
FUYU AOKI
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01
I Want to Be a Saint, But I can Only Use Attack MAGIC!

Table of Contents

Copyright
Character Page
Prologue: The Beginning of the Legend
Chapter 1: The Magnificent Academy Debut of the Rising New Star, Yuffie! (At Least, It Should Have Been)
Chapter 2: The Devil's Incantation: Okay! Form Pairs!
Chapter 3: Student Council? What's That? Do They Have Yummy Goodies?
Chapter 4: Burdock Will Save the World
Chapter 5: You're the Only One I'll Never Forgive
Chapter 6: Peace Is the Best, Isn't It?!
Epilogue: Well, This Is Disturbing
Short Story: Yuffie's First Earring
Afterword
Other Series

I Want to Be a Saint, But I Can Only Use Attack Magic! Volume 1

Fuyu Aoki

Translation by Kashi Kamitoma
Illustration by Bodax
Title Design by A.M. Perrone
Editing by Lilian Le-Diep
Proofreading by A.M. Perrone and Charis Messier
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I Want to Be a Saint, But I Can Only Use Attack Magic! Volume 1

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YUFFIE ABISUS' S
MAGNIFICENT CAMPUS LIFE
CREEPY SMILE
DYING OF EMBARRASSMENT
Agahh!!!
A PARTY OF ERRORS
今宵は宴じゃ!
IT'S TIME TO PARTY!
GROVELING



Noah Elvard

A first-year student at the Academy of Magic. The second prince of the Kingdom of Elvador and student council president. Lyle's older brother. Once he starts reading, he becomes so absorbed that everything around him disappears. Sometimes crashes into things while reading and walking.

Lyle Elvard

A first-year student at the Academy of Magic. Born the third prince of the Kingdom of Elvador, he has received the finest education as one of the candidates to be the next king. He finds himself intrigued by Yuffie, who can use attack magic despite being a girl...

Yuffie Abisus

A first-year student at the Academy of Magic. Despite being a commoner, she possesses a vast store of mana and, for whatever reason, can use attack magic, which only men can deploy. In an attempt to leave behind her life as a loner, she's aiming to become the next Saint (celebrity), but she can barely perform healing magic, leaving her at the bottom of the school hierarchy.

Edward Crysis

A first-year student at the Academy of Magic. As the son of the prime minister, he and Lyle go way back. They've known each other since they were practically in diapers. Treasurer of the student council. His stern exterior is belied by his weakness for sweets. He actually has the skill to be a professional pâtissier.

Jack Gallini

A first-year student at the Academy of Magic. Born as the son of the Minister of War, he was raised in an environment that emphasized "strength," which made him hot-headed and belligerent. He's a musclehead with a hidden romantic streak, so he loves reading romance novels in secret.

Prologue: The Beginning of the Legend

***I** want to be a Saint.*

Only one reason lay behind Yuffie Abisus's deepest desire.

"Yuffie, you're always alone."

To erase those infuriating words from her life.

Roughly a thousand people lived in the village of Millil. Its singular distinctive feature was that it produced mountains of burdock. Otherwise, its presence in the magical Kingdom of Elvador was as weak as that of Yuffie herself.

And Yuffie was a resident of said village. She'd been born lighter than most other children, growing up with an appetite below average, and ended up with a body as frail as burdock root. She was pale and spindly, her hair a dull gray.

When she turned three years old, her parents sent her off to the village's sole place of learning—the church. "Goodness, I hope you can make lots of friends, sweetheart." Those words her mother uttered might as well have been a curse because her peers quickly christened her with the nickname "Ghost."

While it definitely bothered her to be treated the same as some F-rank monster living a quiet life in a cave, her coloring, plus her tendency to fade into the background, meant she didn't have a comeback either. Besides, she wasn't close enough to anyone *to* talk to them, so it was physically impossible for her to argue back. Neither her small frame nor her timidity helped her case; she always stared at the ground with her back hunched over. Additionally, she struggled to communicate with others and genuinely enjoyed being independent. Before she realized it, the people around her often said this one thing to Yuffie.

"Yuffie, you're always alone."

Mom, I'm sorry… I couldn't make any friends.

Her only "friend" in school was the nun, whom she paired up with any time an activity required a partner, such as eating lunches on field trips. Otherwise, she always sat alone in a corner of the classroom. That was the girl named Yuffie Abisus.

The turning point in her life came when she was six years old. With the church closed that day, she had nothing to do, so she just lazed around at home.

"Welcome, Saint, welcome!"

"Lady Saint! Look this way!"

"It's the Saint! It's the Saint!"

A sort of commotion had erupted outside. Curious, she quietly poked her head out the window to take a peek. A crowd had gathered in the square in front of the house. Her eyes were drawn to a woman in the middle of the throng, a mix of people of all ages.

"She's so pretty…" The murmur fell naturally from Yuffie's lips.

Even through the water-stained window, the woman looked incredibly radiant. Yuffie's innocent, childlike mind thought of her as an enormous jewel. The Saint's figure was slender, and her skin was white and smooth as porcelain. Her silver hair, which reached down to her back, shone like silk. In her right hand, she held a staff adorned with a blue jewel. The habit she wore was similar to those worn by the nuns at church, but hers was much more luxurious and fine, like the feathery robes of an angel. The woman's expression was calm and so kind that it made her smile. She seemed to possess a compassion capable of encompassing all the sadness and suffering of the world.

"Oh my, the Saint is here."

Yuffie's mother had been standing next to her for a while, her gaze gentle.

"The Saint?"

"Yes. She's an amazing person who can use magic."

"Magic…"

At the time, she didn't know much about magic, so she didn't really understand what a Saint was or how amazing she could be. There was no one in the village who could use magic, and the church never taught her about the subject either. It was much later

when Yuffie learned that magic in this world was rare, and only nobles who lived in cities, such as the royal capital, could use it.

All of a sudden, a man walked up to the Saint. It was hard to distinguish the faces of the people crowding around her, but she immediately knew it was Mr. Ed because of his missing arm. Mr. Ed ran a produce shop with his wife, and apparently lost his right arm in a monster attack in the forest a long time ago. Yuffie had met him a few times. Each time, she hid behind her mother out of shyness, so she'd never actually spoken to him.

The Saint raised her staff to the sky and chanted something at him. At that moment, Mr. Ed's right arm began to shine brightly.

"Wow…"

For the first time in her life, Yuffie witnessed magic. His right arm, which he should have never been able to touch or see again, appeared whole and well—like nothing had ever happened.

The crowd erupted in excitement.

"It's a miracle!!"

"As expected of the Saint!!"

As everyone shouted words of praise for the Saint, Mr. Ed stared at his hand long and hard. He stroked it with his other hand with an expression of disbelief, and eventually, tears spilled from his eyes as emotion overcame him. He wrapped his newly born arm, created by the Saint's miracle, firmly around his wife's back. Tears welled up in her eyes, too.

The villagers all gazed at the Saint with admiration and respect. The eyes of Yuffie's classmates, who always looked at her like she was a withered weed, also glowed.

She's…amazing… A shiver wracked her body. Deep in her mind, Yuffie thought how incredible it was to see the power that had restored Mr. Ed's lost arm in an instant. But she had another thought too. *I'm jealous…*

When her very existence wasn't much different from that of a rock lying around, it was inevitable that she would admire the Saint, surrounded and adored by so many people.

I want to…use magic, too!

Without even realizing it, she had run out of the house.

"Oh my goodness! Yuffie, wait!"

She heard her mother's surprised voice from behind, but kept running.

I need to use it! Fast!

Her body moved before she could think it through.

If Yuffie had just asked her mother about magic at that moment, the fate of the world wouldn't have been decided by one girl.

And so, she set foot in the forest on the outskirts of the village. She ran, letting her excitement get the better of her. Unfortunately, exercise wasn't part of her daily routine, so exhaustion hit quickly. She felt like she'd throw up if she weren't careful. In fact, she *did* vomit a little.

But Yuffie quickly recovered. She was going to use magic now. At the thought, an uncontrollable sense of elation whirled in her chest.

"I hope…I can use magic like the Saint…"

She clenched her fist tightly. Her gaze, always pointed down at the ground thanks to her hunched posture, now faced forward.

"And then I'll be popular too…!"

An image of a new world bloomed in her mind.

"You can use such wonderful magic! You're amazing, Yuffie!"

"That's incredible, Yuffie! Show me more!"

"Eeek! Look this way, Lady Yuffie!"

"Heh… Heh heh heh…"

Uh-oh, she was drooling. She wiped at her wet mouth and fantasized about using magic adroitly to become popular. Then she closed her eyes, held out both hands in front of her, and imagined it. The magic the Saint used. That sparkling, beautiful magic that made it possible to achieve things that could only be thought of as miracles. She concentrated hard and visualized. And then, gradually, a gentle warmth began to envelop both of her palms.

On that day, a crater of unknown origin appeared in the forest on the outskirts of the village of Millil.



Chapter 1: The Magnificent Academy Debut of the Rising New Star, Yuffie! (At Least, It Should Have Been)

DEAR *Mom and Dad,*

Time flies, and nine years have passed since the day I started admiring the Saint. A lot has happened since then, but I've been accepted into the Academy of Magic without any issues. Now, fully grown in mind and body, I find myself in a forest not far from the royal capital of the Kingdom of Elvador.

"…Hrrrngh."

She felt like crying.

"Uuurk… According to the map, it *should* be this way…"

She wiped the tears from her eyes and unfolded the map once more.

Even after nine years, her build was still as small as ever, and her skin as pale as a sickly baby. Her grey hair, now reaching down to her waist, fluttered every time her eyes wandered across the map. On her back, she carried a large backpack, totally at odds with her petite frame.

Yuffie Abisus, fifteen years old. Currently completely lost. She had reviewed the map countless times in preparation for this day, and even though the entrance ceremony had yet to take place, she had visited the Academy of Magic often to confirm the directions. The entrance ceremony was tomorrow, just around the corner, and even though she left home early in the morning with plenty of time to spare, Yuffie lost track of where she was in the forest on the way.

"Why does this always happen to me…" She hung her head, the words slipping feebly from her mouth, truly disgusted by her own incompetence. "At this rate, if I don't make it to the Academy…"

GULP… Dark thoughts surfaced in her mind and began stabbing Yuffie with frightening words.

"Someone who can't even remember a single route has no right to be a Saint!"

"Do you have any idea how disrespectful it is to be absent from the entrance ceremony of a glorious school of magic?!"

"Death penalty! Give her the death penalty!"

Expelled before her first day! Executed for lèse-majesté! Her mother and father torn and in tears in front of their daughter's gravestone!

"Noooooooooooooooo! Not that…! Anything but thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!"

ROLL, ROLL, ROLL, ROLL!

Then, a warm voice echoed through Yuffie's head as she writhed on the ground.

"Yuffie, you all right?"

She stopped dead.

"Ah— Friend…"

"Calm down, it's okay. Now, take a deep breath. That's right, in and out."

Her only companion and conversation partner, Friend, encouraged her.

"In… Out…" As she pumped more oxygen into herself, Yuffie gradually regained her composure.

"Good, good! You're doing great, kiddo! Pat yourself on the back!"

"Heh heh heh…? Am I really?"

The praise made her smile a little. Thanks to his encouragement, Yuffie was able to regain her composure in an instant. Friend was a very precious being who accepted everything about her. He didn't have a specific form because he was in her head.

Wait a second. Most people wouldn't normally call that a *friend*? Well, Yuffie wasn't going to hear any of that!

Anyway. Friend was her cherished friend, her emotional anchor—absolutely no doubt on this front.

"But…" She was at the age where she wanted *real* friends. "When I get to school, I'll make some actual *human* friends, and then…" Grinning, she started fantasizing. "I'll become a great Saint and be popular with everyone… Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha… Heh heh heh heh heh heh…"

"You can do it, Yuffie! I believe in you!"

With Friend's support, a glittering scene expanded in her head.

She stood on the balcony of the royal castle, the largest and most beautiful structure in the country. Smiling softly and waving gracefully, the epitome of a Saint. While wearing those beautiful garments, of course, just like an angel's feathered robe.

"Lady Saint, Lady Saint!"

As she imagined being watched and adored by tens of thousands of people, Yuffie lost herself in the euphoria.

RUSTLE, RUSTLE!

"Eeek!"

FLINCH!

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking! I'm just a useless bagworm, so please forgive me…!" The sudden rustle of grass startled Yuffie, and she reflexively pressed her head into the ground. The pose signaled complete surrender, and she acquired it over her fifteen years of life.

"Meow."

The sound brought an involuntary smile to her face as it rang through her ears. She raised her head and saw a black, fluffy thing.

"A…cat?"

Was it a stray, or was it lost? Either way, Yuffie's heart wasn't strong enough to remain indifferent to a cat inviting anyone it saw to a heaven of healing, no questions asked.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty…" Beaming, she stretched out her hand awkwardly.

SNUB!

"Nooo…"

The cat's rejection inflicted so much damage that it might as well have been a sharp knife thrust deep into her chest.

"I get it, humans don't even like me, so it's a bit selfish to think that cats would. I knew that, but I thought it was okay to have *some* hope since the world is so unfair…" Yuffie sat cross-legged, a gloomy look on her face, muttering under her breath, the words a disjointed rush.

As if unable to bear seeing her like that, the cat sat down in front of her, its attitude both exasperated and sympathetic.

"You're…letting me pet you?"

"Meow." The cat sounded impatient, as if telling her to hurry up and pet it already.

When she timidly stroked its small head, she felt soothed by its warm fluffiness. Her heart skipped a beat as the feline purred and rubbed its face against her palm.

"So, so cute…"

Yuffie couldn't contain her enthusiasm as she stroked the cat. Its attitude now was a stark difference from its aloofness earlier. Cats were fickle creatures, after all.

"I wish I could act like this too… Just do whatever I want…" she murmured to herself.

"*Graaaaaaaaaaaaaawwwrrr*!!!"

"Wh-What the…?!"

Yuffie instinctively covered her ears at the brain-rattling roar. Loud stomps echoed in the forest, and then something huge covered in jet-black fur appeared from the other side.

"A Black Wolf…?"

Its danger level was categorized as D. The monster was so strong that a group of roughly five mid-rank adventurers was needed to defeat it.

"*Hsss*!"

The cat she'd been cuddling until a moment ago now stood with its hackles raised and began threatening the Black Wolf. Maybe the feline had run away from the other creature. Even if that wasn't the case, at this very moment, it was definitely a target now.

"*Grrr*..."

Anyone could sense the wolf's intense will to tear apart everything it saw from the murderous intent emanating from its fierce eyes. Its sharp fangs gleamed, and hot, poisonous breath wafted from its mouth.

"*Grrrrrrrrraaaaaarrr*!!!"

Roaring, the Black Wolf ran toward Yuffie and the cat. A simple principle governed monsters' behavior: they devoured creatures weaker than themselves, incorporating them into their own flesh and blood. So, a small cat and a skinny human like Yuffie were perfect targets.

If a normal person found themself in this situation, they would immediately clasp their hands together and pray to the heavens. "Oh, God, have I done something wrong?" With that question in their heart, they would be torn apart by razor fangs and become a Black Wolf's dinner—any *normal* person.

"Thunder Hammer Explosion."

Light burst from Yuffie's outstretched hand, striking the Black Wolf at a speed faster than the eye could see—a blinding white flash, followed by a crackling sensation, and then an explosion. With only a questioning "*Grr*?" sound, the Black Wolf vanished off the face of this world. It all happened in an instant.

"…Gosh, what a nasty shock that was." Yuffie sounded dazed after finishing off the monster. Her energy was the same as when you reflexively swat a small fly away.

"Oh, no! I didn't mean to…!"

It stunned her to see so many trees cut down and the charred ground as a result of her attack. The scene reminded her of the time when she was five and accidentally broke a vase in the house, which led to her mother scolding her.

"B-But this was an emergency! I didn't have a choice…!" She tried to rush away quickly, explaining herself to God only knows who. Before she could, though…

"Your magic is as incredible as ever, Yuffie."

A voice, definitely *not* from inside her head, vibrated in her ears. She traced the source to the cat sitting at her feet.

"Friend…is that you?" she ventured.

"Yup, it's me."

Was this an illusion? The cat, who'd only been making cute meowing noises until now, was speaking in Friend's voice.

"Don't look so surprised. I'm me."

"D-Did you read my mind? But wait…"

Actually, it didn't seem so strange to her because, after all, Friend himself was a figment of her imagination. In other words, she was the star of her own sad one-woman show. From the outside, she probably looked like a crazy person who talked to herself a lot.

Oh, no. I sort of want to die now…

Not actually, though. If she *did* die, it would cause a whole host of problems, so she cut off that train of thought, along with the one that made her wonder why the cat started speaking in Friend's voice. She'd never excelled at pondering over difficult things anyway.

I'm sure it's just my overly active imagination that connected Friend and the cat. That was how she convinced herself.

"I still have to figure out how I'm getting to school."

She shrugged her backpack on again. If she didn't find her way out of this forest quickly, it would be night by the time Yuffie reached the Academy. Just as she was about to hurry on, Friend (the cat) jumped onto her shoulder. He then proceeded to rub his face against her cheek. Apparently, he thought of her as his savior and had no intention of leaving her.

"I guess I can't…leave you here, huh?"

Yuffie wasn't kind so much as she tended to go with the flow. And that was why she decided to take Friend with her. She stroked him lightly, and he purred with pleasure. Smiling at how adorable he was, she ran off with Friend (the cat) on her shoulder.



THE Academy of Magic was located a little outside of the city center of Gardelia, the capital of the Kingdom of Elvador.

"We made it…somehow…" Standing in front of the gates of the Academy, Yuffie exhaled in relief.

The sky was beginning to turn orange with the sun setting, but there was still some time before it got dark. Despite the misunderstanding earlier when the guard at the gates of the school thought she was suspicious, she had somehow managed to convince him she was, in fact, a new student. He had let her through, and here she was now, safely on the grounds.

She was nervous that someone would question Friend, who'd been on her shoulder the whole time, but no one said a thing. Perhaps the Academy was tolerant of pets.

"Wow… This is so…incredible."

Yuffie sighed dreamily as she surveyed the majestic establishments the Academy of Magic boasted. The stone school buildings sported tall spires, and granite carvings adorned the walls. Stained-glass windows suffused the place with a mystical color thanks to the sunlight streaming in.

But it wasn't just made of inorganic material. The garden was lined with a variety of trees and seasonal flowers in full bloom. A sense of tranquility permeated the space, as if time passed slowly here.

Needless to say, the church in her village of Millil didn't hold a candle to the massive educational institution.

"Hi."

JOLT!

Surprised by the sudden voice coming from behind, Yuffie dropped her backpack on the ground and crouched, using it as a shield to hide behind.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Why are you acting like that?"

"Oh! I'm sorry, it's just a bad habit…"

She peeked out from behind her backpack to see who had called out to her. And found…a handsome young man standing there. His blue eyes reminded her of the sea. His nose was straight, and his blond hair, looking soft to the touch, glimmered in the sunlight. He was so inhumanly beautiful that Yuffie thought this must have been what the first man looked like when God created him.

He was tall and slender, but by no means skinny. The ripples in his clothes suggested a lean, muscular build, and he wore his school uniform like it was the formal attire of a royal family.

Aaaaaaaaaah, this is too much for me! I'm blinded by a person made of pure light!

FWISH!

"Huh. There you go, hiding again," he commented.

"I'm sorry… This just isn't something a human of darkness should see…" she muttered.

"Aha ha ha! Where the heck did that even come from?" The young man covered his mouth as he chuckled. "You're funny."

"Funny…?" Yuffie popped her head out again. "Am I really?!"

"Does the thought make you that happy?"

"Oh, I'm sorry… I got carried away. Please don't hate me…"

"Why would I? I mean, it's the first time I'm meeting you."

The young man smiled the whole time.



"I'm Lyle. And you are?"

"Um, I'm Yu-Yu…Yu…YuYuffie."

"YuYuYuYuYuffie, huh? An unusual name."

"N-N-N-N-, that's wrong. Please take out four of the 'Yus'…"

"Then just 'Yuffie,' huh? I like that. You a new student?"

"Oh, yes, I am."

"Me too. Nice to meet you." Lyle held out his hand.

I-Is this…the friendly handshake I've heard rumors about…?!

A zap went through her head like a lightning strike, and excitement bubbled in her chest. But at the same time, negative thoughts gathered like dark rain clouds unleashing a sudden downpour.

Such beautiful hands… Is a loser like me even allowed to touch them…?

"Um, Yuffie? What's wrong?"

"Ahhhh! I'm sorry!"

She came to her senses and made up her mind. It would be rude to refuse a friendly handshake here. Mustering what little courage she had, barely the size of her pinky finger, she timidly took Lyle's hand.

"N-Nice to meet you too…" Her voice was as reedy as a dying insect's final chirp.

"Yeah, let's have a great year."

Seeing Lyle's refreshing smile, Yuffie felt a bit relieved. It would be rude to hide forever, so she hoisted her backpack on again.

"Um… Well…"

What should I talk about? She had no idea what topic to bring up. Having only spoken to her family for the past few years, her communication skills were next to nonexistent. *Wait… I know!*

Yuffie was ready for a situation exactly like this and opened her backpack. She quickly took out a long, dark brown object and offered it to Lyle.

"Um, here you go…"

"Is this…burdock?"

