it in person.

Bewildered, Yui looked at Filiel. "El?"

"He's my grandfather," Filiel explained.

When she heard that he was Filiel's grandfather, the word "royalty" popped into her mind, and she hurriedly stood up and bowed.

"There, there, no need to be so formal," Theodore said. "More importantly, do you really feel completely fine?"

"Yes, I do," Yui replied. She was confused, and she clearly didn't understand what it meant to be able to touch Filiel.

"Hmm." She doesn't seem to be using magic or a magic item, Theodore thought. In all his years, he had never seen a case like this, so he wasn't able to understand what it all meant. "Well, what's your name?"

"My name is Yui O'Brian."

So she's his blood relative, Theodore thought. Even without knowing the magical reason for it, that was all he needed to hear to understand why the girl could touch Filiel. Theodore got a faraway look in his eyes.

Looking somewhat uncomfortable, Yui hesitantly spoke. "Um, I think my brothers are looking for me, so please excuse me."

She quickly tried to leave, but then, from behind her, she heard Theodore say, "Hold on." There was no way she could just keep going when the former king had asked her to wait, so she stopped and turned around.

"There's something I want to ask of you, so would you listen to me?" Theodore asked.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I want you to meet with Filiel again." Theodore had seen the horribly disappointed expression on Filiel's face when Yui had tried to leave. His grandson had finally expressed interest in another person, and he couldn't let her slip out of his grasp.

Yui had wanted to talk more with Filiel too, so she had no reason to refuse, but she did have one worry. "Will you tell my father?" she asked. She had no idea what her father would do if he learned that she was meeting with royalty,

and she was terrified of his potential reaction.

Becoming a conversation partner of royalty was a great honor, so everything was generally done through the family. However, seeing Yui's gloomy expression, Theodore could tell that doing so wouldn't be good for her. He glanced sideways at Filiel, who had a grim look on his face. Seeing that, Theodore was quick to make his judgment.

"Yui, can you sneak out of your house and come to visit?" he asked.

No one in that house besides her mother and her brothers ever paid her any mind. If I just tell them that I'm going to play with friends, I could slip out without any difficulty, Yui thought. She nodded.

"Then, let's keep it a secret from your family. What about meeting somewhere else?" Theodore asked. It would've been easy to force things ahead, but here was finally someone who might be a source of comfort for Filiel. He didn't want her to feel any ill will toward the royal family, and especially not toward his grandson.

After thinking it over for a little while, Yui agreed. "That should work... But is it really all right? That means you'll be slipping out of the palace to meet me." She seemed to want to ask whether it was fine for him to sneak out of the palace so simply.

"It won't be a problem at all, so don't worry about it. In a way, we slipped out of the palace to come here today." Theodore chuckled.

Behind him, Filiel mumbled irritably. "Father will get angry if he finds out."

"I'll write you a letter soon," Theodore promised Yui.

"Okay. I'll look forward to it," Yui said. "See you later, El."

"Yeah, later."

Yui waved at him, then left, and Filiel stared at her until he couldn't see her anymore. Once she was gone, he felt someone's gaze, and he turned around to see his grandfather grinning at him. "What is it...?" he asked, irritated.

"You only just met her today, but you're quite a couple. Did you fall for her?"

"Wha—? Th-Th-That's not it at all!" Filiel's face turned bright red as he

stuttered.

"There's no need to be so shy. I guess romance comes for us all—even you."

"I'm telling you, it isn't like that!"

"I bet if I told your parents, they'd cry with joy."

"Please never do that!"

In contrast with Filiel's usual state, where he concealed his emotions in order to suppress his magic energy, his responses right now were entertainingly genuine. From the bottom of his heart, Theodore was delighted at this fortuitous encounter.





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by Kureha

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