She nodded eagerly. The burdock was a specialty of Millil, and she'd washed and dried it thoroughly. *Gifts are the best thing to give*

as a sign of friendship! With this in mind, Yuffie had brought a large amount of it from home as a secret weapon, and it took up most of the space in her bulging backpack.

Lyle's eyes widened for a moment before he smiled and said, "Thank you. I'm looking forward to eating it."

End of conversation.

Uuungh! What do we talk about now*…?!*

Maybe reading her mind, Lyle broke the silence. "Is that cat your familiar?" He seemed interested in Friend, who was grooming himself on Yuffie's shoulder.

"No, he's Friend."

"Ahhh, so you're friends, huh? That's great."

"Um… No, he was under attack from a Black Wolf earlier, and I saved him, is all."

"A Black Wolf?! Seriously?!"

"Yeees?!" Yuffie wheezed out when Lyle suddenly raised his voice.

"Where and when?!"

"J-J-Just now, in the forest on the way to this school…"

"The Funnel Forest! I guess that makes sense… Are you all right? You're not hurt anywhere?"

"Oh, yes! I managed to take it down, so I'm totally fine!"

His eyebrows twitched at her response. "Meaning…you had a guard with you?"

"No…?"

"Then you can use swordsmanship?"

"I can't even use a kitchen knife…"

"Then are you actually a boy dressed as a girl, Yuffie?"

"What? How did you even arrive at *that* conclusion?!"

Lyle burst out laughing. "Well, if you beat a Black Wolf on your own, the only way you could have was by using attack magic."

"A-About that…"

"Relax, I'm only kidding!" Lyle replied nonchalantly. "Since you were pulling my leg, I thought I'd do the same. You were trying to lighten the mood, right?"

"Um, well…" She couldn't keep up with his train of thought.

"I mean, come on." After a pause, Lyle continued, "Only *men* can use offensive magic. Everyone knows that."

"Eep!" she squeaked.

"Why did you suddenly look away?"

"…N-No reason. None at all," she got out awkwardly. She was desperately trying to conceal her agitation from him.

"All right, if you say so. Then…" He looked at Yuffie again before speaking. "Sorry to keep you for so long, Yuffie. I had fun talking to you. Thanks."

"O-Oh, the p-pweasur…" Having lisped out of nerves, she wanted to die.

"I still have a few things to take care of, so I'll see you around campus," he said.

"Yes, of course! See you!" She bowed so deeply that it felt like her hips would give out.

"You don't have to be so formal. We *are* classmates, you know." With a soft laugh, Lyle bade goodbye and strode away.

Yuffie stared blankly at his back for a while. "What a strange boy…" Then a sudden idea popped into her head. "It'd be fun to have someone like him as a friend… No, no, not for me." She shook her head vigorously, banishing the thought.

We live in two completely different worlds… There's no way he'd be friends with me*.*

Her self-deprecating sigh puzzled Friend, who asked her, "What's wrong, Yuffie?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

After patting Friend, Yuffie started walking.



SOME time after she and Lyle went their separate ways…

"Where am I…?"

…Yuffie had tears in her eyes again. She was supposed to be heading to the dorms, but she'd gotten completely lost. The campus was huge. Really huge. So huge that her entire village could probably fit inside it. Yuffie had such a terrible sense of direction that

she would sometimes get lost even in Millil, so it was extremely challenging for her to navigate the school grounds, a place she was visiting for the first time.

"In that case…"

The only thing she could do was ask someone. Fortunately, or unfortunately for a timid girl like her, lots of people were walking around. She could call out to them and ask them where the dorms were. Problem solved. However…

"No way, no way, no way! I can't, I can't, I can't!"

To Yuffie, talking to someone on her own was as difficult as a baby confronting a Black Wolf. Just thinking about it made her stomach turn. She wanted to avoid it at all costs. But at this rate, she'd never make it to the dorms. Turning into a skeleton before a Saint would be a massive disgrace to her family.

"Nnngh… What should I do…?" she groaned.

"Would you like some help?" The voice tinkled like a bell. She turned around as if lured by it…

"Wow…"

…and discovered an incredible beauty. Wide, clear eyes. A small but perfectly slanted nose. Every feature was neatly positioned. A svelte figure, skin as white and smooth as porcelain, and silver hair cascaded down her back like silk threads. Though the girl wore the same uniform, her overpowering elegance made her stand out.

She was the kind of young woman who made you think that the word "beautiful" was created specifically for her. And what caught Yuffie's eye most of all was her calm, compassionate expression that seemed to envelop all the sorrow and suffering of the world. Suddenly, she remembered a woman she had seen a long time ago with a similar aura. The Saint who came to the village nine years ago…

"Why…are you hiding?" the girl asked.

"I'm sorry, you're just so bright…"

Like with Lyle, Yuffie couldn't bear the overwhelming aura of light the girl emanated, so she hid behind her backpack.

"Really? But it's already sunset," she noted with a puzzled look, apparently interpreting Yuffie's words literally.

She couldn’t stay hidden forever, so Yuffie popped her head out from behind her backpack.

“Meow!” At the same time, Friend popped his head out from her hold.

“Gah! Friend!”

“Oh, my!” The young lady, quiet until just now, lit up. “Oh my my my, how adorable! Is she your familiar?”

“Ah, no… No, he isn’t. Ahem.”



The girl moved to stand in front of Yuffie and started petting Friend. Meanwhile, Yuffie stumbled over her words as she answered.

"So, you're friends, then. I think that's lovely. What's his name?"

"Friend."

"…? Yes, I can see you're good friends. I'm asking his name?"

"Um… Friend…"

"Oh… Oh, I see! It's quite a unique name, so I misunderstood. I'm sure you want to deepen your bond with him as much as you would with a human friend… At least I'm assuming that's what inspired you to name him 'Friend?'"

"Aha… Ha ha… You could…say that."

I can't tell her I call him 'Friend' because he's my only friend in the world… Yuffie studiously avoided the other girl's gaze.

"Have you been friends for a long time?"

"N-No. We only met a little while ago."

"Well, isn't that marvelous! I'm jealous of how quickly you two became friends. I should have brought my own Black Hole Seraphim and Demon Overlord God Phoenix from home too."

"B-B-B…?"

Maybe she has an evil god as a pet…? At this point, Yuffie started to get the impression that the young woman *might be a bit odd…*

"Um… Is it normal to bring animals to school?" Yuffie asked.

"Many nobles bring familiars to use magic, or their pet dogs and cats. Students are allowed to keep animals in the dorms at their own risk."

"I-I see…" Yuffie finally understood why the gatekeeper hadn't asked her any questions about the cat.

Oooh, this is my chance!

She made up her mind and spoke up. "Um! I-I'm actually trying to find the dorms, but I got lost…"

"Oh, you poor thing. Why didn't you say so? Let's see, the best way to get you there…" The young lady gave her careful directions on how to reach the dorms. She didn't look irritated at all, as if helping someone in trouble was as easy as breathing.

"Th-Thank you so much! Really, you're a lifesaver!" Yuffie bowed and thanked her again and again.

"You're welcome. And you don't have to be so over the top. It was just a little thing."

The girl seemed a bit taken aback by Yuffie's dramatic display of gratitude. But then she flashed a perfect, genuine smile.

It was at that moment that several female students came running over to them.

"Lady Erina!"

"So, this is where you were! We've been looking for you for ages!"

When she saw them, the lovely girl frowned in disappointment and murmured, "Darn. They found me. I only managed to carve out a little time for myself… Oh?"

Before she knew it, Yuffie had vanished without a trace. Erina looked around and saw her sprinting away toward the dorms, shouldering the enormous backpack.

"Perhaps she remembered something urgent she has to do," she muttered in a thoughtful tone. Then she murmured, "I've apparently forgotten to ask her name."



"FINALLY, it's over…"

In a room in the Academy of Magic's student dormitory, Yuffie was wiping the sweat from her forehead as she took a breather. She had eaten dinner (burdock root she brought from home) and was unpacking her things. The room assigned to her was equipped with all the necessary furniture for living alone, such as a bed, desk, closet, and dressing table. Maybe on account of so many students being from famous noble families, the room was well-built and spacious for one person.

In addition, there was a large store on the first floor of the dormitory that sold food and daily necessities, so Yuffie won't have any trouble with daily life here. Also, since many of the aristocratic students brought their pets, Yuffie was able to procure cat food for

Friend. To Yuffie, who came from a rundown house in the faraway countryside, it felt like moving into a mansion.

"You seem tired, Friend."

She dove into the lush bed, and Friend, who'd been sleeping soundly at her side, opened his eyes and meowed. But after a moment, he yawned, closed his eyes again, and went back to sleep. Yuffie had just fed him, which explained his food coma.

Friend, Yuffie's imaginary friend, appeared whenever she was in a pickle or started acting strangely. He was, so to speak, responsible for her mental stability. So, Friend was probably just a cat under normal circumstances.

"You're so laidback."

She smiled a little after giving him a pat, then looked up at the ceiling and muttered to herself. "I forgot to ask her name…" The beautiful person who had shown her the way to the dorms was such a kind, gentle girl—like a Saint.

All the more reason why Yuffie was so filled with self-loathing when she thought back to how she'd acted.

"Ugh… I'm so sorry…"

As soon as several female students who seemed to be the girl's friends showed up, she ran away. Her social skills were already bad enough, but if more people were added into the mix, running away was a conditioned reflex action because Yuffie knew she wouldn't be able to handle it.

"Next time I see her, I have to apologize…"

She also had to give the young lady a token of her friendship. Yuffie didn't know whether the girl was a classmate or if she could start a conversation herself, so she had no idea what would happen. Still, she had made up her mind.

"Up we go!"

Since there was nothing in particular to do, Yuffie got off the bed. She opened the window and stepped out onto the balcony. The dormitory was on a small hill overlooking the cluster of densely packed school buildings, affording a panoramic view of the campus.

"I can't believe I'm going to live here from now on…"

She leaned her weight on the railing and felt a strange emotion rise as she looked down at the line of buildings. In principle, schools of magic were boarding schools. There were exceptions for some high-ranking nobles who lived in mansions in the royal capital and were exempt from having to stay in the dorms. Yuffie, who came all the way from the countryside, didn't fall into that category.

If she were being honest, she felt a bit lonely. But more than that was excitement. Even though the village church served as a substitute for a school, the classroom was shabby, there weren't many students, and the subjects taught weren't particularly interesting. Because of all this, her expectations for the coming days here only grew.

"Heh heh… Heh heh heh…"

Her expectations were so high that she let out a creepy laugh. Not good. Not good at all. Yuffie pressed her cheeks hard to smooth out her expression.

"I'm looking forward to my dream school life…"

She had a flashback to her memories at the church. No friends to pair up with, so she paired up with a nun. No friends to eat lunch with on the field trip, so she ate with a nun. She wasn't given any role in the school play because they'd forgotten about her, so for whatever reason, she ended up watching it from the audience. *It was hell trying to think of excuses to give Mom and Dad.*

And then, a voice echoed in her head.

"Yuffie, you're always alone."

"Aaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrghhhhhhhhh! Forget, forget, forget already!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Yuffie slammed her head against the banister, trying to blow all thoughts away into the darkness of the night.

"Meow?" Stunned by her sudden, bizarre behavior, Friend jumped up.

"Go away, my dark past!"

She danced to banish the nightmarish images, expel the dreaded memories from her mind. Yuffie thought she heard an ominous cracking sound come from somewhere in her body, a sound

that shouldn't have been there. Even so, she danced like a maniac. Unfortunately, Yuffie's stamina was as weak as her communication skills, so it wasn't long before she hit her limit.

"Haa… Haa…"

Out of breath, she curled up as if slammed by a body blow. After a while, she staggered to her feet.

"I-It is what it is… I was just unlucky enough to grow up in a bad environment…"

She forced herself to say positive things to lift her spirits and dispel the negative thoughts. After wiping the sweat from her forehead, she strained a smile. Her facial muscles weren't used to the exercise. Pulling herself together, Yuffie returned to the banister, letting the night breeze carry her words away.

"My new life is about to start. I wonder if I can make a hundred friends… No, a hundred is too much… How about ten? No, even ten is a bit much…" Yuffie stood staring into the night, pondering her next choice of words. "New goal! One friend!"

That was a much more realistic target. Feeling refreshed now, Yuffie decided to go to bed for the night. All the traveling, talking to lots of people (two people), and the dance earlier had brought her stamina gauge down close to zero. Once she was ready to sleep, she crawled into bed.

"Goodnight, Friend."

"Meow…"

Yuffie closed her eyes, full of hopes and dreams for her school life. Going to bed at this reasonable hour meant waking up early in the morning. Then, she could spend that free time before classes however she wanted. Reading, taking a walk, or meditating. A productive way to kick off the day?

Because starting tomorrow, I'll be a student at the prestigious Academy of Magic…

Yuffie had finally taken her first step toward becoming the Saint she'd always longed to be. That was her reason for being here in the first place. She needed to keep that in the front of her mind, always. As she closed her eyes, bright scenes flashed in her mind one after

another. She couldn't help but smile as she imagined herself using healing magic as an extraordinary Saint.

"Heh heh heh… I'm the genius Saint, Yuffie…"

And with that, her day ended.



"DAMN you! Are you even interested in the Academy?!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!!!"

In the first-year students' classroom, a male student was tearing Yuffie a new one.

"How could you be so late on the day of the entrance ceremony?! Don't you have any self-awareness or pride as a student of this renowned school?!"

"Nnngh… Anything I say will only make things worse…"

The one reprimanding her was a serious-looking young man with black hair and glasses. Based on his appearance alone, he was obviously the type of student who had a strong sense of justice and believed in maintaining order, meaning he probably scolded people just for falling asleep in class.

Yuffie could only shrink in on herself and apologize as he blasted into her in front of everyone. While going to bed early last night had been a good thing, it was a shame that her delusions had grown too intense. All that excitement meant she didn't fall asleep until morning, and when she finally did, she ended up oversleeping. Despite getting ready faster than ever before in her life, Yuffie was spectacularly late for the orientation held in the classroom before the entrance ceremony.

Reading? Taking a walk? What a pipe dream. (Blank stare)

"That girl is crazy…"

"Plebes really need a lesson in discipline."

Uuugh… Their glares really hurt…

Whispers, backbiting, and snickering. Yuffie had learned from experience that once the atmosphere turned like this, it was too late for her. From what she could see, most of her classmates came from

schools specifically for nobles. No surprise, then, that most of them had already formed cliques.

She thought that no one would want to be friends with someone who was not only a commoner but stood out in a bad way from day one. But then…her eyes met the goddess of salvation's. The girl who had given her directions to the dorms yesterday was smiling and waving at Yuffie.

We're in the same class…! Just being in the same class with someone so kind made her feel loads better. *Note to self: Ask her name later…*

"Hey! Are you even listening to me?!"

"Y-Yesh, Sir!"

The moment she stood up straight, an elderly teacher, who seemed gentler than the male student, came to her rescue.

"Now, now, Edward, that's enough."

"Hmph. Fine, Professor, if you say so."

Maybe because he was faithful to the power dynamics, the male student backed down and ended his lecture, freeing Yuffie to take her seat. She was relieved that it was a little higher up in the middle of the spacious classroom.

"A tough first day, huh?"

She was shocked when the boy sitting next to her spoke.

"Lyle…?!"

"Hi, Yuffie. Fancy seeing you again so soon." Sea-blue eyes, a straight nose, and soft blond hair. As always, he radiated a luminous aura. "Thanks for the burdock. It was…delicious. Hey, what's wrong? Why are you covering your eyes like that?"

"Don't worry about me. I just don't have any resistance to the light."

At least now she knew she didn't need to worry about falling asleep in class.

"Oh, yeah…? Anyway, I'm sorry about Edward. He's sort of a stickler for the rules."

"P-Please don't apologize. It's my fault for being late. Is he…a friend of yours?"

"Yeah, we're childhood friends. We've known each other for over ten years now."

"Childhood friends…"

Her eyes widened—childhood friends…blessings bestowed only to those chosen by God. To Yuffie, who'd never had a friend in her life, they were like heavenly beings.

"Yuffie, are you all right? I'm worried you're going to leave us mortals for the heavens."

"Eep! I'm sorry, I almost fainted from how sacred you are."

"Honestly, where do you even come up with this stuff?" Lyle put his hand over his mouth and chuckled. "You really are funny, Yuffie."

She didn't think she'd said anything funny, but at least he didn't seem to dislike her, which was a relief.

"Omigosh, look, it's Lord Lyle."

"Ohhh… He's sooo beautiful… My eyes are practically melting."

"Handsome *and* smart, he passed the entrance exam with a perfect score… He's just so perfect."

When she overheard some of the other girls whispering, Yuffie suddenly blurted out, "Um… Are you famous, Lyle?"

"That's a good question. Technically, I *am* the third prince of this country, so I suppose some people know me."

"Y-You're the what…?!"

"Some people" is the understatement of the century!

"What the heck? Why are you suddenly on your hands and knees?!"

"Forgive me, Lord Lyle. A dung beetle like me should never have cozied up to you like this…"

"Hey, stop putting yourself down so much," he replied with a rueful smile.

When Yuffie raised her head, the kind expression on his face was the one you'd have for soothing a crying child.

"I'm not a fan of formalities, so just treat me like you have been, as equals."

He's so nice…

"O-Okay then. Thank you, Lyle…"

"Hey. You there."

FLINCH!

Her heart nearly burst through her chest at the sound of the gruff voice from behind. When Yuffie turned around, she saw the student who had bit her ear off earlier…Edward, arms crossed and a fierce look on his face.

"Don't tell me a mere commoner like you just addressed the third prince without any titles?"

"O-Of course not…" Yuffie, with a strained smile and sweat streaming down her face, bowed to Lyle again. "Once more, I would like to ask for your kind consideration for this dung beetle, Lord Lyle."

"S-Sure. Also, sorry about that, I guess?" He said with his usual gentle smile. But there was a hint of loneliness on his face.

At the time, though, Yuffie didn't notice because she lacked the ability to read the people around her.

"Who does she think she is?"

"She's way too close to Lord Lyle…"

While Yuffie was talking to Lyle, some of the girls in their class were glaring at her with jealousy.



THE entrance ceremony brought together new and current students. Tonight, a solemn atmosphere blanketed the central hall of the Academy.

"Next, the representative of the new students. Lyle Elvard, the top male student in the year, will give a speech. Please come forward."

At the master of ceremonies' call, Lyle, who was sitting in the front row, stood up and headed for the stage. As soon as he looked around, the atmosphere, which had been relaxed until then, became charged. This happened not only because of his position as the third prince but also his own charisma.

"Thank you for the introduction. I am Lyle Elvard, and I'm truly honored to be here today as the representative of the new students.

Today, we pass through the gates of this glorious Academy of Magic and begin a new journey in life…"

Yuffie, sitting in the section specifically for new students, was astounded at how smoothly he rattled off his speech. *Lord Lyle sure is amazing… He's the third prince* and *the top of our grade.* He suddenly seemed distant, and that feeling made her a little lonely.

Then a boy sitting nearby whispered, "So, he really is the top male student in our cohort, after all."

"That means…he's the most powerful in attack magic in the freshman class, right?"

"Wooow, I only wish I could be like him… I need to practice and become top-notch at attack magic too."

Yuffie felt a chill run down her spine at their words.

In this world, only men could use offensive magic. At least, in the history of the Kingdom of Elvador, *no woman had ever been able to use it*. This was important, so it bore repeating. Only *men* could use offensive magic; women could not.

This was common knowledge not only in Elvador, but the rest of the world too. Therefore, Lyle, who entered the Academy at the top of his class, was the best at attack magic in their year.

"I chose to learn and grow as an offensive magician because this power is a gift from heaven that only men like me can use, and I believe it's necessary to protect the citizens of this country from all enemies. That includes monsters and other nations…"

His words were a testament to the fact that offensive magic lay solely in men's domain.

"We'll learn, grow, and become stronger at this school. And we pledge to use this power to work hard for our nation and our people. By taking pride in ourselves as magicians, acting with sincerity and a sense of responsibility, and fulfilling our individual roles, we will be able to overcome all difficulties."

Lyle finally reached the end of his passionate speech.

"So, everyone, let's celebrate the start of a new journey and move forward! May our country and our future be a brilliant one!"

As soon as he finished speaking, the hall erupted in cheers. Moved by his words, the students rose to their feet and clapped

enthusiastically.

Amidst all of this was Yuffie…

Wow, the pressure is incredible… I feel like I might faint…

The zeal of the crowd nearly burned her to death. If you put an octopus in boiling water, its resulting color would probably match Yuffie's face right now.

As Lyle returned to his seat, silence settled over the hall again.

"Next up, Erina Celestia, the top female student. Please step forward."

A girl walked to the stage and took Lyle's place at the podium. Yuffie's eyes widened comically the moment she saw her.

"No way…" she muttered. The girl with the shoulder-length silver hair was the same one who had been kind enough to give her directions to the dorms yesterday.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Erina Celestia. I couldn't be happier to stand up here as the female representative. Having said that, I plan to take a lighter approach to what I'm about to say, so please relax, everyone." She began with a soft smile.

Yuffie felt the atmosphere in the hall mellow instantly. Once it did, Erina continued addressing the student body.

"The reason I wanted to learn healing magic…is because I grew up with a sick grandmother. At the time, I could do nothing but watch over her, and I wanted power so much. This experience was the catalyst that led me to the path of studying recovery magic…"

The students listened to the words she spun like a beautiful melody, their expressions captivated. This time, a girl sitting near Yuffie whispered loudly.

"Oh, Lady Erina, you look divine today too…"

"I want to become a great healer like her…"

Their words made Yuffie's heart pound.

In this world, only women could use recovery magic. There had never been a male in the history of the Kingdom of Elvador who could use it. This was also important to remember, so it bore repeating as well. Only women could use recovery magic, not men.

Being at the top of her grade meant that Erina was the most talented user of healing magic among the students enrolled in the

Academy this year.

"Healing magic is a power given only to us women, to heal and support people. It can cure illnesses, heal wounds, and make people's lives richer and more comfortable. However, with power comes the responsibility to use it correctly. The healing magic we learn is a force to be reckoned with, and if misused, it can bring great tragedy. We all know what happened in the Tragedy of Seraphin, and that's precisely *why* we must study the knowledge and techniques to control our power and utilize it correctly."

But…what is *the Tragedy of Seraphin?* While Yuffie tilted her head in confusion, Erina continued her speech, her gentle voice somehow exuding passionate conviction.

"However, you needn't worry. We're friends who will learn together, grow together, and become stronger together. With our powers combined, we can definitely overcome any difficulties. No matter what happens, don't forget to support and help each other."

After a pause, Erina looked around the hall and let her final words settle in the air. "Finally, I would like to conclude this speech with heartfelt thanks. I sincerely hope that your school life will prove fruitful for you all. I look forward to embarking on this new journey with everyone."

She bowed gracefully and was met with thunderous applause. A different kind of emotion than Lyle's speech enveloped the hall. Yuffie clapped too, albeit quietly. Erina's words had penetrated deep into her heart.

"Lady Erina is incredible too…" Yuffie mumbled.

"Of course. She's destined to be the country's next Saint." Edward, sitting next to her, heard her and couldn't resist making the barbed reply.

"She's what…?!"

She stared googly-eyed at him. Having lived in the countryside until now, Yuffie was unfamiliar with the magical affairs of this country, but she knew enough about Saints. One had visited her village during her childhood, and she was the reason why Yuffie wanted to study healing magic.

The Saint was the protector of the Kingdom of Elvador and considered a symbol of the hearts of its people. They could cure any terminal illness or serious injury using prayer and healing powers, and reigned as the symbol of the state religion, Valencia. Their deep wisdom and insight meant they also served as an advisor to the king.

There could only be one of her kind in each generation, demonstrating the importance of the role and the great responsibility that the Saint held. Taking all of this into consideration, it went without saying just how incredible the position was for the next one. Apparently, Erina was a person of incredible status and was in no way inferior to Lyle. The thought made Yuffie's blood run cold.

"By the way, Edward, may I ask about your background…?" Yuffie asked.

"My father is the prime minister."

"P-Prime minister…?"

"Clearly, you don't know much."

"I-I'm sorry…" She bowed her head repeatedly.

He sighed and explained. "The prime minister is someone who assists the king in government affairs."

"Th-That's so elite!"

"My father, yes. Me? Not so much."

"I still think it's impressive… I mean, our class is full of incredible people."

"Another of our classmates is from a high-ranking family, named Jack. He's the son of the minister of war."

"R-Really…?"

Even Yuffie understood what that meant.

"I find it strange that a group of old friends is in the same cohort. I'm sure the school thought it would be more convenient to keep us all together," he said.

"I-I see…?"

She didn't know much about their circumstances, so she didn't really understand what he was implying. But one thing she *did* know was that she'd be studying alongside such incredible talent. A shiver ran through her at the realization.

Both Lyle and Erina are from different worlds…

A strong sense of shame overcame her then, making her wonder if she was worthy of even breathing the same air as them.

She thought back to Erina's speech. Her beautiful face that entranced everyone, her soft smile, and the way she spoke confidently made her the epitome of the Saint. Yuffie didn't doubt that the people in the hall had a lot of faith and expectations for Erina.

And what about Yuffie herself? She didn't want to think about it.

I studied and practiced healing magic a lot too… But in the end…

Everyone was still applauding for Erina.

"I wonder if I can really become one…"

No one heard Yuffie's faint mutter as the commotion drowned it out.



THE school's courtyard was close to the hall where the entrance ceremony took place. In stark contrast to the inorganic brick school buildings, it was a place surrounded by abundant nature, showcasing its beauty in every season. Old trees stood in the spacious area, and the warm spring breeze rustled branches and leaves. In the middle was a small fountain, the water's surface sparkling in the sunlight.

And there, in such a peaceful, calming place…

"Ugh…"

…Yuffie was on the verge of throwing up.

Having grown up in the countryside, she couldn't stand how crowded the entrance ceremony had been and grew nauseous as a result. Not wanting to soil such a beautiful place with her vomit, she desperately tried to force down the hot monster surging up from the back of her throat. Unfortunately, she was losing the fight. At this point, she preferred just facing off against a solitary Black Wolf.

A few moments later, she staggered to her feet and hid herself in a spot of lush vegetation.

"Ah, greenery… The smell of grass, so calming…"

She looked like a suspicious person. However, her quick thinking worked, and the monster returned to its lair in her stomach. Just as Yuffie inhaled, thinking that she had somehow managed to avoid spewing everywhere, someone spoke.

"Oh?"

At the sound of the unfamiliar voice, her heart nearly burst out of her chest and whooshed into the sky to become a star. She whipped around and met the eyes of another incredibly handsome young man.

He had fair skin and light blue hair, like the sky reflected on the lake's surface. His green eyes, reminiscent of the deep forest, peeked out from behind his long, neatly trimmed bangs. The boy's lips pressed together in a straight line, and his expression was impassive. His slender but well-proportioned body further accentuated his fragile aura. The young man was wearing the school uniform, but the way he wore it made him look like a historic god written about by ancient poets. His ethereal beauty and mysterious charm made it hard to take your eyes off him.

As soon as this gorgeous young man saw Yuffie, he spoke in a voice like the murmur of a spring stream. "Who are you? Are you up to no good?"

She knew it. She *did* look like a suspicious intruder.

"N-N-N-No, you're wrong." With a rustle, Yuffie rose from the bushes.

"Then were you playing hide-and-seek?"

"N-No, that's not it either… I got sick at the entrance ceremony, so I was healing myself through the greenery."

That sounds so stupid! What do you mean by 'healing yourself through the greenery?' I'm such an idiot, and on top of that, he definitely thinks I'm weird now!

While regret swamped Yuffie, the young man tapped a finger on his chin, pretending to think, and then spoke again. "So…you were trying to become one with nature to calm your mind?"

"Mm-hm!" Yuffie nodded.

"I know how you feel. Being in nature is very healing."

Her face brightened at the young man's calm words. He not only understood her eccentricities but also related to her. Just that was enough to make her happy. She could swear the trumpet corps played a fanfare in her head.

Oh, right! I brought burdock as a sign of friendship… Crud, I don't have it with me right now! She'd thought it would be a bit odd to bring the root to the entrance ceremony, but now she regretted leaving it in her room!

"If you're feeling unwell, you should go to the nurse's office," he suggested.

"N-N-N-N-No, I'm fine! I managed to calm myself down."

"That's good then."

The young man, expressionless until then, inclined his head with a quiet smile. That smile would have pierced the heart of any normal girl and turned her eyes into heart symbols.

He must be an aristocrat too… I hope I didn't do anything rude… Uuurk, now I'm super nervous… Yuffie's self-esteem was so low that she couldn't survive thinking about that right now, so she tried desperately to calm her pounding heart.

"All right then. I'm going back to my reading."

The young man lay down in the courtyard. He took out a paperback book and began to read. She blinked at the boy, who was suddenly immersed in his own world.

He's…different.

She wasn't sure how to describe him. Marched to the beat of his own drum? Yuffie could tell he was a humble person from his polite tone. But the more powerful impression she got from him was of someone content in his own world, unaffected by the opinions of those around him.

Strangely enough, her shyness wasn't as strong anymore. Maybe because, unlike most people, he was easy to talk to and approachable. It might be rude to say that he was similar to her, but Yuffie felt a kinship with him.

Since reading is his hobby, it means he's an indoor person… I'm an indoor person… So, by the transitive property, he's just like me!

With the formula rattling in her head, she found her feelings toward the young man brightening. To use an analogy, it was like a stray cat tossed unceremoniously into a group of dogs reuniting with its friend after several years. She felt a strong sense of camaraderie with the young man.

"You're a freshman, aren't you?"

"Eeek!" Yuffie pressed her hand over her pounding heart. He'd scared her, talking to her out of the blue again. "How did you know…?" she asked him.

His gaze shifted to the bodice of her uniform. "Because your ribbon is red."

"Ohhh…"

Now it made sense to her. At the Academy of Magic, you could tell what year a student was in by the color of their ribbon or tie. First-year girls wore red, second-year girls wore light pink, and third-year girls wore blue. She'd forgotten the boys' colors and corresponding years, but Yuffie was almost positive Lyle's was red. She checked the color of the young man's tie—green.

"That means you're an upperclassman, my lord…"

"My lord, hm?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know how to address you…"

"My name is Noah. What's yours?"

"……Yuffie."

"Care to explain that long pause?"

"I was just replenishing my courage, so don't worry about it…"

"Aha. You're not so good at talking, are you?"

Yuffie nodded so enthusiastically she almost ripped her own head off. *He's…amazing! It's like he can read people's minds!* She was liking Noah more and more.

"Nice to meet you, Yuffie." He held out his hand. In an instant, Yuffie froze like a stone statue. "What's the matter?"

"Ahhh, I'm sorry! It's nothing!"

I can't believe I'm getting another *friendly handshake after yesterday's…*

It really put her village in a terrible light, considering she'd lived there for fifteen years and never shaken anyone's hand even once. So just like she'd done with Lyle yesterday, Yuffie timidly took Noah's hand. Compared to Lyle's, which she remembered as firm, Noah's felt relatively small and kind of fragile.

"By the way, Yuffie, aren't you going to the party?"

"What party?"

"There's an informal get-together every year after the entrance ceremony."

"Noooooooo…"

Yuffie heard a zap in her head as she vaguely remembered the teacher explaining something about a party after the entrance ceremony. She'd been feeling so nauseous that she completely forgot about it.

"Thank you very much for letting me know!" Yuffie quickly let go of Noah's hand and bowed repeatedly.

"Please be careful."

He saw her off as she left the courtyard.



A party. To Yuffie, it was like a star shining in the night sky. It wasn't just a simple function where people got together, ate food, and chatted with each other. The same as a beautiful but unreachable star, a party was also an event that she couldn't experience.

Of course, she'd be lying if she said there had been no parties back in Millil. Sometimes they were social gatherings, other times graduation celebrations, and even occasions when her popular classmates in their church school had parties. Except Yuffie had never attended any of them. Because she'd never spoken to anyone in the classroom, let alone the popular kids, so she was naturally excluded from being invited (rest omitted or she'd explode from trauma).

However, those dark memories were already in the past. Now that she was a student in the Academy of Magic, she had just as

much right as the others to go to parties. In other words, today marked Yuffie's party debut!

"This should do it!"

In her dorm room, she huffed in triumph at her reflection in the mirror. There she stood, looking like a party goods store turned into a human. She wore a brightly colored T-shirt with the words "It's Party Time!" written in large letters, and her pants were flashy with a blinking polka dot pattern. The frames of her funglasses were decorated in bright colors, and the star-and heart-shaped lenses added to the pop feel. The small charms on her colorful bracelets jangled every time she moved.

I should be able to make friends now…

Yuffie clenched her fists. She vaguely remembered that there was no dress code for the party, so after saying goodbye to Noah, she had headed straight to the store.

I can't talk to people, plus I'm plain… So, I need to make sure my clothes leave a lasting impression on people…

With that in mind, she bought all the clothes she could. She looked a bit like a traveling clown who visited the village every once in a while, but there was no doubt she'd be unforgettable.



"Wow, what a great outfit!"

"What are you wearing? I've never seen anything like it before!"

"You look awesome! Maybe you could tell me where you bought your outfit?"

"Hee hee hee… Who knows, I might even become the star of the party!"

Yuffie looked incredibly happy as she fantasized about being the most popular and eye-catching person at the party. When Friend saw her, he let out a surprised "Meoooow?!" Then he hissed and retreated under the bed in fear. Obviously, cats couldn't understand humans' fantastic fashion sense. But that was beside the point.

"Let's do this!"

She left the dormitory, bubbling with excitement and anticipation. On the way to the venue, it felt like the other students stared at her in shock… But that must have been her imagination.

The venue was a different hall from the one where the entrance ceremony was held. It was also unusually large. The party was already in full swing by the time she got there. Even from outside, she could hear the lively noise and chatter.

Darn, I missed the kick-off… But! I can still recover!

Thinking that it wasn't too late to join, she tried to enter the hall…

"…Let me just wait a bit and check things out first."

Feeling a little timid, Yuffie decided instead to sneak a peek into the venue—*CRACK*! The lenses of her funglasses shattered into pieces!

"Ahhhhhhhh, my eyes… My eeeeeyyyyyesssss…!"

She rolled around on the spot, clutching her eyes. The gathering of the Kingdom's top caste created a blinding explosion of light to rival even the sun and inflicted serious damage to Yuffie.

"Breathe in… Breathe out…"

After soothing her lungs, which felt like they'd been drilled through, she peered into the hall again. The dazzlingly glamorous stage, the crystals of the chandelier sparkled like a starry sky. Rows of delicacies, their flavors impossible to imagine, were arranged on

lavishly decorated tables that plebes like her would never be able to afford in their lifetime.

Her classmates' outfits were just as luxurious as the decorations in the hall. The boys wore dashing tuxedos and tailcoats, and the girls wore dresses studded with colorful jewels. Not a single student was decked out from head to toe in party goods.

That was when Yuffie finally realized that her outfit "stood out" and *not* in a good way. People had already formed groups, and no one lingered alone like a loser. Which meant the only thing she could do was join one of the groups herself…

No way, no way, no way! Absolutely, totally impossible!

Even talking to one person required as much effort as climbing Mount Ecest (12,800 meters above sea level), the highest mountain in the Kingdom. Attacking such a large gathering of people alone was tantamount to suicide.

Suddenly, her eyes fell on a cluster that stood out from the rest of the hall—Lyle, Edward, and Erina. They were surrounded by so many other students, seemingly enjoying their time. Erina had the same aura as the Saint who had come to Yuffie's village a long time ago, so it went without saying that the other students trusted and admired her deeply.

I wish I could be like that too… Yuffie thought as she watched them, green with envy. Understanding dawned at the same time too. *There's no place for me here…*

Her heart broke. She felt stupid for getting all dressed up and excited on her own.

"I wish I could use healing magic, too…" Mumbling sadly, Yuffie took off her funglasses.

Even if you lack social skills, as long as you're talented, people will come to you willingly.

But right now, Yuffie had neither the power of healing magic nor social skills—she had nothing. Comparing the sparkling atmosphere of the party to herself, alone in her lame clothes, she wanted to disappear from this world right away. She spun on her heel and trudged back to the dorms.

Chapter 2: The Devil's Incantation: Okay! Form Pairs!

YUFFIE was originally going to enroll in the Academy of Magic as a user of healing magic. But that didn't happen. When she was six years old, she saw the Saint come to the village and ran into the forest.

"I want to be able to use magic like the Saint…"

And with that thought, she imagined a spell. What came out of her outstretched hands was a raging flame that almost burned down the whole forest.

KABOOOOOOSH!

"Wha-?!"

The explosion blasted her off her feet and was so strong that it blew a crater in the ground, not to mention the damage it did to the trees. She staggered up and stared at the hellish scene of trees blazing. For a moment, Yuffie was stunned—unable to understand what had happened—but she soon realized what she'd done.

Mother is going to be so mad!

She was panicking. Yuffie remembered the time she had broken a vase and received the scolding of her young life. Even for a six-year-old, Yuffie already knew that you shouldn't break things. It was common sense. Except here, not only was she breaking things, she was burning everything to ash, so she understood how bad this situation was.

"Um, um, ummm… What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?!"

Yuffie was growing nervous. Then she suddenly remembered what happened when her mother accidentally started a fire in the

kitchen—she had doused it with water to put it out.

"Water! I need water!"

She thrust her hand out in front of her again, palm facing forward, and imagined a lot of water.

SPLAAAAAAAAASH!

Water appeared out of nowhere and crushed the raging flames from above.

"Bluuug…!"

The deluge swallowed her up and swept her away. Coughing up water, she turned around and saw the fire was out. Though there were more blackened trees and the large hole in the ground remained (a crater that would later become one of the Seven Wonders of the village of Millil), overall, she had managed to contain the damage. It should be fine.

Okay, she knew she probably wouldn't be fine, but she decided not to think about it too much. In hindsight, maybe Yuffie's tendency to avoid reality had blossomed at this point.

"I won't get in trouble for this…right?" The relief she felt triggered a wave of fatigue in her body. She instinctively rolled over on the ground. Looking up at the clear sky, she muttered, "I used it…"

She could use magic. Yuffie was so clumsy that she couldn't even do housework properly, so she trembled at this new kernel of knowledge.

Accomplishment, fulfillment, and happiness, various emotions swirled through her heart. Her magic had been really different from what the Saint had used, but it was still magic. It shone just as brightly, beautifully.

"Now I can…become a Saint…" She was so sure of it that her heart leapt with joy. "I'm going to tell Mom and Dad!" She was sure they'd praise her. Yuffie stood up, her heart pounding, but then froze. "If I can do that much, even though it was my first time…"

Other people must be able to do more. Come to think of it, she'd always been last in foot races and studying. There was no way someone like her could beat others in magic.

Everyone else can use more amazing magic than me, magic I don't know…

Yuffie's low self-esteem and lack of knowledge about magic made her believe that. This was a good reminder that she had almost let herself get too cocky. She shook her head vigorously.

"Let me practice a bit more…"

From that day on, her magic training began. After she learned how to move at high speed using wind magic, she moved her training to a mountainous area far away from the village, afraid of burning down the forest near it.

"Fire Flame!" BOOM!

"Water Shoot!" SPLASH!

"Wind Slash!" WHOOSH!

"Grand Wall!" RUMBLE!

"Stun Shock!" ZAP, ZAP, ZAP!

It was easier to imagine the spells by saying them out loud, so she gave them names befitting of what they did and practiced magic as she pleased every day for seven years. By the time she turned thirteen, she was able to use magic powerful enough to blow away entire parts of rocky mountains if she tried hard enough.

"Maybe…it's okay to tell them now…?"

Yuffie finally decided to reveal her ability to use magic to her parents. But first, she told her mother about her dream.

"Mom."

"What is it, Yuffie?"

"I want to be a Saint."

Her mother stopped washing the dishes. Then she turned to Yuffie and said with a strangely gentle smile, "If you want to become a Saint, you have to learn recovery magic."

"Recovery…?"

Recovery… Recovery… What does that mean?

The universe spread out beneath her feet, behind her, and above her—Yuffie in the cosmos. Images flashed in her mind of the magic she had practiced up until now. Burning down forests with fire, washing away earth with water, exploding rocks with lightning…

Recovery? What is *that? Some kind of food?*

"That's right. To become a Saint, you have to master recovery magic… In other words, healing magic that heals people's injuries and illnesses."

In an instant, blackness obscured her vision.

"Then what about the kind that makes fire and water…?" she asked gingerly.

"Ah, that's offensive magic. There are two types of magic. One is recovery magic, and the other is offensive magic… The latter is magic that manifests elements like fire and water and uses them as a means of fighting."

Yuffie felt like fainting.

"Sweetie? You look like you're going to faint. Are you all right?"

"I-I'm fine…"

She wasn't fine at all. Yuffie had thought that if she could use magic, she could become a saint, but that was a big mistake on her part. To become a Saint, she had to learn healing magic. Despair engulfed her. She wondered what the past seven years even meant now…

"By the way, only women can use healing magic, and only men can use attack magic."

Her mother was saying something incredibly important, except her words barely registered at all. In the remote village of Millil, there was no inflow of knowledge about magic. Not to mention, Yuffie didn't have any friends to even ask for information from. It was then that she learned what everyone already knew—gender determined the type of magic someone could use.

"Also, generally speaking, only nobles can use magic, but my blood runs through you, Yuffie, so you might be able to use it."

She knew her mother was originally a noble from somewhere and had eloped with her father, a commoner, before settling in this village. She couldn't take in anything her mother was saying as the woman squirmed and recounted their lovey-dovey, romantic history.

What she should have done was focus on the anomaly of why a girl like her could use attack magic. But she didn't think about that. For Yuffie, her number one goal was to become a Saint. She had worked hard for seven years, yet it had all been in vain.

Her mind went blank as the truth hit her.

"Stop right there, young lady. Where do you think you're going? It's almost time for dinner."

She no longer heard her mother's words. Yuffie stumbled out of the house and headed for the forest when she cut the pad of her index finger on a sharp rock nearby.

"Owww…"

Although she grimaced in pain, she had already decided what to do. She slowly placed her other palm on the bright red, bleeding wound and visualized it healing. She had been able to perform spells such as fire and water on the first try. A faint hope existed that she could perform healing magic too, but…

"Huh… No…"

Nothing happened. Only the silence of the forest filled the air. If she had to say, her palm was glowing faintly. Except the light was nothing like the sparkle that occurred when she cast an attack spell.

So, Yuffie prayed for a while. She focused on the image of healing so much that her head started to tingle. Unfortunately, the wound didn't close. She tried and tried until it was completely dark, but in the end, the cut didn't heal.

"Maybe I just haven't practiced enough."

Starting the next day, Yuffie cloistered herself in the mountains again, where she would cut her finger and try to cast healing magic on it. Over and over again. A year of trial and error followed.

"I can't…do this anymore…" She sprawled out on the forest floor. Sweat covered her forehead. "It's impossible for me, huh…"

She thought back on her achievements over the past year. While a wound would normally take several days to heal, for her, it only took an hour. So she *could* use healing magic to some extent. But the Saint regenerated an arm in just a few seconds.

Recovery magic also consumed an abnormal amount of mana. She could cast attack magic several times in a row, but using healing magic once took a huge amount of her power—it was incredibly inefficient.

"I guess…I don't have the talent for it," Yuffie muttered, shoulders slumped in defeat. Right now, she was far from being a

user of healing magic. The figure of the Saint she had admired was nowhere to be seen.

One day, when she'd stopped caring about being able to use offensive magic.

"Ouch."

"Are you okay, Mom?"

She cast healing magic on her mother, who had cut her finger with a knife. As usual, it took about an hour.

"I'm sorry it took so long to heal…"

Next to a dejected Yuffie, her mother stared blankly at her completely healed fingertip. Then, her eyes suddenly widened, and she exclaimed, "Yuffie, you can use healing magic!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I can… Sort of…" When Yuffie nodded, her mother's smile grew—a smile she had never seen before.

"Darling! Yuffie can use healing magic!" she called out excitedly.

"What?!" Her father rushed over to them. He then cut his own palm with the knife and demanded a demonstration. "Now, try using it on me."

The pressure made her feel nervous, but just like she'd done with her mother, Yuffie spent an hour healing the wound on her father's hand.

"That's amazing, Yuffie!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"Isn't it, dear?! It takes her a little bit of time, but it's still healing magic!"

Her mother practically danced with joy.

"Um… Um… Ummm…?" Yuffie was more confused than happy by how well they were taking this.

"Hey, honey, how about we enroll Yuffie in the Academy of Magic?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea."

"What's that…?" Yuffie asked, puzzled.

"It's a school in the royal capital specializing in magic," her mother explained. "A lot of students from all over the Kingdom go there to study healing magic, just like you."

"A lot…"

Yuffie didn’t like change. That was a fundamental part of her personality. If something was delicious, she wanted to eat it every day; she went to bed at the same time every night. But she was intrigued by what her mother said about the Academy of Magic.

If I go there, I can learn healing magic…

Maybe she could understand why she’d hit a wall in her magical training. Perhaps she’d be able to use even more powerful healing magic than now. And then, she would possibly have a chance of becoming the Saint…

I might even be able to make friends…!

Yuffie’s eyes lit up, and she quickly decided to enroll in the Academy.

Things moved quickly from there. Later, someone claiming to be an employee of the Academy of Magic came to their house and watched her demonstrate magic. The qualifications for enrollment were the ability to use healing magic above a certain level and the will to master it.

As usual, it took an hour to heal a small wound, but Yuffie’s application was approved on the spot, and she received an invitation to the Academy. Needless to say, her parents were ecstatic.

“Maybe she really can become the Saint, honey!”

“No ‘maybe’ about it, darling! After all, she’s our Yuffie!”

Both her mother and father doted on her.

Long story short, this was how Yuffie received admission to the Academy of Magic.

In the end, though, Yuffie never told her parents that she could use offensive magic—she just couldn’t find the right opportunity. That said, she never saw any value in attack magic in the first place, so she didn’t think it was worth mentioning.

Yuffie had enrolled in the Academy without realizing how rare and abnormal it was in this world for a girl to be able to use offensive magic.

CHEEP, CHEEP!

"Nh… Morning already…"

Yuffie sat up in her dorm room bed. She looked at the clock and saw it was six in the morning, the same time she would wake up in the village. She got out of bed to wash her face. On her way to the bathroom, she saw the remains of party goods overflowing from the trash can.

"Gaaah!" she shrieked and banged her head against the wall. "Nooooo! My dark past! Let me forget it ever happeeeened!"

The dreaded memory of yesterday ran through her mind. Yuffie had been excited to go to a party for new students and ended up looking like a decorative holiday tree—not good. But after taking a peek into the venue, the radiance singed her eyes, and she couldn't stand the feeling of being out of place, so she ran back to her room. While everyone was having fun, Yuffie counted the stains on the wall while munching on a salted crescent roll she had bought at the store. Thus were yesterday's events happily (not) recorded in Yuffie's Dark History File No. 8975.

"Omigosh, pipe down, will you?! What time do you think it is?!" A girl's sharp voice came from the other side of the wall she was banging against.

"Eeek! I'm sorry!"

Jumping back, Yuffie knelt on the floor. She'd get mad too if someone started banging on her wall so early in the day. At home, her parents ignored her occasional fits with a "Here we go again." But this was a student dormitory where other students lived; she shouldn't cause trouble for others.

I'll go and give her some burdock as an apology later… From now on, she decided to bash her head on the floor.

"Yuffie? Are you all right?" Friend had come over to her side without her noticing and looked up at her in concern.

"I'm fine, Friend."

When she stroked his small head, Friend started purring. *Cute.*

"Class starts today…" Yuffie suddenly remembered and sighed. After the entrance ceremony and the party (which she didn't

attend), today was finally the first day of school. She didn't know if today's lessons were theoretical or practical.

"I don't know if I can handle the practicals so soon…" she bemoaned.

Practicals were classes where they actually used magic to learn. In other words, Yuffie had to show off her healing magic in front of everyone. She'd already made a fool of herself yesterday, but now she had to make a production of her incompetence by taking an hour to heal a cut.

"Ugh… I feel a fever coming on… My stomach hurts, and my head does too… Maybe I should take the day off? I should, right? If I try too hard on the first day of classes, it'll come back to bite me later on…"

"No, Yuffie, you can't fake being sick on the first day," Friend scolded her. "You're going to master healing magic and become a Saint, right? That's why you came here, isn't it?"

"Urk… You're absolutely right…"

She couldn't think of anything else to say in response to Friend, who refused to let her indulge her insecurities. Well, technically, since he was an imaginary friend, he was her.

"Don't worry, Yuffie," Friend said, rubbing up against her. "I'm sure you'll be fine. If you learn from the kind teachers here, you'll improve quickly and be able to use healing magic properly."

"Yeah… You're right. You're so right."

Friend's words made her a little more optimistic instead of allowing her to wallow in her negativity. She couldn't run away from her own lack of skill. Right now, she could only use weak healing magic, but if she worked hard at the Academy, she would definitely be able to use the powerful stuff. To do that, she had to go to class.

Yuffie stood up straight and clenched her fists in front of her. "I'll do it! I can do this!"

"That's the spirit!"

"Thank you, Friend. I almost cut class."

"You're welcome."

Yuffie gave him a final pat and tried to reassure herself. "It's normal to start with lectures, right?! So I should be just fine! Yup,

yup!”



“YOUR magic training starts now!”

The practical was intense. They were under a cloudless blue sky in a mountain clearing behind the Academy. The students, including Yuffie, were lined up in a row.

“Just because this is the first class of the new semester doesn’t mean it’ll be easy! Steel yourselves!” a woman named Professor Sharon projected to the class. She stood in front of the other faculty members and seemed to be the one in charge of their first class, which, by the look of things, would be a memorable one. Her striking, long red hair reminded Yuffie of a raging fire. With the way she spoke and the aura she exuded, it was like her hair color embodied her hot-blooded personality.

An air of tension hung heavily over the students.

I-I’m scared… Yuffie shook with fear. She regretted not calling in sick, but it was too late. The spring sunshine wasn’t supposed to be this hot, so maybe it wasn’t just her imagination that her skin burned in pain.

“What did you all come to this school for? Answer me!” Professor Sharon pointed her wand at Lyle, who answered quietly, not showing any sign of agitation.

“To become the strongest offensive magician and the wand of this country.”

Gasps of admiration rang out from the students. Yuffie was about to burst out in applause, but she stopped herself just in time.

“Hmph, a noble sentiment. What about you then?! What did you come to school for?”

SWISH!

Erina was the one she pointed her wand at next, and she also spoke calmly. “To become the best healer and eventually the Saint so that I can save this country from all disasters.”

Admiring oohs and aaahs rose from the students again.

CLAP, CLAP, CLAP.

Their eyes turned to her, and Yuffie gasped. This time, she hadn't been able to contain herself, and the sound of her clapping echoed much more than she'd intended. She bent her knees without a word and shrank in on herself, trying to make herself less noticeable.

And then she prayed.

Please don't pick me, please don't pick me, please don't pick me…

SWIIIIISH!

God! Why?!

"You there! Why did you come to this school?!"

Yuffie looked around, pretending like she hadn't heard her.

"Yes, you, the one who was clapping earlier! Don't act like you didn't hear me!"

"Eeep! I'm sorry…" She snapped her spine straight, as if a ruler had been thrust into her back.

What if I just…screamed?

On the other hand, this might just be her chance. She'd been given the opportunity to express herself in front of her classmates. If she gave a clever and superb answer like Lyle and Erina's, everyone would be impressed; Professor Sharon would respect her; she would feel comfortable in class; be able to use healing magic properly; make a hundred friends; graduate from the Academy with excellent grades; become the Saint; and after many accomplishments, be worshipped as the greatest Saint in recorded history; then a full-body statue made of pure gold would be erected in the large square in front of the palace; and she would become a popular spot for people to visit for the next 10,000 years.

"Why are you so quiet? Speak up!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Psyching herself up, Yuffie cried out with all her might, determination blazing in both her eyes!

To become the greatest Saint and help as many people as possible!

"To make…friends…"

What she actually said wasn't what she was thinking, but her deepest desire. She could have heard a drop of water splashing in the abrupt silence that descended.

This is the end for me… Goodbye, cruel world…

The color drained from Yuffie's face. She could hear quiet snickers from somewhere, mocking her.

"How. *Dare*. You?" With veins throbbing at her temples, Professor Sharon stalked right up to her. She then grabbed her roughly by the collar and yanked her close.

"Ack…!"

The woman's steely gaze could have killed a Black Wolf. "Do you think that was funny?" she snarled.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Yuffie apologized profusely with tears in her eyes. In response, Professor Sharon snorted derisively, like it'd be a waste of time to keep pushing, and released her. She turned on her heels and marched back to stand in front of them. Then she barked out in warning.

"I hope the rest of you aren't entertaining such foolish thoughts! This is a school for pursuing magic and drilling it into your very cores!"

Her gaze bore into the students, and she further declared, "Boys will focus only on mastering offensive magic, and girls on recovery magic! Toss away any cheap ideals of friendship into the garbage! Is that understood?!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The students shouted in unison. Meanwhile, Yuffie, her soul having left her body thanks to Professor Sharon's menacing presence, clutched her head in her hands. She felt like she'd made the same mistake as yesterday.

❖ ✿ ❖

"NOW, let me explain how this practical will go!" Professor Sharon called out. "Groups of four, made of two boys and two girls, must defeat five Almiraj in the mountains and bring back five horns as

proof. You'll have three hours. If seriously injured or lost, you must blow the rescue whistle to summon a teacher. The teachers on standby will immediately come to your aid."

An Almiraj was a rabbit monster with a single horn on its head. Its danger level was categorized as F, at the bottom of the ranking. In terms of its strength, one adult could take it down. If you were unlucky, it could hurt you, but you wouldn't die from your injuries.

Groups of four?! With two girls and two boys…?!

This part shocked Yuffie more than anything else. Memories of her schooling at the village church came back to her. Since she'd never had friends, forming groups with her classmates was a hellish experience. She had heard the words, "Yuffie, how about you and I pair up (said with kind eyes)?" over and over so many times from the nuns that she nearly started foaming at the mouth at the first instruction.

Thankfully for her, she was relieved to learn that the groups had been decided beforehand. She was so utterly relieved that she almost felt like she was in heaven. Yuffie went to meet the classmates that Professor Sharon had sorted into groups. However…

"Oh, hey, we're in the same group, Lifa!"

"Omigosh, Alto! I'm *sooo* glad we're paired up!"

"Jeez, Lifa, I'm right here. Don't tell me you forgot about me already?"

"Of *course* not, Gill. I'm excited to have you in my group too!"

The three of them got along like a house on fire. Yuffie didn't know if they were old friends or if they had met each other at the party yesterday.

I feel so out of place…! Flustered, she didn't know how to join the conversation.

"So…" The girl named Lifa turned to Yuffie, her expression awkward.

"You must be…um…" Alto struggled to find the right words to say.

Ahhh! I know that look in his eyes! "Seriously? We have to team up with her*?" That hurts!*

Squeezing out all the courage she could, Yuffie bowed deeply and greeted, "I'm Yuffie, nice to meet you."

"Oh, right, same."

"What he said."

"Let's do our best, hm!"

The difference in their attitude from when they talked to each other to now was remarkable. Their excitement was nowhere near what it had been. The three of them looked uncertain, like they didn't know how to interact with her.

Urk… I totally get it, though, considering how I messed up yesterday and *today…*

In any case, they had the misfortune of being paired up with a dung beetle like her.

So I have to try at least not to hold them back… Yuffie encouraged herself.

"Begin!" Professor Sharon commanded.

Their first practical was underway.



AFTER grouping, the students dispersed toward the mountains.

"How many groups do you think will succeed this year?" Professor Himmel, waiting behind as a helper, spoke to Professor Sharon.

"This year's first-year students are supposed to be outstanding. I'd like at least eighty percent to win." Then she looked down at the student roster. "Yuffie Abisus… Her entrance exam scores were by far the lowest. Hmph, just what I expected from a commoner."

"Is that the girl who was acting strange earlier?"

"Likely. A coward, that's what she is. She'll probably just whine and hightail it back to the countryside soon," she spat.

That was the extent of Professor Sharon's interest in Yuffie.



"NNNGH... Where am I…?"

An hour had passed since class started. Yuffie was walking alone through the forest, grumbling and crying. She thought back to how things turned out like this.

"Gah…!"

"Gill!"

One of their group members, Gill, was slightly injured in the battle with the first Almiraj.

"Um, um… Please let me use healing magic on you!"

Yuffie immediately offered (*It's my turn!*) and started using healing magic on Gill—except there was no sign of the wound getting better.

"Uh… How long will it take to heal?"

"About…about an hour?" she answered.

"Did you just say…one hour…?!"

Gill was shocked, and as Lifa stared at her with a look that said, "Are you serious?" a new Almiraj appeared.

"Shit! This is bad timing! I'll fight! Lifa, heal Gill!"

"Okay!" Lifa shoved Yuffie aside and raised her hand toward the injured boy. *"Fountain of life, have mercy on the wounded. Heal these wounds…"*

As she chanted, Lifa's hands glowed, and Gill's injuries healed in an instant. Yuffie was astonished at the difference in their healing magic as Lifa was incredibly skilled.

"Alto, I'll help you!" Gill, fully healed now, returned to the battle.

"Awesome, thanks!"

So, the two boys defeated two Almirajes…

"That's the third one!"

"Good job!"

"Two more to go!"

As Alto held up the three horns of the rabbit monsters they'd slain, Lifa and Gill cheered in excitement.

"Gill, thanks for the backup!"

"You're welcome! Thanks to you too, Lifa. I wouldn't be here without you."

"Oh, it's nothing. We wouldn't have taken them down without you and Gill, Alto!"

While the three puffed up with a sense of accomplishment at having cleared the task thanks to their teamwork, Yuffie had become invisible. Not wanting to disturb their joy, she tried desperately to disappear.

"Um, Yuffie… Thanks to you too. Appreciate you trying," Gill stated with a kind smile.

"Oh… No… I'm sorry I wasn't much help…" Yuffie trailed off.

That was the end of the conversation. Lifa and Alto just looked at Yuffie as if she were an eyesore. It was clear that they found Yuffie useless and annoying.

After that, Alto and Gill were in charge of the fighting, and Lifa would cast healing magic on anyone who got injured. There was no role for Yuffie. They treated her like she didn't exist.

I'm totally useless!

In a panic, Yuffie tried to find an Almiraj at least, but during her search…

"Huh… Where is everyone…?!"

She had gotten completely separated from the group—end of flashback.

"Calling for help for something like this would only bother the teachers, not to mention way too embarrassing…" she muttered, looking down at the rescue whistle that Professor Sharon had given her. With a sigh, she started walking again, deciding to wander the forest for a while longer. She *had* to run into someone before time ran out on this exercise.

The forest was dark and creepy, but Yuffie wasn't particularly shaken. All that time in the mountains practicing offensive magic until nightfall came in handy, but right now, that fact was no consolation.

"If this is how the first lesson turned out, I'm afraid of what the future holds…"

She didn't want to think about it. Professor Sharon probably chose the groups to balance between the good and bad students,

because Alto's attack magic was obviously stronger than Gill's. The idea was that in actual combat, those with poor grades would learn from the stronger students, and vice versa, with the good ones teaching the weaker ones. That feedback loop was designed to help them improve each other.

In fact, Alto taught Gill the tricks of offensive magic. When the former had been injured, Lifa had asked Yuffie if she wanted to learn some healing magic. However, she had turned down the offer quickly, telling the other girl to focus on healing Alto instead.

Why did I refuse?! It was too late for regrets, though.

With a strained smile and an awkward, "Oh, all right," Lifa had gone to Alto.

If Yuffie had possessed even a basic level of communication skills, she could have learned recovery magic from Lifa.

"I just want to disappear…"

She couldn't use healing magic, nor could she even talk to people properly. Right when she was once again feeling dejected by her own incompetence…

FWEEEEEEEET!

…an artificial sound came from far away. Yuffie intuitively knew someone had used their rescue whistle.

"Maybe they're lost, just like me…?!"

Her expression brightened. Someone was in the same predicament as her! A sense of relief welled up within her, but then she heard a loud thud.

"What is that…?" Curious, she headed in that direction.



"HAAA… Haaa…!"

Lyle Elvard was running. He was running as fast as he could, clutching his injured shoulder. Impatience stamped his face. His breath came out in shallow pants, and sweat glistened thickly on his forehead.

"Damn… How the hell did this happen…?"

BOOM!

"Whoa!

The earth shook, and Lyle tripped over something and fell.

"Ngh…"

Just as he tried to get up, the cause of his panic appeared, mowing down trees. It was so enormous that it could tear a person to pieces with a single slash. Its six eyes glared at him.

"Piss off already!"

Frustration and unease tinged his voice as Lyle stared at the very symbol of death and despair in front of him. Only a few minutes ago, he and his team had been hunting Almirajes smoothly. He'd been designated their leader; excelling as he did in attack magic, hunting an F-class monster was as easy as snapping his fingers. They were doing well, and none of them got hurt.

Right when they needed to hunt one last Almiraj to complete their task, that *thing* suddenly appeared. Scorching flames rose into the sky, disturbing the hush of the forest. A huge, three-headed beast emerged from the fire.

Its pitch black body and eyes glittered red like hellfire. Its flaming fur glowed brightly every time the flames rose, the individual hairs swaying as if alive.

"A Flame Cerberus…?!" a boy in his group, Luke, shouted in shock.

The monster was classified as B-level and shouldn't normally be in this forest. It glared at the four students and growled deep in its throat like it was assessing them.

"Eeek…!"

"N-Nooo!"

Both girls stared with dread at the monster shrouded in an eerie miasma.

FWEEEEEEET!

Luke blew the rescue whistle. This situation was very clearly far from normal, so it wasn't the time for schoolwork. But the sound only served to agitate the Flame Cerberus, who leaped at the boy.

"Whaaaaaa!"

"Luke, get away! *Fire Shield*!"

Lyle immediately used fire magic to create a shield in front of Luke. The impact of the Flame Cerberus and Fire Shield colliding made a thunderous sound. Lyle took the chance to jump toward Luke just as his Fire Shield broke at the same time.

They both managed to escape the monster's attack by the skin of their teeth.

"Luke, are you okay?!"

"Y-Yeah… I think so…" Luke grimaced. He had scraped his knee.

"Luke! Are you all right?" One of the girls, Iris, ran up to him and cast healing magic.

Lyle immediately tried to attack the Flame Cerberus. *"Fire Ball!"*

A fireball big enough to wrap your arms around rushed toward the monster and hit one of its heads. He'd thought that maybe he could drive it off.

"Didn't work, huh?"

The black smoke cleared, revealing their unharmed opponent, and Lyle clicked his tongue in aggravation. The Flame Cerebrus distanced itself cautiously, perhaps trying to come up with a way to attack as well. Lyle had done his best with his spells, but a Flame Cerberus elemental attribute *was* fire. Meaning his earlier attacks were basically useless.

I know the teachers heard the whistle, but it will still take a while for them to reach us.

He realized they must not have anticipated a situation like this. If they waited for the grown-ups, they'd all be wiped out. Mind made up, Lyle ran, shouting, "I'll be the decoy! The three of you, head back to where the professors are!"

"Lyle, no!"

"Don't, Lyle!"

He heard Luke and Iris try to stop him, but there was no time to discuss.

"Water Ball!"

He shot a ball of water the same size as his Fire Ball earlier at the Flame Cerberus. The monster's body shook explosively. All three heads glared at Lyle.

"Come on! Catch me if you can!"

He ran at full speed.

"*Grrraaaaaarrr*!"

It moved in pursuit of its attacker, ensuring Lyle's groupmates' safety. So far, so good, but Lyle was still only human. There was no way he could beat the speed of a wild beast, and the thing caught up in the blink of an eye.

"Ngh…! Aqua Arrow…"

He tried to cast another attack spell, but before he could finish, one of the Flame Cerebrus's front paws slashed at him. The sharp claws tore through Lyle's shoulder.

"Gaaah…!"

The shock sent his body flying backward. He tasted blood in his mouth. The pain in his shoulder burned, like it was on fire. He glanced down and saw red steadily staining his uniform.

The beast didn't pursue him, almost like it was daring him to try and escape its clutches.

"Damn it…"

Lyle staggered to his feet and ran again, and the Flame Cerberus also started moving, albeit slowly. It took its time cornering him, like a child playing with an insect by stepping on its wings.

The chase continued for a while, but Lyle's strength finally ran out. The monster towered over him as he lay panting on the ground. Six eyes glared at him.

"Piss off already!"

It gathered flames in its mouth, readying itself to deliver the finishing blow.

I think this might be the end for me…

Lyle was about to discover the reason why it was called a *Flame* Cerebrus. He sensed death approaching, but he couldn't let himself be defeated like this.

"I am Lyle Elvard…" He slowly rose to his feet and fixed his gaze on the monster. "The third prince of the Kingdom of Elvador, and the one who will become the wand that protects this country."

He couldn't die here. Even if he couldn't defeat the Flame Cerberus, he would fight with everything he had to survive. With this

resolve in his heart, he prepared himself to unleash his most powerful spell.

"A-Are you all right…?"

A strange voice that didn't fit the situation. Yuffie, one of the girls in his class who shouldn't be here, suddenly appeared.

"*Grrr…*"

The monster also extinguished the flames in its mouth.

Why is she here…?! Lyle's eyes widened almost comically.

Yuffie Abisus. They'd only spoken a few words the day before the entrance ceremony. From what he could see, she was alone. Maybe her other group members were nearby, or perhaps she was lost. Either way, Yuffie, being a girl, had no way to attack. Meaning he needed to protect her. Especially because there was no one else who could.

"Oh my God, you're hurt!"

She rushed over when she saw his torn shoulder. It was like she hadn't even noticed the Flame Cerberus right there, and that flabbergasted him. As for the monster in question, perhaps outraged by her seemingly ignoring its existence, it once more lit a flame to fire from its mouth at her.

"Don't come here!" Lyle shouted. "*Marina Burst!*"

Advanced water magic. It instantly created a large amount of water and attacked the target with immense pressure. Lyle was the only freshman who could use it.

At that moment, one of the Flame Cerberus's heads unleashed a Fire Breath. The breath collided with his Marina Burst and exploded. Too bad for them that monster immediately fired a second Breath attack.

I was too slow…!

Lyle raced toward Yuffie. "Water Ball!" He managed to mitigate the attack with the low-level water magic spell. However, the flames, still plenty powerful, brushed against the two of them.

"Yuffie!"

"Eeek!"

He caught her just in time and turned his back to the flames.

"Gaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

"Lord Lyle!"

The flames unleashed by the Flame Cerberus burned relentlessly against his uniform.

"Shiiit!"

Lyle quickly chanted and made water appear on his back. The flames died down with a whoosh, revealing burnt bare skin underneath the charred remains of his uniform.

"Lord Lyle! Oh, no… This is all my fault…" Yuffie was panicking and tearful. "I-I need to hurry and use healing magic…"

He shook off her hand and turned around. "Don't worry about me, just run!" he snapped at her, his expression ghastly.

"But…" she mumbled.

Meanwhile, the Flame Cerberus geared up to launch another attack, ready to unleash Fire Breaths from all three heads.

This is bad! At this rate, Lyle knew they would both die. *I need to save Yuffie at least!*

"*Water*… Ngh…"

He tried to use water magic to blast her away, but he felt a sudden loss of strength in his body. *I can't run out of mana… Not now!*

After firing several Water Balls and activating the advanced Marina Burst spell in quick succession, his magical energy was depleted. Making both offense and defense impossible.

As if mocking their hopeless situation, the Flame Cerberus fired at them. Scorching hot flames roared toward them, massive enough to turn two people to charcoal.

Ahhh, damn it…

"Somewhere like this, of all places…" he muttered.

Is this where my life ends…?

He had done nothing, become nothing, and been unable to protect even one girl. He was going to die without knowing why this happened. Anxiety spread in his chest, as if he were being pulled into an abyss, and at that moment, the thought of death became real.

"Water Wall."

Then something unbelievable happened. Yuffie's voice echoed, and out of nowhere, a transparent blue wall appeared in front of Lyle. Countless sparkling droplets of water fluttered down. It was a beautiful sight, like diamonds raining on them.

The wall contained many times, no, dozens of times, more water than Lyle could have produced. There was enough water to cover the entire area. At least, that was how it felt to him.

The next moment, her Water Wall began to move. Like a single living organism, it expanded toward the Fire Breaths and enveloped all three streams of flame. With a whooshing sound, the wall neutralized the monster's attack. As sudden as dropping a lit match into a lake.

Yuffie waved her hand, and the wall of water disappeared in an instant. Silence reigned again, like nothing had happened. Lyle instinctively looked around. He wondered if one of the male teachers had come to help, but there was no sign of anyone other than the two of them.

And he sure as hell wasn't the one who'd cast it. Not only was his mana at zero, but he had never even mastered such advanced magic in the first place. Which meant it was inevitably Yuffie's doing.

"…Huh?" That was the only thing he could say, and he barely even managed that. Proof of his shock at how Yuffie, a *girl*, fired an advanced spell he'd never seen before.



"OH, no… Your burns are awful…"

After neutralizing the Flame Cerberus's Fire Breaths, Yuffie frowned as she scrutinized Lyle's injuries. The gash on his shoulder accompanied the burns on his back caused by the monster's attack.

"It'll take me about three hours to heal this… I'm so sorry, this is all my fault…"

She was on the verge of tears. She'd gotten lost and headed in the direction of the sound coming from the rescue whistle, where she found Lyle cornered by the Flame Cerberus.

I have to help him!

That was her only thought when she ran over to him, then the beast unleashed its breath attack. Out of instinct, Yuffie tried to block it by using water magic, but Lyle ended up burned while shielding her from the flames before she could. She was stressed, feeling guilty over his injuries, and anxious to heal his burns quickly.

With a serious look on his face, he asked, "Are you absolutely positive you're not a cross-dressing boy…?"

"No, I'm not!" she shrieked back at him.

"*Graaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrr*!!"

The Flame Cerberus let out a blood-chilling roar. The area turned red, the ground heated up, and dust rose in the air. Flames burned in its blood-red eyes and raged like a storm. Its scream shook the earth, rocking through the space like thunder, seemingly reaching the ends of the Kingdom itself.

The beast was enraged at having its attack blocked. The fact that Yuffie didn't pay any attention to it only added fuel to the fire. Its fury turned into flames, engulfing its entire body, and it became a demonic fiend covered in hellfire. The Flame Cerebrus roared again and tried to unleash another Fire Breath, but Yuffie only shushed it calmly.

"Please be quiet." She then raised a hand in its direction and chanted. *"Roaring Flame Bullet."*

In an instant, the color red engulfed the world. The roar of the flames tore through the area. Countless fireballs rushed out from her palm, mingling to form a huge bonfire dancing wildly in the air. The scorching hot bullets formed by the gathering of thousands of flames spiraled toward the Flame Cerberus, like a fire dragon biting its prey and tearing it apart—a direct hit.

"*Grrraaaaaaaaarrr*…?!"

Unable to fight back, all the monster could do was rattle out its final death cry as her spell reduced it to ash. Only a black shadow remained, proof of its existence.

Lyle was speechless. Women couldn't use offensive magic, but Yuffie had done just that. Her very existence easily overturned this bit of common sense, leaving him shocked, to the point of being unable to comprehend what he'd just seen.

"Okay, now I can take my time healing you… Oh, shoot, but my healing magic takes too long. I won't make it in the time limit… Ugggh, if only I'd practiced more…"

Yuffie herself didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation at all. She was simply her usual flustered self. In fact, during the seven years she spent devoting herself to training in attack magic, she'd taken on countless monsters. That probably explained why she'd ignored the Flame Cerberus. Her attitude only deepened Lyle's confusion.

"That's…impossible…"

His voice shook as he finally managed to speak. He looked her straight in the eye and asked with a serious expression, "How in the *hell* can you use offensive magic?!"

"Huh?"

…

……

……

"Uh-oh."

Shoot, shoot, shoot! I was so focused on his injuries that I completely forgot…

Yuffie finally, *finally* realized how serious this was. She had unleashed an offensive spell like she was swatting a fly—and Lyle had seen her do it.

"You're definitely a cross-dressing boy, aren't you? You *have* to be!"

"N-N-N-No, I'm not!"

That was the one thing she absolutely, positively had to deny!

"Then what did you just use?! Because I saw you casting fire magic *and* water magic! Not to mention both of those spells were advanced… Actually, I'm pretty sure they go beyond advanced! So answer me! Why are you able to use attack magic?!" Lyle grabbed Yuffie by the shoulders as he questioned her. Confusion, doubt, and awe flashed in his eyes, like he was facing something completely unknown to him.

"Um… Well…" She didn't understand why he was yelling at her, but intuition told her that if she revealed the truth, things would get

complicated. "Um, well, um… You see…that just now was…sleight of hand!"

She decided to try and dodge the question.

"There's no way you can instantly kill a *Flame Cerberus*, a B-rank monster, with sleight of hand!"

"Urk…"

He shot down her lie in a second, leaving her at a loss for words.

"Wait a minute. I just remembered something. You said you defeated a Black Wolf the day before the entrance ceremony, didn't you?"

"Eeek! I-I think you have the wrong person?"

"No, I definitely heard you then. After seeing the power of your magic just now, I can see how you managed that too. You really are amazing."

"D-Do you think so? Now you're making me blush…"

"Ha. I knew it."

"Ack! You tricked me!"

She had never been praised before, so Yuffie couldn't help being overcome with joy at his words. Now, she couldn't hide the truth anymore.

What do I do, what do I do, what do I do…? Uuuuuuuuunnngggghhh… She didn't know how to explain the situation. Her mind went blank, and sweat drenched her like a waterfall when…

"Professor! This way!"

She heard other students far away. The teachers must have arrived after hearing the rescue whistle. Resolve flashed in Yuffie's eyes. In a moment, she overcame her panic and reached a state of enlightenment. She turned to Lyle and said with a calm expression.

"Please keep what you saw just now a secret."

"No, that's imp—"

"Please? Pleeeaase?"

Lyle nodded vigorously, unable to say no to the pressure she put on him. Her awkward wink, meant to look cool, only made Yuffie look even creepier.

She jumped to her feet and cast a wind magic spell behind her back. *Wind Kick!*

A wave of wind engulfed her as the magic warped the wind around her body to move at high speed. Escape—Yuffie concluded that this was her best course of action for now.

"Hey, will you wait a— Ah, jeez, you're fast!"

She flew off with the speed of a shooting star. There was no way Lyle could stop her, so he could only stand there in shock.



I *messed up, I messed up, I messed up…*

Yuffie covered her face as she escaped at lightning speed, entrusting herself to the wind magic. Anxiety and fear filled her heart, shaking her. Once Lyle was entirely out of sight, she dispelled the wind magic and planted her feet on the ground.

"Haaa… Haaa…"

With her pounding heart and shallow breath, she realized the potential consequences of her actions. He had seen her attack magic—that fact slithered over her like a dark shadow.

Okay, yes, it's weird that I can use attack magic since only men are supposed to. But…

A small part of her had thought there were exceptions to the rule. Take eggs, for example. An egg usually has one yolk inside, but sometimes there are two. So if she could use it, then it must not be set in stone. Yuffie's low self-esteem made her think that, which explained why she never really thought too deeply about why she could use offensive magic, and also why she never told anyone about it.

However, after Lyle's furious questioning earlier, she came up with a possibility.

Maybe it is *a big deal for me to be able to use offensive magic…?*

So big that her very existence broke society's rules.

"No, no, no, no, no way, no way? That can't be, it's impossible…!"

Though she tried to deny it, Yuffie noticed her voice trembling slightly. The shocked expression on Lyle's face when he saw her using attack magic, and how on edge he'd been when he questioned her, denied the "impossible."

"But…what *if*…"

What if her ability to use offensive magic, despite being a woman, was something that became important? She started fantasizing then:

She opens the imposing door, and there's the principal, sitting at a large desk with a stern look in his eyes. Also in the room are the school's top teachers, all lined up. Everyone's looking at Yuffie as if they want to shoot her dead.

"Yuffie Abisus. There's something I have to ask you."

The principal's voice is low and weighty as he starts bombarding her with probing questions.

"How did you learn offensive magic? Who taught you?"

Each question cut like a blade.

"…Um, I kind of…taught myself…?"

"You think this is a laughing matter?!"

BANG! (The sound of a fist slams down on a desk.)

"Eeek?!"

A trial follows, where she's questioned about hiding her ability to use attack magic. As she stands at the hearing, the dainty Yuffie is assailed by a barrage of questions. The gazes of the people sitting in the gallery pierce her. She's exhausted by the interrogation and can only stammer her replies.

CLANG! CLANG! (The sound of the judge's gavel crashing down.)

"Yuffie Abisus, I hereby sentence you to 890 years in prison!"

A de facto death sentence.

CRASH! (The sound of her being tossed in jail.)

She's thrown into the cell, and cold iron shackles are fastened to her hands and feet.

"Ngggh, where did I go wrong…?" she mutters as she bites into moldy bread, but no one answers.



Alone in a cell surrounded by cool stone walls, time passes by. One day, a dirty mad scientist wearing suspicious sunglasses and a white coat draped over his fat body comes in, cackling.

"Yuffie Abisus!" he crows. "For the advancement of magical science, please let us examine your body!"

Thus begins the human experiment. In a dimly lit room, she's naked and tied to a bed. A thick syringe is thrust into her arm, and an unknown liquid is poured into her. Each time, her body violently rejects the fluid, and she rolls her eyes as she thrashes, blood and screams unleashing from her mouth. A sharp knife cuts her up, dissects her.

"Noooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Yuffie rolled around on the ground, clutching her head!

THUD!

"Achoo!"

Her fantasy finally ended when she crashed into a tree and sneezed at the same time.

"Just please don't dissect me, just please don't dissect me, I really can't stand it when it hurts, just please dissect me…!" she muttered like a curse, but the throbbing pain in the back of her head helped her regain her composure.

"What's done can't be undone…"

That's right, the past can't be changed.

All she could do was think about what to do to avoid the worst possible future (a delusion).

"But I did the right thing! If I hadn't fought off the Cerberus there, Lord Lyle's life would have been in danger…"

In order to save him, it had been necessary to use her attack magic in front of someone else. When she told herself this, she calmed down. He had treated her kindly ever since their first meeting. Lyle was important to her, so she was relieved that she'd been able to go to his rescue.

"Not to mention…" She remembered how he had held her and protected her from the monster's attack. "I think…this might be the first time someone else protected me."

It was a strange feeling, one she'd never felt before.

"Stop it, you silly girl! He was just helping you! Don't read into it!" Yuffie shook her head vigorously. It would be presumptuous for someone like her to feel even a little happy to be protected by Lyle, the third prince of this country.

"Ugh… I don't feel so good…"

Just as she was trying to soothe her head, throbbing from too much shaking, the sound of a whistle rang out, signaling everyone to gather.

"I don't want to go back…"

She wanted to run away as fast as she could, but that wasn't going to happen. So she plodded toward the sound.



WHEN Yuffie arrived at the spot where they all first gathered, the other students were already there. Her eyes immediately went to Lyle, who was in the middle of the circle. Someone must have healed him because his back wasn't red anymore, and his skin was back to its natural, beautiful state.

Thank goodness…

Yuffie breathed a sigh of relief. Knowing it would be bad if their eyes met, she quickly walked away to stand at the fringes. Her restless gaze spotted the other members of her group.

I should probably say something…right…?

Her sudden disappearance might have worried them. With butterflies in her stomach, she slowly walked over to them.

"Oh, Yuffie!" Lifa noticed her first. Alto and Gill were standing behind her, and their reproachful stares said, "We were looking everywhere for you!"

"You have *no* idea how shocked we were when you vanished without a word like that."

"I-I'm sorry… I got lost." She hunched her shoulders in shame when Lifa scolded her. Alto and Gill tried to brighten the mood.

"Well, we're all together again and that's what matters!"

"And don't worry, we hunted down the last Almiraj too!"

"Th-Thank you…"

That was the only conversation they had about Yuffie being separated from the group. Since it didn't make a difference whether she was there or not, the reunion wasn't a particularly emotional one. She felt both relieved and lonely.

Professor Sharon stepped forward and announced, "Due to unexpected events, today's class is cancelled!" She didn't elaborate any further. The students glanced at each other in confusion.

Please let this be the end, please let this be the end, pleeeaaase…

Yuffie was scared. Scared that her name would be called and she'd be taken to a dark room and interrogated. Although she had asked Lyle to keep the Flame Cerberus incident a secret, it was only a verbal promise. He had no reason *not* to report something so important to the teacher.

Her fears remained just that as they were all dismissed. In the end, there was no talk of the monster in question. It was also proof that Lyle kept his word.

He really is a good person…!

Yuffie was deeply moved by the knowledge. She was also relieved to have somehow managed to get through this pickle, but unaware that Lyle watched her from a distance.

Chapter 3: Student Council? What's That? Do They Have Yummy Goodies?

AT night in her dorm room, Friend was lazily grooming himself on Yuffie's bed. As for the owner of the room herself, she sat cross-legged in a lone corner, covered with a blanket.

"I want to go home," Yuffie muttered, her expression the epitome of emptiness under the blanket. Her voice was lifeless, and she stared vacantly into space, as if hypnotized. Countless sighs had escaped her half-open mouth for a while now.

"Oh, why did I do that…? I'm so stupid, so very, very stupid…" She smacked her forehead as words of regret tumbled from her lips.

After returning to the dorm, she'd found herself thinking, *That might not have been the best idea…* and *Maybe not this either…* Her self-loathing had grown stronger and stronger since, and now she wallowed in the pits of despair.

"About twenty points… I guess."

That was how she'd score herself for everything that happened today. At the very least, considering her only goal had been to make at least one friend, it was fair to say that her first day of class was a complete failure. The teacher scolded her in front of everyone, things had been awkward with her teammates during the drill, and her healing magic was still so bad that she couldn't heal anyone properly. And to top it all off, she got lost and worried everyone in her group. Not only was she not useful to anyone, she was, in fact, just a nuisance.

"But! But wait… I think I'm a little closer to Lord Lyle now… Right?"

The only silver lining was the incident with the Flame Cerberus. She had used offensive magic to save Lyle from the monster. Although she couldn't use healing magic, she had still managed to save him from dire circumstances.

"So he should be feeling a little grateful… But hold on." With her petty ulterior motives rising to the surface, Yuffie froze when she realized something. "It doesn't make any sense. There's no way my attack magic is more powerful than Lord Lyle's…"

Academics, sports, recovery magic, sociability, and interpersonal skills. Lyle had entered the Academy of Magic this year as the top student. So, the thought of *Yuffie's*—who was useless in all those areas—offensive magic being more powerful than his was absurd. It was so obvious that she slumped on the floor.

"Then… What else could it possibly be…?!" With a gasp, Yuffie fell deep into thought. And then she arrived at the true answer. "Was all that just an act to make me reveal my attack magic…?!"

In a situation as dangerous as they'd been in, she would have had no choice but to use offensive magic to save them. And the reason he decided to carry out his plan was…

"He…saw through me. He knew all along." During their brief exchange the day before the entrance ceremony, he must have realized that she could use attack magic. "He must have made that joke about me being a cross-dressing boy just to get me to let my guard down…"

The pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place one after the other, and the knowledge horrified her. Her impression of her classmate, Lyle Elvard, took a sudden 180. He was the third prince of the Kingdom of Elvador, a shrewd young man and strategist beyond her imagination.

In other words, he was a devil who would stop at nothing to gain the upper hand—one who had no trouble manipulating a naive girl from the countryside.

"Then the teachers must know about me too…and soon a bunch of military policemen will come to arrest me…and they'll take me to the headmaster's office…from there, court…then prison…and finally human experiments…?!"

The color drained from Yuffie's face.

"F-F-F-Friend, what should I do, what should I do, what should I do…?!"

"What's the matter?"

She threw off the blanket and ran over to the bed. Friend looked up curiously. "They're going to dissect meeee…!"

"What are you talking about?"

KNOCK.

Suddenly, she sensed someone standing beyond the door. She turned her head like a broken robot and looked in that direction.

Thus began Yuffie's fantasy.

The military police kick open the door and come rushing in…

Before she can scream, strong men pin her down…

"Let me go! Please don't cut me open, please don't cut me open!"

She lies there helpless and in tears. Soon after, Lyle appears from behind them and speaks to her, his twisted smile a caricature of his usual friendly one.

"You did everything just the way I wanted you to. Can you be *any simpler?"*

"Eeek!" Yuffie stared at the door, breathless.

KNOCK, KNOCK.

"Gaaah?!"

The sound was actually coming from the other side of her room, and she jumped. She turned around timidly and saw a shadow on the balcony. A young man raised his hand as if to say, "It's me." Lyle. He pointed at the latch and made a gesture asking her to open it.

Oh, no… I'm doomed…

She exhaled deeply, ever so deeply. Convinced that her hypothesis was correct, Yuffie felt resignation spread in her chest. The panic from earlier disappeared, and she got off the bed, her expression calm. She felt like a death row inmate heading for the

guillotine. With slow movements, she unlocked the balcony door, then slid it open. Lyle stepped inside.

"Ummm… What exactly are you doing?" he asked.

"This is how a dog surrenders. Woof!"

"Except I'm not into this kind of thing."

"W-Was that not the right pose? Then…"

"Why are you holding your hands out this time?"

"So that it'll be easier to put the handcuffs on…"

"Didn't I *just* say I'm not into this kind of thing?!"

Bewildered by Lyle's shocked reaction, Yuffie tilted her head. "But…aren't you here to arrest me…?"

"Who's arresting whom?"

She pointed her index finger at Lyle, then at herself.

"Okay, but why?"

"Why, he asks…"

Yuffie then suddenly realized that she didn't sense anyone else other than him. Definitely no military policemen here. Lyle himself didn't seem hostile, either, only confused by her behavior…

And that was when the lightbulb in her head went off. Her hypothesis might be nothing more than complete delusion.

"I'm so sorry!"

"Yuffie, stop!"

She slammed her head on the floor and apologized with all her heart. "It was just a misunderstanding! Truly! Honestly! I'm so sorry!"

"All right, all right, calm down! I'm not bothered at all! I mean, I don't even know why you're apologizing!"

She timidly raised her head, and Lyle smiled at her like someone trying to calm a child.

"So, can we talk? Properly?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"You don't have to sit so formally, you know. But if that's what you want, who am I to judge?" Lyle regained his composure and began to speak. "First off, let me apologize for my unorthodox visit and for surprising you."

"N-N-N-No, not at all! Don't worry about it! I'm the one who surprised *you*!"

"Haha, you have a point. Anyway, boys aren't allowed in the girls' dorms, and I didn't think it would be a good idea for other students to see me visiting you, so I snuck in through the window."

"I agree, I think you made a wise decision. If you were to be seen with a water flea, no, a ground beetle like me, you'd become fodder for the Magic Spring Cannon."

"I don't think it would be that big of a scoop, though."

The Magic Spring Cannon was a publication periodically released by Weekly Magic Spring, which was the most widely published magazine in the royal capital. It covered political scandals and celebrities committing adultery. You could call it a gossip rag. The magazine was regularly delivered to her village of Millil. Since entertainment options were few and far between, it was often used as a topic of conversation at church. Of course, none of this mattered to Yuffie, who had no one to talk to anyway, but she knew that being shot by the Magic Spring Cannon would cause severe damage to your career.

"Anyway, the reason I came by is to talk to you about what happened this afternoon," he said.

"Oh…"

"That's right. The thing with the Flame Cerberus."

The air around Lyle grew tense, and Yuffie straightened up. While her eyes showed signs of agitation, he looked around the room and muttered to himself. "They might hear us here…" Then, with his usual friendly smile, he suggested, "Why don't we talk outside for a bit?"



WHEN Lyle pushed the heavy door with a creak, a sacred space suddenly opened before Yuffie, its high ceiling with intricate carvings and large stained-glass windows set into the stone walls cast a transparent curtain of light. The interior of the building was

enveloped in a tranquil darkness, but the moonlight filtering through the windows created a mysterious atmosphere.

"No one will come here," he said.

Th-This is so beautiful… Yuffie stopped in her tracks and looked around the church; its grandeur made the one in her village, which also doubled as the local school, look like a child's toy.

"Yuffie."

"Y-Yes?" She flinched when he said her name, but then was shocked to see Lyle bow deeply.

"First of all, let me thank you," he spoke in front of the golden altar engraved with a statue of the Valencian god. "Thank you for saving me. I wouldn't be here if not for you."

"I-It was nothing, and you're welcome…?"

Along with confusion, warmth expanded in her chest. It was basically the first time anyone had ever thanked her, so the strange feeling was both happy and ticklish. Just thinking about it made her lips curve into a smile. But at the same time, the fact that the person bowing to her so deeply was the third prince of this country made her feel something close to fear.

"So, um, what happened after that?" Yuffie asked, trying to divert the conversation.

"Right, we need to talk about that too." He then continued to recount the aftermath of the day's incident. "I told the teachers that I barely escaped with my life from the Flame Cerberus. I didn't lie, did I? Because I honestly thought I was going to die."

"So that means…"

"I didn't say it was you who defeated it. In fact, I never even mentioned you."

The tension in her body dissipated. She was relieved that her ability to use offensive magic hadn't been revealed. Also grateful that Lyle had kept it a secret, just like he'd promised.

Ugh…I'm sorry for thinking you were a devil… She covered her face as shame overcame her.

"The higher-ups at the Academy are investigating the situation and why the Flame Cerebrus appeared in the first place. It's impossible for a monster with a B danger ranking to even show up in

that forest. It might have been because of some sort of natural disaster, or… Actually, let's not discuss that," Lyle paused, his gaze grim. Before she could guess the meaning of the emotion in his eyes, his expression returned to normal. "So, now let's move on to the main topic. I'd like to ask you something, Yuffie."

"What is it?"

He answered her with a bright smile, not even giving her a chance to wonder. "Are you interested in joining the student council?"

A question mark might as well have been floating above her head for all her confusion. "The student council…?"

He nodded, still smiling.

"What…is that?"

Lyle was taken aback. "I-I never imagined you wouldn't know what a student council is."

"I-I'm sorry! We didn't have one in my church."

"Ah, I remember now. You're from the countryside, aren't you? Sorry, I didn't explain it well enough," he replied, clearing his throat. "The student council is essentially a group of students who plan and manage the various activities and events that take place at school. Each member has a specific position, for example, secretary or accountant. Each role is self-explanatory, and all of them are important to running the student council."

The words continued flowing smoothly out of his mouth.

"The student council at our school is a bit unique, since it's often made up of students who excel academically or come from good families. This year, it's me, Edward, and Erina."

Lyle, the third prince of this country; Edward, the son of the prime minister; and Erina, the next Saint… An impressive lineup.

"The student council also has some privileges. Its members have their pick of career paths after graduation. In other words, you won't have to worry about making a living. A very attractive organization, especially from the perspective of students who are commoners… Whoa, Yuffie. Did you just faint while standing up? Are you all right?"

"Ack! I'm sorry! All this talk about a world so far above the clouds made my mind go blank."

"No, I apologize, I dumped too much information on you at once. Would you like me to explain it again?"

"No, it's fine! I think I have the gist of what a student council is."

"That's good then." Lyle nodded with satisfaction.

"Well, there's a ton I want to ask you, so I'll start with…why do you want a loser like *me* in the student council?"

He started pacing as he answered her. "Several reasons. First, the fact that you can use offensive magic is much more important than you think."

Two conflicting thoughts immediately flashed in her mind at his words: "No way" and "Ugh, I knew it." The former was much more powerful, though.

"Unless you actually are a cross-dressing boy, the only magic you should be able to use as a girl is the healing kind. And yet you activated an offensive spell strong enough to defeat a Flame Cerberus in one hit. This in itself is an extraordinary fact, one that could rewrite history textbooks."

His shoes clacked on the floor as Lyle walked circles around Yuffie. Although it was impossible to read his expression, she could hear the excitement in his voice.

"However, to be perfectly honest, the problem lies in how we manage your power. Some will see it as the power of a god, capable of saving everything, while others may think of it as the power of a devil, capable of destroying everything."

"I…guess."

Though Yuffie agreed, his words didn't feel real. It felt like he was talking about someone else, not her. But Lyle's serious expression in the moonlight made it clear that he was stating an undeniable truth.

"When that power inevitably comes to light, if you don't have someone to back you up…you might be in a bit of trouble. After all, your very existence overturns the building blocks of our world. Which means there will be both people who'll try to erase your

existence and ones who will try to investigate every inch of your body to find out the truth."

"Eeek…!" Yuffie gulped and shrieked softly.

A dimly lit laboratory, a cold bed, a thick syringe… A scene straight out of her silly fantasies might actually become reality.

"Personally, I want to avoid that situation. Yuffie, you're a student at this school and someone who needs to be protected. And more than anything, you're important to me…" Lyle stopped speaking then, seemingly overcome with emotion. For a moment, something like love flashed in his eyes as he turned to Yuffie. But then he quickly shook his head and resumed. "As a friend. You're an important friend to me."

"Friend…" She suddenly broke out into a grin.

"What brought on that smile?"

"Ack! Nothing! I'm fine!" Yuffie rubbed her cheeks to return her face to normal. While she was overjoyed about him calling her an important friend, Lyle himself seemed a bit dissatisfied. "Lord Lyle?" She inquired, noticing the subtle change in the atmosphere.

He cleared his throat to deflect her question. "We're getting way off track. Even though I want to protect you, I have my limits. So…" Lyle stopped pacing, looked her straight in the eye, and continued forcefully. "I want you to join the student council so you can stay as close to me as possible. It's made up of the best students in the Kingdom, so I'm sure we can help." He paused, took a deep breath, and asked, "So what do you say?"

Yuffie, on the other hand, was speechless. It wasn't that she was worried that Lyle was trying to deceive her or make things up. The problem was entirely on her end.

After a brief moment of silence…

"I-I'm so sorry!" She bowed her head, bending as far as she could. "This is all too sudden for me… Plus, I'm having a really hard time getting my thoughts together…"

She understood why he wanted her to join the student council, but before she could even wrap her head around his logic, she simply couldn't accept the fact that her offensive magic was valuable at all. In short, she was confused.

"Of course, I'm not expecting an answer right away. It's an important decision that will affect your school life from now on."

"Thank you for being so understanding… Again, I'm really sorry…"

"Don't worry about it! I'm not the president anyway, so I can't make the final decision."

"Oh, I see."

"The president is an upperclassman. I'm the vice president. I suppose that makes me the next student council president."

Either way, it was still an impressive position.

"Everything I just told you is based on my own judgment. To move forward properly, I'll need to get the approval of all the student council members, including the president. Which is why I'd like to suggest something to help with that." After carefully choosing his words, Lyle asked Yuffie, "Would it be all right if I told them about what happened today?"

"Oh, sure, of course."

"You're not even going to think about it?!" Lyle's eyes widened in shock. "A-Are you sure?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. I don't mind, since it's you, Lord Lyle," Yuffie replied, looking a little embarrassed. Lyle ran a hand through his hair awkwardly.

"You should be a bit more cautious. Or more like…learn to be suspicious of people."

"That might be a challenge for me, since I haven't interacted much with anyone before now…"

"I'm amazed you can admit that so easily. I feel like I heard something I shouldn't have."

"Well, that's because I think I can trust you, Lord Lyle."

"Oh, really? And why is that?"

"J-Just because?" Yuffie's eyes darted everywhere but at him.

In response, he let out a huge sigh and muttered to himself, "That's it. I'm getting you on the student council no matter what."

"What was that?"

"No, it's nothing. Anyway, I want you to come to the student council office after school tomorrow. I don't think words alone are

enough to convince you, so you should see how we do things for yourself and use the experience to decide."

"All right, I understand…"

And so, Yuffie, a wilting wallflower lacking confidence, would be visiting the student council office.



AFTER school the next day, Yuffie put on her backpack and arrived at her destination—a certain corner of the central school building.

"Th-This is the student council room…"

In front of her was an ornate door that at first glance looked like a castle gate. The wooden door was intricately crafted down to the last detail, with carved patterns depicting mythical heroes fighting, almost making it seem like the student council room was a place where heroes gathered. The words "Student Council Office" were written in a stately font and complemented the gorgeous, golden handle. Overwhelmed by it all, Yuffie even forgot to breathe.

"I-I can't…" She felt burdened by what opening this door meant. The weight was too much. "I'm not going in today…"

Just as she was about to turn around.

You're an important friend to me.

Lyle's words kept repeating in her head.

"Friends…" As soon as she muttered the word, her whole body tingled. It was the first time someone had said to her, "You're my friend."

Until now, even if I thought of someone as a friend, they didn't think of me that way… This is the only pattern of my life…

Bitter memories came rushing forth. How old had she been back then?

Lisette, who sat next to her, dropped her writing instrument, so Yuffie picked it up for her.

"Thank you, Yuffie!"

That was the first time she had a conversation with Lisette.

"You thanked me…"

Something changed with that one word. For Yuffie, who had never spoken to anyone outside her family before, those words from Lisette were like a breath of fresh air in her heart.

After that, Yuffie started to actively talk to Lisette.

"Lessons are so…boring, huh…"

She would casually bring up all kinds of topics during class.

"Cleaning…is fun, huh…"

She would try talking to her while cleaning after school.

Most of Lisette's responses fell along the lines of "Mm-hmm" and "Sure is." Still, Yuffie thought of her as a friend she could talk to freely.

Until she overheard the following conversation between Lisette and another classmate.

"Hey, Lisette. You've been getting along well with Yuffie lately. Are you two friends?"

"Huh? Uh-uh… I've never thought of us as friends. I mean, her voice is so quiet I can't hear what she's saying."

SHOCK!

Yuffie never spoke to Lisette again after that.

In hindsight, this incident had made it even harder for her to talk to others, something she'd already had trouble with. The shock of that time made Yuffie's stomach turn inside out whenever she thought about it.

"I-I need to shove these crappy memories away!" She shook her head vigorously to regain her composure.

Lord Lyle definitely *called me his friend…* He was the first friend Yuffie had ever made in her life. And that was exactly why… *I can't just turn a blind eye to a request from my friend!*

She narrowed her eyes and scowled at the heavy door to the student council office. Then she took a deep breath and reached for the golden handle.

"Here I go…"

Just as her fingertips were about to touch it…

"What the hell have you been doing all this time?"

"Gaaah!" Yuffie jumped at the low, combative voice, then turned around timidly. "Eeek…"

There stood a young man, his rough appearance immediately putting Yuffie on edge. She wasn't great with his type. He had short red hair slicked back and wore his uniform sloppily. At first glance, he looked like just another delinquent. But his muscles were proof of daily training, and his sharp eyes revealed a strong will and pride. The color of his tie clearly marked him as one of her classmates, but his fighting spirit and intimidating aura were enough to put any adult to shame.

"I-I'm sorry, please forgive me…"

"I haven't even said anything yet," he frowned at Yuffie's stammering, his gaze sharp. "You got business with the student council?"

His stare reminded her of an eagle stalking its prey, and Yuffie froze in reaction. With the intense pressure radiating from him jabbing at her, the part of her brain that controlled language began to malfunction.

"Ahh… Um… Uhhh, uhhh…"

"Damn it, use your words!"

"Eeek! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Yuffie, the pacifist, was completely overwhelmed by this young man, and his aura burned with combativeness. So she grew more and more awkward.

S-Someone help meee…

"Jack, keep bullying Yuffie and you'll wind up dead."

Out of nowhere, Lyle appeared between them.

"Lord Lyle…!" Her face brightened as her tension instantly eased.

"Yuffie? That's her name?" Jack's eyes widened in response. He then looked at Yuffie again, as if he were saying, "Is this *her*?" Not understanding why, Yuffie tilted her head curiously.

"All right, both of you, don't just stand there. Let's head in," Lyle stated, leading her inside protectively.

Jack followed after them. As she walked, a tidbit of her memory activated.

Oh, that's right… Jack…the son of the minister of war…

She remembered what Edward had said at the entrance ceremony. Her thoughts were interrupted the moment she entered the student council office.

"Wow…" Yuffie exclaimed involuntarily.

The room was decorated lavishly, like a palace. The walls were studded with gold decorations and lined with tall bookshelves full of books. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, there was a velvet sofa fit for royalty, and warm sunlight poured in through floor-to-ceiling windows.

Already seated at the large marble table in the center of this luxurious space were two familiar faces.

"Yuffie Abisus. Normally, it would be impossible for a commoner like you to set foot in this room. So burn this image into your puny brain."

"Goodness, Edward, must you be so harsh?"

"Hmph. I'm simply stating the truth."

It was Edward and Erina. They made a lovely picture sitting there, which only heightened the sense of guilt that Yuffie shouldn't be here.

I-I want to go home…

Who's to say if she meant her family home or her room in the dorms where Friend was waiting for her? But she felt overwhelmingly out of place, conspicuous in a world different from her own. The feeling made Yuffie want to run away.

"Now look at what you've done. You scared her. I'm sorry, Yuffie. Edward has always been like this." While admonishing him, Erina stood up and walked over to her.

"Oh… Um… I'm the one who should apologize. I really don't belong here…" Yuffie stepped back without thinking from the other girl's overpowering aura of holiness.

Erina gently placed her palm on the back of Yuffie's hand. "There's nothing to apologize for, Yuffie. In fact, we're the ones who need to apologize to you. I'm sure you were surprised at our sudden invitation." The kindness in Erina's voice gave Yuffie an inexpressible sense of relief. "It's all right. Don't worry, just relax." She squeezed

her hand as if to encourage her. A gentle warmth seeped into Yuffie from her cool fingertips.

"Erina…" Yuffie's tense expression softened. Erina's smile was warm, just like a Saint. The anxiety that had been swirling inside Yuffie melted away, and her stiff body relaxed just a little.

Oh, right!

Before she forgot, Yuffie took out four burdock roots from the backpack she was carrying.

"Oh, what's this?"

"It's burdock. A specialty of my village… For all of you…"

"How thoughtful of you…" Erina pressed a hand to her cheek. "This burdock is scrumptious, fresh, and crunchy. I have to admit it's become a favorite snack of mine."

Lyle, who had tried some before, added on, "Truly? Then, thank you so much."

And with that, Erina accepted the four burdocks. She didn't look at all displeased.

Oh, Erina, you're so kind…

It felt like the entire student council office was being rocked in an angel's cradle.

"Are we done with all this useless crap? Can we get to the point now?" Jack threw himself down on the sofa, his cutting tone like a bucket of cold water dousing the cheerful atmosphere. "I sacrificed my training time to come here. I don't wanna waste a single second."

"All right, fine. Stop being so bloody impatient, will you?" Lyle smiled wryly, then took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and spoke quietly. "I originally wanted to bring this up when the president and other upperclassmen were here. Unfortunately, they have another unavoidable commitment. So, for now, I think we should get into it with the four of us and Yuffie." He glanced at the president's empty seat.

Then that means…there are more *people on the student council?!* The thought made Yuffie tremble.

"I've gathered you all here for one reason: to discuss Yuffie Abisus joining the student council."

She listened to Lyle anxiously. He saw her gaze and nodded.

"Don't worry. I already gave them a heads-up about you in the morning, about what happened with the Flame Cerberus yesterday, and that you can use super-advanced offensive magic. Of course, whether or not you trust me is a separate issue," he finished with a shrug.

Jack snorted derisively. "Lyle, do you have any idea what you're saying?"

"I do, because I'm completely sane."

"Like I believe that. I bet you hit your head in the fight with the Flame Cerberus and lost your mind, right?"

"I saw Yuffie defeat the monster in an instant with my own eyes."

Jack clicked his tongue at Lyle's serious expression. "I still don't believe you. I think Edward and Erina feel the same way, right? Right?"

"I agree with Jack." Edward crossed his arms and replied flatly. "I refuse to believe that Yuffie, a girl *and* a commoner, can use offensive magic. What's more, super-advanced spells that surpass even Lyle's? Absurd."

Yuffie looked away awkwardly at the cold glance he sent her way.

Erina, on the other hand, smiled despite her apparent confusion. "Yuffie, I very much doubt you're the type to lie, but this is all just a bit much, so…I can't say I'm completely convinced. I'm sorry."

Jack nodded, unsurprised by the others' reactions. "It's impossible for a woman to use attack magic, and that would be true even if the world flipped upside down."

Yuffie's heart sank at their remarks. Her shoulders, already slumped, hunched even more. *I knew it… I mean, their reactions are normal…* For a moment, she doubted herself. That maybe her ability to use offensive magic was all just her imagination, and that in reality, she couldn't use anything…

No…that can't be true!

Yuffie shook her head. Her spine snapped into place, ramrod straight. She wiped away the doubts that had begun to sprout and replaced them with a single-minded thought.

Okay, so I'm terrible at everything—studying, sports, talking to people… But…! She clenched her fists. *The seven years I spent practicing attack magic almost every day definitely aren't a figment of my imagination!*

Some things even Yuffie could never deny. The fire magic that almost burned down the entire forest. The water magic that accidentally created a lake and nearly changed the course of a river. The lightning magic that struck the village with such force that it caused the villagers to mistake it for a sudden thunderstorm. The wind magic that blew away all the clouds in the sky, turning it into a clear, sunny day. A slight mistake in the output of her earth magic almost created the tallest mountain in the country.

All of that was real. Her eyes brimmed with force.

I have to make them understand that I can *use attack magic!*

Yuffie wasn't good at speaking up in situations with more than one person, but she mustered up her courage and spoke her mind.

"Um, um…"

"Then why don't we have her prove it?" Lyle issued the challenge, interrupting her before she could finish.

"Are you serious?" Jack retorted with a scowl.

Lyle only grinned devilishly in response.



THE Academy of Magic was also famous for its many vast training grounds, each a massive dome-shaped structure with a wide-open space inside. The walls were reinforced with special magic to prevent them from collapsing even with powerful magical attacks.

Yuffie and Jack faced each other on one of them.

H-How did this happen…?

A huge, magical lantern hanging from the ceiling illuminated her stiff face. She rewound to just ten minutes ago, when Lyle made

the suggestion to Jack, who was doubtful that Yuffie could use offensive magic.

"One of the training grounds is currently empty. Jack, if you fight Yuffie, you'll find out the truth. Don't you agree?"

Jack hesitated, then answered him. "Are you serious, man? You want me to use my magic on a tiny thing like her? Over my dead body!"

"So you're forfeiting? That would make you a coward who tucked tail while also basically admitting I'm right about her and her abilities."

"Screw you!" Jack shouted back. "Fine then, challenge accepted!"

Urk… Using magic in front of people makes me so nervous…

It was already nerve-wracking enough just standing in the spacious arena with nothing around, but it was even more so with people watching. Since this battle was organized in secret, only Lyle, Edward, and Erina were in the audience. Still, Yuffie's mouth was dry with tension.

Plus… She glanced over the training field. Definitely wide. But… *If I'm not careful, I'll blow this whole place up!*

Jack taunted her while the thought flashed through her mind. "What's the matter? Poor little baby, too scared to talk?" he sneered at her. "Why am I not surprised? I mean, I *am* the second-best in our grade after Lyle! If you wanna call this off, now's the time."

"N-No, I won't! I'll do my best!" Yuffie bowed her head and expressed her determination to fight.

"…Damn it, I really don't need you messing up my rhythm." Jack scratched his head, looking uneasy.

"Yuffie is adorable, isn't she?" Erina giggled in the stands. Her eyes were filled with affection, like a mother watching her child playing in the sandbox. "Now that I think about it, Lyle, I'm curious about exactly which types of attack magics she can use."

"Well…" Lyle pretended to think for a moment, then continued with a mischievous smile. "You'll just have to find out for yourself."

"Aw, don't be so stingy."

"Erina, stop it," Edward grunted. "He can't answer you because she never actually used offensive magic. Just hurry up and get this over with. I don't have time to watch a farce."

"Don't worry, you won't be disappointed," Lyle replied.

"We'll see about that," Edward retorted, completely unapproachable.

With a faint smile in the other boy's direction, Lyle took a step onto the battlefield. "I'll explain the rules! Once the match starts, you're free to fight however you wish! However, killing is strictly prohibited! Also, refrain from using magic that can damage the training grounds! Yuffie, please take that into consideration!"

"I-I will! I'll be careful!"

"I'll teach you to underestimate me…" Jack's face was filled with anger from the implication of Lyle's words that Yuffie was stronger than he was.

"The winner will be determined if one of you surrenders or I deem either of you unable to fight!"

"I'll heal any injury as long as neither of you dies!" Erina exclaimed with an excited wave of her hand.

I have to try my best at least so that they aren't disappointed… Yuffie steeled her resolve. Her eyes brimmed with strength.

"Then, begin!"

With Lyle's command, the battle began.

"I'll show you what I'm made of! *Inferno!*" In an attempt to finish this off quickly, Jack emitted red flames from his outstretched hands, fireballs blasting one after the other—five of them in an instant. On average, first-year students could create one or two fireballs at a time.

"Five fireballs at once, impressive."

"I didn't expect anything less of our grade's number 2."

Edward and Erina nodded in admiration.

"You'd better pray that you don't get hit!" With that, Jack raised both hands toward the ceiling and swung them down in one go. The five fireballs released intense heat, tore through the air, and rushed straight for Yuffie.

"Yuffie! Move out of the way!" Erina yelled.

In this world, girls couldn't use attack magic. So the only way to deal with it was to run away. *If* you were a normal girl.

"Water Ball."

Yuffie stretched her hand out in front of her with a calm expression and briefly chanted the spell's name. Five water balls instantly formed from Yuffie's outstretched fingertips. Each was about the size of a fist, transparent and bluish, and exuded a gem-like beauty.

"What the hell…?!" Jack bellowed.

Yuffie waved her hand and created an instant popping sound. Her water balls absorbed the heat from his fireballs and exploded, containing the burning power. Hot steam filled the space but cooled down immediately, obscuring their vision. A warm dampness caressed their cheeks.

A few seconds later, the steam cleared to reveal Yuffie unharmed, not a single burn mark on her clothes. The only traces of Jack's fireballs were the five molten tracks left on the ground—she had intercepted every single one of his attacks.

Silence…

Jack couldn't believe it. One of his most advanced spells had been blocked so easily.

Edward and Erina were also astonished. Yuffie, a girl, had used water magic, one of the elemental offensive magics.

"Y-You're joking…" Erina blurted out, goggling at the sight in front of her.

"That should be…impossible… But…she definitely executed water magic…" Edward propped his chin on his hand and lapsed into thought. "Not to mention the power to create five water balls at once in addition to the control required to shoot down each fireball without the slightest deviation… This is no amateurish feat…" His tone grew increasingly agitated.

"See? I was telling the truth." Lyle chuckled like a child whose prank had been a success.

Meanwhile, Jack, finally able to accept reality, spoke with trembling lips, "Y-You…are you *sure* you're not a cross-dressing

boy?"

"First him and now you! What is it with you people?!" Yuffie wailed, her agitation at odds with the atmosphere.

As for Jack, his lips twisted belligerently. "So…you weren't lying… You *can* use attack magic."

Clearly the type to believe what he saw with his own eyes, Jack immediately raised his guard against Yuffie and manifested a new spell. *"Roaring Flame Beast!"* Red hot flames began dancing on his palms, which he raised toward the ceiling.

"That's…!" Edward cried out in shock.

In an instant, the flames transformed into a giant blazing figure in the shape of a beast. Red and orange flares swirled as heat scorched the air. The flaming beast roared fiercely, baring its fiery fangs and claws, exuding the ferocity of a wild creature.

"I'll give you props for forcing me to use this spell," Jack taunted with a grin. "Fire is the symbol of absolute power… I've been fascinated by it since I was a child, and it's the magic I'm best at. I've been honing it all my life! Take her down!" Jack roared and swung both arms. The flame beast, moving as if it had a life of its own, leapt at Yuffie with incredible force, ready to devour her.

"You won't stand a chance if that hits you! Yuffie, surrender!" Erina's screams rang out in vain as the flame beast undulated ferociously and rushed toward Yuffie, showing no mercy. Its aura was overwhelming. The sight of it on the attack evoked boundless fear.

But Yuffie herself remained completely calm.

"Grand Wall."

She stretched out her hands in front of her, and a huge earthen wall appeared.

"Are you freaking kidding me?!" Jack's cry of surprise was drowned out by a rumbling sound that reverberated everywhere.

The earthen wall, towering like a mountain, greeted the giant fire beast. With a roar so loud it nearly burst their eardrums, the Roaring Flame Beast crashed into the wall.

"Gaaah!"

The force of the explosion blasted Jack backwards. The spectators felt the impact too, and they instinctively tried to protect themselves. The fiery beast's angry roar echoed in the air as it tried to smash through the earthen wall, but it swallowed the inferno whole—like an ancient giant crushing a person. The sturdy earthen wall remained standing without any damage, protecting Yuffie from the attack. A few moments later, the cloud of light and dust cleared.

"Is this…actually happening?" Erina murmured.

Yuffie was unharmed, and there wasn't even a single scorch mark on her clothes. Only a massive burn remained on the earthen wall, the remains of the flame beast that had come to life to burn everything to ashes.

"I don't believe this…" Edward also seemed unable to fully accept the reality.

"…Three elements," Lyle muttered.

I knew she could use fire and water magic… But I didn't expect earth magic, too… he thought.

There existed five basic elements of offensive magic: fire, water, wind, earth, and lightning. Normally, people focused on one element and mastered it. However, the particularly talented could master two elements after spending a considerable amount of time training, which was the case for Lyle. Only the most skilled could even achieve competency in three or four attributes; most of them joined the palace's Advanced Magic Division and became famous as the country's shield. Incidentally, no historical records existed of magicians who could use all five elemental magics.

She never ceases to amaze… Yuffie had just shown him something that went beyond common sense, and Lyle could only let out a dry chuckle. *A girl who can wield three elemental magics at such a young age, and she's only a first year at the Academy…*

"No, hold on." Lyle's breath caught. A thought so ridiculous he had never even considered popped into his head. "Is it possible…she can use the other attributes too…?"

Meanwhile, Jack staggered to his feet, despair etched into his face. "No way… No freaking way…"

Fire magic that he had spent nearly ten years perfecting. Even with his most advanced technique, the culmination of all his skills, he'd been unable to even scratch Yuffie. The gap between their powers was overwhelming. And she hadn't even revealed her own attack moves to him. Unable to accept this fact, Jack stood there dazed.

"Are you okay?!" She quickly dispelled the rock wall and ran towards him.

"Stay away from me, you idiot!" Jack shouted.

Yuffie stopped, her shoulders shaking. "I'm sorry, I accidentally used too much energy…" Her flustered apology dealt the final blow to his wounded pride, shattering it.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you! You're mocking me!"

Jack was furious. All of his attacks had been blocked by a girl who should have only been capable of using healing magic. A commoner beneath his notice. It was a humiliating feeling, as if all the magic he'd built up until now had been rejected. A fiery burst of emotion exploded in his chest.

No way… No way in hell am I accepting her!

Anger, frustration, and a desire not to lose. These intense emotions gave Jack strength. He braced himself and tried to cast magic again. Unfortunately for him…

"Ngh…"

His body swayed unsteadily; his eyes were unfocused, and he looked like he was on the verge of falling.

"Jack, don't! If you use any more magic, you know there will be side effects!" Edward shouted from the audience seating.

Yuffie was taken aback. *Side effects! Oh, right, we learned about that in class…*

If you used too much magic, you would suffer from something called "side effects." They apparently appeared as various malfunctions in the body. Yuffie wouldn't know, as she had personally never experienced this phenomenon before. Symptoms included headache, nausea, and in severe cases, the patient might end up bedridden for days. In the worst case, one could even die.

Jack had poured almost all of his mana into that tremendous spell, and he was now experiencing the side effects.

"I can't let him fight anymore at this point…!" As someone aiming to become a Saint, Yuffie couldn't let him push himself too hard. "Um, um! Shouldn't we stop now? You look like you're exhausted…"

"Shut up, don't underestimate me! I can't lose like this!"

Argh, you dummy! You just added fuel to the fire!

Ignoring Yuffie's pleas, Jack thrust his palm forward.

"Fire…"

"Stun Shock!" Yuffie chanted before Jack could.

"Dwaaah?!"

Oh, no! I've done it now!

Not wanting to drag the fight out any longer, she reflexively unleashed a lightning spell. She had meant to reduce the output to the bare minimum so Jack couldn't move, but instead, Jack just stood there as his eyes rolled back in his head.

Silence returned.

Erina and Edward were speechless.

"Yuffie, you…" Lyle walked on unsteady feet over to Yuffie and asked, "You can use *four* attributes…?"

"N-No…" She shook her head in fear before casting another spell. *"Divine Wind."*

Jack was about to lose consciousness and collapse, but Yuffie used wind magic to lay him down slowly on the ground.

"I-I can use them all…"



THE cave yawned as if enveloped in darkness. Only the sound of dripping water echoed occasionally, and an eerie silence hung in the pitch black space. The air was chilly, and the many rocks scattered in the darkness spoke of the cave's vastness.

Two figures stood deep inside it. One was a silhouette with a hood pulled down low, his face consumed by the darkness, and his form unclear. His feet planted firmly on the ground, he exuded a

calm confidence. The other was a strange being that suddenly appeared from the jet black shadows. It was the very embodiment of wriggling darkness.

"The Flame Cerberus was defeated?" A muffled voice rang out in the blackness. Both surprise and anger colored it. "Any casualties on the student side?"

The hooded man spoke quietly, "Zero…"

"That's impossible." This time, the voice was clearly tinged with shock.

"Who is it? Who did this?" the shadow questioned the hooded man sharply.

"A female student named Yuffie Abisus," he answered with trembling lips.

"You must be joking?"

Suddenly, a light like a flame shot out of the darkness, blowing off the man's wrist.

"Gaaaaaah!" The man fell to the ground, screaming in pain. The shadow then stomped on his head. "I'm telling the truth…! Please, please believe me!" the man pleaded, his face stained with tears and sweat. "I saw her! She took the Flame Cerebrus down on her own!"

The shadow was silent for just a moment before he finally released the man's head. Something tentacle-like stretched out. A green light glowed, then the man's hand quickly returned to its original form.

"Haa… Haa…" the hooded man cradled his hand as he panted.

"Yuffie Abisus…" The shadow's voice was ominous. "Capture her," it commanded, refusing to tolerate any objections. "And eliminate every last member of the student council. Carry out the plan no matter what."

"I-I understand…"

"Should you fail…" The shadow stretched and pressed the man's neck against the rock wall.

"Ngh…?!"

"Next time, I'll incinerate you, head and all."

It was a cruel declaration, an unavoidable warning. Due to fear and lack of oxygen, the man nodded repeatedly. That was the end of the conversation, and soon silence descended. All that remained was the eerie *plip plip* of water dripping.

Chapter 4: Burdock Will Save the World

MEDITATION is a journey into the ocean of the mind. Shutting out the five senses as much as possible and facing yourself releases the real essence hidden in the unconscious. In other words, a moment of encounter with your true self that you've almost forgotten in the busyness of everyday life.

"Yuffie, what are you doing?" Friend asked her.

"I'm meditating."

"Detonating?"

"Um, I think you misheard me."

After the battle with Jack, Yuffie had gone back to her room and was now meditating on the balcony. Years ago, a believer in the village church practiced meditation, which, according to what she'd heard, had the effect of calming the mind and organizing your thoughts. With how hectic the day had been, her head felt like hundreds of crushed candies mixed together, so she had decided to try meditating. But…

"Actually, maybe detonating *is* a better description…"

Far from calming her mind, her worries had only increased. It was obvious what was troubling Yuffie. She recalled the aftermath of the fight with Jack after school.

Once Erina healed the unconscious Jack using her magic, everyone returned to the student council room.

"Now you all know—it's an undeniable fact that Yuffie can use offensive magic," Lyle began with a grin. "So, in light of this, I'd like you to consider allowing her to join the student council. What does everyone say?"

Yuffie, shaking and silent, stood next to Lyle, who spoke confidently. She looked nothing like the girl who had unleashed such unconventional magic earlier. A space with too many people was much more threatening than Jack, a powerful fire magic user.

Edward, Erina, and Jack responded to Lyle's proposal in succession.

"Forgive me, but I need some time. I'd like to get my thoughts in order."

"I'm sorry… I'm not sure I can accept reality either…"

"…"

All three were confused, unable to think logically.

"Of course. No one would be able to stay calm after witnessing something like that."

Unsurprisingly, since everything they had believed as common sense was turned upside down in just a few minutes. Deciding that the others needed time to process this new reality, Lyle turned to Yuffie and said, "There you have it. I'm sorry for imposing on you even more, but please come to the student council room again tomorrow after school."

"Oh, yes, of course."

Unable to refuse, Yuffie nodded vigorously. And with that, she was free to go about her day.

After that, she returned to the dormitory in a daze, and when she sat down on her bed in her room, she suddenly realized the gravity of the situation.

"The three of them found out that I could use offensive magic, and I hurt Jack… Arrrgh, what should I do…?"

I… I just did something completely outrageous…

For Yuffie, who had thoroughly avoided standing out (or thought she had), this was a disaster. Her dream school life was on the verge of crumbling. She had only herself to blame, though, since she'd given in to the peer pressure.

"But more than that, my attack magic was…incredible."

The situation she'd laughed off as impossible turned out to be real. Her offensive magic really *was* amazing compared to others'.

Jack was apparently the second-most skilled at it after Lyle in their cohort.

Her first thought when she heard that was, *Really…?* Of course, she'd immediately felt apologetic toward Jack for even thinking it. However, it didn't change the fact that his fire magic had been much weaker than the first spell she'd learned. So, when comparing her attack magic to his, the vast disparity was clear to see.

"There's never been a woman in history who can use attack magic. In fact, I've never heard of anyone who can use all five elements, not even men. Yuffie, you're really incredible."

The words Lyle had spoken after the battle kept looping in her head. She had found them hard to believe at first, but his face told her he wasn't lying.

"I should be happy about this. So why aren't I…?"

Her expression as she gazed up at the moon floating in the dark sky was conflicted. She had made it her goal to learn and master healing magic and become a Saint. Still, for some reason, she wound up focusing on attack magic—unwillingly—especially because her healing magic was still as useless as ever.

"If only some of the power from my attack magic could be diverted to healing magic…" She knew it was a wish that would never come true. After all, there had never been a single woman in history who could use offensive magic. "Why can I use it…?"

And hers was exponentially more powerful.

"I just don't get any of this…"

No clues came to mind. The first time she used attack magic, she'd managed somehow by visualizing the spell. It hadn't been all that hard, which was why she couldn't understand everyone else's reactions. She thought that if she could use it, anyone could, and that it wasn't a big deal.

Yuffie's self-esteem was already lower than the ground. She was terrible at everything she did, so there was no way she could fathom the idea that she could use offensive magic on a level that had never existed before. Just like Edward and the others who couldn't understand this reality, she herself couldn't accept the

uniqueness of her power. Not only that, her very existence began to feel alien, and an indescribable fear struck her…

"Gah! No, stop it!" Sensing her thoughts veering to the dark side, Yuffie shook her head vigorously. "Anyway, there's no point in thinking about it now…"

She had made peace with what happened today. The rest she would leave to future Yuffie to decide her next step when she went to the student council office tomorrow. For now, she was done thinking about it.

"Yuffie, I'm hungry," Friend said as he sat next to her. His eyes were admonishing.

"Oh, sorry, you're right, it's almost time for dinner."

Her stomach voiced its hunger loudly then. She realized she hadn't eaten anything since lunch. Her mind had been racing so much, she'd forgotten to eat.

I have to go buy dinner… No, it's too much of a hassle; I'll just have burdock root again today…

Just as she was about to stand up…

"Ungh?!"

An electric current zapped through both of her legs! Having been sitting cross-legged for so long and engrossed in her thoughts, Yuffie didn't realize that they'd gone numb!

"Ooowww…"

Moving like an old lady who'd hurt her back, she stumbled to her feet.

"Aaaahhhh, my legs! Aaaaahhhh!"

Yuffie rolled around on the balcony with both legs in the air, trying to shake off the painful pins-and-needles tingling.

If only I could use healing magic at a time like this…! She should know by now that wishing for the impossible was a pointless exercise.

While she bellowed in unbearable agony…

"Omigosh! Will you shut up?!"

A girl's sharp voice came from the window of the room next to hers.

"Eeek! I'm sorry!"

She tried to kneel as usual, but the intense numbness in both legs made that impossible. Feeling apologetic, she tried her best to keep her mouth shut and crawled into the room like a caterpillar. Face down and desperate, Yuffie closed the window and finally managed to catch her breath. If she heard a strange voice coming from next door deep in the night, she'd be angry too.

"I was trying so hard not to be a nuisance after bothering you just this morning too… Uuurk… I'm sorry for being a waste of space." She thought that she should offer up more burdock as an apology again.

"Yuffie, are you all right?"

"I…don't think I am."

She definitely wasn't all right in a lot of ways—not her legs or her future. But time marched on without any mercy. Yuffie understood she had no choice but to go with the flow.

Friend licked her cheek and commented, "Then you will be. You will be."

And that helped soothe her a bit.



THE next day after school, in front of the student council room. Yuffie had been pacing back and forth for about ten minutes, facing the intimidating door.

Ugh, it takes courage to open this door alone…

Unlike the classrooms where she could just blend into the background, there was nowhere to escape in the student council office. In fact, remembering what happened yesterday, she was even more worried about how she should act when she stepped inside.

Maybe someone else can open it instead. A girl can hope…

PACE, PACE, PACE, PACE…

"Can I help you?"

"Eeep!" Yuffie flinched and turned toward the voice. "N-Noah?!"

Fair skin and light blue hair. His eyes, peeking out from behind long, trimmed bangs, were a deep forest green. Noah was the

upperclassman she'd spoken to in the school's courtyard on the day of the entrance ceremony.

"We meet again." He raised his right hand in greeting, his face as expressionless as ever.

"Wh-Why are you here, Noah…?" she asked him timidly.

"What do you mean 'why?'" Noah glanced at the door to the student council office. "I'm the student council president."

"Huh…?"



HE *really* is *the student council president…* Yuffie thought when she saw Noah sitting in the president's seat. It was a bit unlike him when she recalled how he'd been the other day, reading a book by himself in the lush courtyard. Then again, his mysterious aura and unfazed demeanor were the perfect traits for a leader.

"Excellent, everyone's here," Lyle greeted, clapping his hands and sporting his usual grin. Sitting on one of the sofas in the center of the room were Lyle, Edward, Jack, and Erina. "By the way, is Hans still on his expedition?"

"Yes. I'm sure he's achieving great things abroad even as we speak," Noah answered Lyle's question matter-of-factly.

"Then let's start today's meeting with the six of us."

Crud, it's finally starting… Yuffie groaned internally.

Next to Lyle, Yuffie was looking down at her trembling hands placed on her knees. Compared to yesterday, the air in the student council office was as heavy as lead. When she considered that she was the cause of it, she felt like digging a hole in the floor and hiding.

"Today's agenda revolves around Yuffie's future here. But first…" Looking around the room, Lyle addressed the three who'd witnessed Yuffie's magic. "Have you all finally managed to accept the truth?"

Edward was the first to answer his question. "Frankly, I still think it's ridiculous that a girl can even use offensive magic. However, based on all the information I've seen with my own eyes,

it's an indisputable fact that Yuffie Abisus is one such female. Making her defeat of the Flame Cerberus also likely." He paused, grinding his teeth a bit, before continuing. "As strong as my desire is *not* to believe this, that is nothing more than an unwillingness to change my mindset simply because of what I *thought* was the way of the world. Until now, that is."

"So you acknowledge her talent?" Lyle prompted.

"If I were to shake my head at this point, it would mean I'm blind."

"Good, good. Just goes to show how reasonable you are. Erina, how about you?"

"I suppose I agree with Edward. I can't believe it, but I saw Yuffie use attack magic with my very own eyes. It would stretch the bounds of reality to treat the experience as an illusion or hallucination."

"I appreciate it." Finally, Lyle focused his eyes on Jack.

"…I'm a loser. I don't have a say in this," Jack huffed.

"Do you at least recognize that Yuffie can use attack magic?"

"I fought her and I lost. If I don't admit it now, I'd be lying about my own magic. And that's the only thing I won't do."

"Typical Jack. All right then, with all three of you agreeing that Yuffie can use attack magic, we'll move forward with this discussion."

Yuffie sighed in relief at his words.

"Having said that…" Lyle's easygoing smile disappeared, and a serious expression settled on his face as he turned to Noah. "The president, who has the power to make decisions here, has yet to see Yuffie's magic. So I propose we move to one of the training grounds now and have her do a demonstration."

"There's no need for that," Noah, silent up until then, finally spoke.

"Are you sure?" Lyle asked, raising an eyebrow.

"All four of you aren't liars, nor are you in a position to do so. In light of that, if everyone is saying the same thing, there's no need for me to verify it myself." His words echoed through the room, calm and persuasive. Despite the fact that everyone else was younger

than him, Noah didn't pull rank. He spoke politely, exuding an air of someone who knew his worth. "Because I trust you all."

The student council members nodded earnestly in response to his words. It was like they shared an invisible bond.

Wow, he's exactly what I think of as the perfect student council president… Yuffie sighed in admiration.

Next to her, Lyle murmured so low only she could hear him. "… I'm honored, Brother."

Brother…?

An invisible question mark sprang above her head, but Noah pressed on.

"Considering the items on today's agenda, we should prioritize making decisions. Time is of the essence. I'd like information to help me with that, so allow me to hear what each of you has to say. Be honest." Noah looked at Edward first.

"I'm opposed to Yuffie being a part of the student council," Edward started with his arms crossed. "First, I believe we should report to the school right away that Yuffie can use offensive magic and leave the final decision to the national government. A woman who can use offensive magic… Her outrageous existence isn't something the student council can or should hide. If we do, in the worst-case scenario, we may be charged with treason."

T-Treason…?! A chill ran down Yuffie's spine. *On second thought…that* is *a possibility, huh…?*

She clasped her hands together tightly. Her very existence was an anomaly. Yuffie had no idea how much of an impact it would have on the country, let alone the school. So, as Edward said, it would be better to let the adults decide what to do with her.

But then Lyle's words echoed in her head…

"When that power inevitably comes to light, if you don't have someone to back you up…you might be in a bit of trouble. After all, your very existence overturns the building blocks of our world. Which means there will be both people who'll try to erase your existence, and ones who will try to investigate every inch of your body to find out the truth."

No, no, no, no! I don't want to be some lab rat!

*A dimly lit laboratory, a cold bed, a thick syringe…*she saw it all vividly in her mind.

"Respectfully, I disagree with Edward's opinion." Just as Yuffie's delusions were about to go into overdrive, Lyle's remark interrupted them. "If our people discover that she can use offensive magic… Who knows what the Fundamentalists might do to her?"

His words gave Edward pause. "While I admit that can't be ruled out…"

"Um, excuse me… What do you mean by Fundamentalists…?" Yuffie asked timidly, and Edward's eyes widened.

"You don't even know that? It's part of the basics of the Valencian religion."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I think we were taught a little bit about it at the church school in my village, but…it was just the tiniest bit. I didn't even know that there were sects, plus they didn't bother mentioning anything about magic because it's not relevant to us commoners."

"This is the problem with country bumpkins," Edward sighed in exasperation.

"Clearly, the national government needs to provide administrative guidance to whatever school is in Yuffie's village," Lyle muttered, scaring her, but she pretended not to hear.

"Listen up, commoner," Edward said, his voice stern. "The teachings of the Valencian religion emphasize valuing harmony and coexistence with all living things and nature because God created everything, so Valencians must respect and protect all life. Are you with me so far?"

"Y-Yes. I remember learning that at church." Yuffie nodded.

Lyle, watching the exchange between the two, commented with a smile, "Edward, I appreciate how caring you are despite your harsh words."

"Stuff it. I merely concluded that we couldn't move forward unless we shared a common language. Anyway, back to the topic at hand. There are multiple sects in the Valencian Church. The two main sects are the Fundamentalists and the Moderates, and each has a different interpretation of the doctrine."

"I see, I see. Go on…" Yuffie nodded some more.

Edward held up an index finger. "The Moderates interpret the doctrine faithfully and apply the spirit of coexistence to all beings. They claim that they respect all beings equally, humans and nature, regardless of social position or role. In simple terms, they're a group of pacifists who don't want conflict."

He held up another finger and continued.

"In contrast, the Fundamentalists hold a broad interpretation of certain doctrines and believe in using any means possible to protect them—they're zealous and aggressive. In particular, they strongly believe in the doctrine that 'offensive magic is a gift from God only given to men.' In other words…" His expression turned grave as he touched on the crux of the matter. "The Fundamentalists will never accept the fact that you, Yuffie, a girl, can use it. You'll meet with intense hostility from them, and your life may even be threatened—What's wrong?"

"Don't kill me…" Yuffie muttered tremulously as her eyes welled up with tears.

"As if I would! Besides, I very much doubt you'd go down that easily!"

"Hm. That's a good point…" She realized he was right as she recalled the Flame Cerberus.

"Moreover, I'm not a Fundamentalist; I'm a Moderate, so stop looking like a frightened lamb… What a bloody pain in the neck you are." Edward scratched his head.

"Don't worry, Yuffie." Erina came over and hugged her gently. "Everyone here, including me, is a Moderate. No one has any intention of harming you."

"Lady Erina…" Yuffie sniffled.

"Oh, please, none of that. Just call me 'Erina.' I cherish you as a friend, you know?"

"Erina…"

Yuffie was touched by her compassionate words, drawn in by the kindness that might as well have been a shining beacon amidst such a frightening conversation. She let herself lean into the other

girl's embrace. Erina's ample chest was soft enough to envelop her, like pillows. Truly, the epitome of a Saint…

"Gosh, you're so sweet… I just want to gobble you up…" Erina muttered.

Yuffie quickly removed her face from Erina's chest. "What did you just say?"

"Nothing?"

Yuffie sensed something other than affection from her newfound friend, almost like a leopard staring greedily at a feast in front of it…

"I'm glad to see you two getting along, but can we get back to our talk?"

"Oh, forgive me, Lyle. Yuffie was just too adorable and I…"

"It's fine that you like cute things, but don't lose your head and spirit her home."

"Not to worry. I already have a Black Hole Seraphim and a Demon Overlord God Phoenix at home," Erina stated.

"I don't think that's the problem… Anyway. Tell us your thoughts, Erina," Lyle beckoned in an attempt to steer things back to the matter at hand. Yuffie remained befuddled by their exchange.

"Well, if there's a possibility that Yuffie might be in danger, perhaps we shouldn't reveal her powers. But…I also don't think it's right to hide them from the school or the country, so…" Erina propped her hand on her chin and thought deeply. She was obviously undecided.

"Jack, what about you?" Lyle asked.

"I'm a loser. I don't have a say in this."

"That's all you've been saying this whole time."

"'Cause losers don't have a say."

"I want your opinion, regardless of whether you won or lost."

"Then…I guess I'm on Edward's side. I learned from fighting her that her power is abnormal. Honestly? I don't think it's something we can handle."

"I see." Lyle stared off thoughtfully into space before continuing. "I also don't think it's a good idea to keep Yuffie's powers hidden forever. Like everyone has said, the impact her attack magic

would have on this country…no, on the world, is immeasurable. However, if we choose to reveal the truth, we'll need to determine who's an enemy and who's an ally because it goes without saying that her safety is on the line. If we're not careful, many other lives could be at stake too, not just hers."

Edward, Jack, and Erina nodded as they listened to him.

"Um… What do you mean by that last part?" Yuffie asked.

"It means that no one can attack you and come out unscathed."

"I wouldn't do something that cruel!" she cried.

"But you *would* defend yourself if necessary, right?"

"I mean… Yes… I don't like getting hurt either…"

Yuffie was by no means a *saint*. She also had a strong survival instinct that kicked in at the first sign of danger. Of course, that didn't change the fact that she strongly disliked the idea of hurting others.

"Trust me, I understand. I'm not attacking you. In any case, my opinion is that we should avoid bloodshed as much as possible." Then Lyle looked at Noah, signaling he was done expressing himself.

"Thank you for honesty, everyone," Noah said, his voice like the morning dew of early spring. Then he turned his attention to Yuffie. "What do *you* want to do, Yuffie?"

"Huh?! Me…?!" She sat up ramrod straight at the sudden question.

"This is about *your* life. Therefore, we must respect your wishes."

"O-Oh…"

When he put it like that, he was absolutely right. But she was actually at a loss for words since she just assumed she had no say in this situation. Everyone's eyes were focused on her, sending her body temperature skyrocketing. Her brain blanked.

"It's all right, calm down." Lyle placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "This is important. You can take your time to think about it."

"Thank you…very much…"

Yuffie regained some of her composure thanks to him and sank into deep thought.

What do I want to do…? What kind of life did she want to lead at this school from now on? She'd enrolled in the Academy of Magic to master healing magic and become a fine Saint. *But…is that my true wish…?*

It didn't feel right even when she asked herself that. Gradually, a wish she hadn't even realized, or to be precise, had long been forgotten, began bubbling up inside her. She lifted her head, and determination filled her once downcast eyes.

Her mouth opened of its own accord, and she spoke, "I…just want to be friends with everyone and live a peaceful school life…"

Edward and Jack almost fell off their seats.

"Seriously? That's the only thing in your head after everything we just said? Are you five or fifteen?"

"I-I'm sorry, but…that's really all I want."

She wanted to be a Saint, but that was just a means, not an end. Yuffie's wish was very simple and hadn't changed since she was a child.

"Yuffie, you're always alone."

It was to erase those infuriating words from her life. In short, to be surrounded by lots of friends and have fun.

Erina giggled and commented, "Yuffie, that's so like you."

"Well then, that settles it," Noah said. "For now, we'll leave the matter of Yuffie's powers in the hands of the student council."

"Are you certain, President?" Edward spoke up in response to his decision. "Yes, her powers are extraordinary, and yes, the Fundamentalists pose a risk. But we're just students, and I really don't think we can make this decision on our own…"

"Edward." Noah's enigmatic expression remained unchanged. "What is the role of the student council?"

He froze for a moment before answering. "To be there for the students, understand them, and lend a helping hand."

"Precisely. Yuffie is an important student at this school. Her safety cannot be endangered, which is why, as the student council, we should adopt a policy of protecting her. That said, considering

the potential influence of her power, we will eventually report this to the school and the country. But now is not the time. As Lyle said, at the moment, we don't know friend from foe, so I think it would be remiss of us to reveal the truth so readily."

Noah took a breath to gather his thoughts. "Nevertheless, I understand it isn't realistic to continue hiding this matter. It's not that I don't trust you all to keep this a secret, but no one knows when or how information will spread. Since there's a possibility that someone orchestrated the Flame Cerberus incident the other day, outsiders might become involved, if they aren't already. So if we take all this into account…I'm of the opinion that Yuffie joining the student council is a very good idea."

All eyes turned on her.

"As student council president, I propose that Yuffie Abisus join the student council. What do you think, Yuffie?"

"Um, well, um…" she babbled.

This whole thing confused her. She, a lowly commoner, was being asked to join the student council, which was filled by higher beings like Lyle and Erina. They were all people she would never be presumptuous enough to talk to ordinarily—and this fact scared her.

I don't belong here… Is it even okay for someone like me to be a part of this group…? Negative emotions filled her chest, and she felt like she was suffocating.

Perhaps sensing what Yuffie was thinking, Lyle slowly stood up and spoke, "If you don't join the student council, we won't be able to protect you." His words, meditated but persuasive, sent a shockwave through her. "Just like you, all we want is a peaceful school life too. That's why we need you here. Don't minimize yourself. It isn't wrong for you to join the student council."

Lyle's words lightened the heaviness weighing her heart down. That was when she realized something.

I'm…scared…

She'd never experienced being accepted into someone's circle before. All sorts of bad thoughts came to mind. What if people ended up disappointed in her after she joined because she didn't live up to their expectations? Uncertainty swamped her.

But then everything will stay the same…

Just like when she was in the village, she'd be alone forever. Yuffie didn't want that for herself anymore. She wanted to go to school, make friends, and have fun every day. These feelings were her truth.

I want to change…

Be brave. This was a rare chance to change herself. Yuffie stood up determinedly. Then she took a deep breath and somehow managed to soothe her trembling hands and shoulders. She bowed her head and yelled with all her might.

"I know I'm inexperienced, but…I look forward to working with you!"

A long, drawn-out silence descended on the student council room. Her face reddened as she stood there shaking.

I didn't need to be that loud!

"Welcome to the student council!"

It was Lyle who broke the hush.

"If that's the president's decision, then I suppose it is what it is," Edward grumbled with a sigh.

"I'm a loser, so I don't have a say in this anyway," still saying the same thing, Jack spoke with a smile on his lips.

"You're officially part of the student council now! I can't wait for us to work together, Yuffie!" Erina hugged her tightly, as if she were welcoming a new member to the family.

Their reactions clearly showed that they accepted her in their group. Yuffie felt so relieved that her soul almost left her body.

Stop it. Keep it together.

A suspicious heat flared in the back of her eyes. If she let her guard down, the tears would overflow. Knowing that crying in this situation would make things awkward, Yuffie pressed her face against Erina's chest to stop her tears from falling.

"My, my, Yuffie, don't you like being coddled?"

Erina gently stroked her head. She felt like there was some huge misunderstanding brewing, but Yuffie was so relaxed that she entrusted herself to the other girl.

Brow furrowed, Edward spoke, his words dampening the cheery mood. “What should we use as the official reason for her joining the student council?” he asked as he pushed up his glasses calmly. “Just because we know the real reason doesn’t mean it won’t be difficult trying to explain to the other students.”

“Oh, no…” Yuffie blurted out.

He-He’s right… Compared to all of them, I don’t have any *redeeming qualities…*

Her imagination ran wild:

The rest of the student body shouting insults at her, eyes filled with hatred…

“Why would you let a commoner join?!”

They’ll drag me around the city and then burn me at the stake…!

“I think we’ll manage,” Noah answered nonchalantly, as if trying to dispel her anxiety.

“Luckily, the members of the student council hold some of the highest titles in the country,” Noah said. “Among the aristocracy, hierarchy is everything, so if we can offer a logical explanation, I think the other students will understand.”

“That’s a very good point, President,” Edward replied.

“You’re good at this kind of thing, aren’t you, Edward? So I’m counting on you.”

Edward could only sigh and say “I understand” to Noah’s words, half tossed out as an order. Among the aristocracy, hierarchy is everything.

“Excellent. I think that should do it for today’s main agenda item,” Lyle concluded, like checking off a task on his list. “From now on, we’ll be doing the student council’s regular work, so you can head back to your room, Yuffie. Once we figure out what your exact role will be, I’ll let you know in a few days.”

“O-Okay! I’m excited to work with all of you.” She bowed repeatedly.

Then Lyle replied with a smile, “Oh, right, I’m sure you know this, but you’re not allowed to use offensive magic in front of anyone other than us, and you’re not allowed to tell anyone that you can

use it either." He lowered his voice. "If anyone finds out…you might be witness to a *very* bloody mess."

"Eeek!" Lyle's intimidation sent chills down her spine. "I'll keep that in mind…"

"Good. See that you do."

And that was how Yuffie joined the student council.



IT was nighttime now, and the sound of Yuffie's fork poking at burdock salad was loud in her dorm room.

"Mm, delicious," she murmured, bringing a bite to her mouth.

Burdock salad was a specialty of the village of Millil, and for her, the representation of her mother's cooking. It was simple to make too. Just wash the burdock, shred it into small strips, and rinse in water to remove the scum. Then drain the water and put it in a hot frying pan, stir fry with sauce, vinegar, sugar, etc., and voila, burdock salad.

You might ask, "But how is that a salad when burdock is the only ingredient?" And Yuffie would respond, "Don't take things at face value." At first glance, it might seem like a simple dish, but the sweet and sour taste of the burdock is combined with sugar, vinegar, and the fragrant sauce to create a medley of intertwining flavors. Both the texture and unique taste were addictive. Plus, the salad was also a good friend to Yuffie, a country bumpkin who wasn't wealthy, in helping her save money.

"I still can't believe it…"

As she munched on her dinner, she thought back to her joining the student council.

"I wonder if that was really the right choice…"

She sounded forlorn. Although Lyle and the others had welcomed her, she still couldn't shake the feeling that she was out of place in the student council.

"Don't be discouraged," Friend purred as he came over to where Yuffie sat, bursting with negativity. "It's going to be all right; you'll figure it out."

She smiled a little as he comforted her with his usual cheery support. "You know what? You're right… You're totally right… Thank you, Friend."

"You're welcome."

As she stroked the cat, the invisible clouds that had been casting a shadow over her lifted. A different kind of brightness filled her heart now. She was happy that others wanted to get to know her, even if they were after her offensive magic. Such a meager joy, but there. She worried endlessly about how she'd fare on the student council moving forward and how her attack magic would be treated.

"It will all work out somehow, right…? It has to…"

Her voice carried hints of resignation and optimism. This was how she convinced herself, finding a spoonful of confidence from taking a small step of courage. Yuffie forked up another bite of the burdock salad.

"…Maybe I made too much."

Looking at her plate, which was still half-full, she sighed. There was still more in the kitchen.

"Oh, I know, I'll share some with my neighbor."

Yuffie clapped her hands in excitement. She had given her neighbor two burdock roots as an apology for the noise she had made due to her admittedly eccentric behavior. She had been too timid to hand it over directly, so early in the morning, she wrapped it in a bag and left it in front of her door with a message with the words "I'm sorry" written on the card. By the time she got home from school, the burdock was gone. It made her happy to know that the girl had accepted her apology.

"I'll try to learn more delicious burdock dishes…" Yuffie promised herself.



"MAYBE things *won't* work out, after all…"

The next morning, Yuffie felt like her stomach was about to explode in the classroom. If she let her guard down, the burdock

salad she had for breakfast would come back up.

"Why is a girl like that in the student council…?"

"What kind of connections did she use?"

Everyone was whispering, but they were loud enough for her to hear. The rumor that she'd joined the student council had spread like lightning today, causing shock, confusion, and jealousy among the entire school.

"A commoner who can't even use healing magic properly in the student council is so out of bounds…"

Urk… I know that better than anyone, okay?!

Every word she heard tore Yuffie's heart to shreds.

"What on earth is all this commotion?"

"Lord Edward!"

Edward had just entered the classroom, and their classmates surrounded him.

"Lord Edward, please explain!"

"Why did a commoner like that join the student council and not one of us nobles?!"

The boy pointed at her as if he didn't even want to mention her name, and Yuffie instinctively hid behind her textbook. Edward followed the direction of his finger and saw her trembling like a frightened critter.

"Oh, is that all?" The lenses on his glasses glinted as he answered, his expression impassive. "Who here can recite the student council's philosophy?"

Their classmates looked at each other, then fell silent.

"I thought so. This is a good opportunity to memorize it. The philosophy of our student council is…" Edward raised his right arm toward the ceiling and barked. "To be there for the students, understand them, and lend a helping hand!"

His words created a buzz in the classroom, but he didn't let it deter him.

"Accordingly, we need to consider not only those of high status and abilities like us, but also those who are on the opposite end of the spectrum," Edward spoke matter-of-factly as he pushed up his glasses. "And so, we decided that Yuffie Abisus will join the student

council! She's an exceptional underachiever with questionable behavior and a poor command of healing magic. By her joining the student council, the other members' horizons will broaden, allowing us to understand more students better!"

STAB, STAB, STAB!

His words pierced Yuffie's heart.

Yes, Edward's explanation makes sense…but…but still!

They hurt so much it wasn't funny. In short, he was saying that her becoming a part of the student council was to create balance in terms of demographics. It was a compelling argument, especially because it came from Edward, a high-ranking aristocrat.

"I-I see…"

"That's a fair point."

The atmosphere in the classroom, critical of Yuffie, began to change. Someone swallowed in awe at Edward's attitude, which was reminiscent of a general making his grand speech before a battle. He continued in the same strident tone.

"And the one who made the final decision was…none other than the student council president himself, Lord Noah!"

"Whaaat?!"

Everyone's eyes widened in shock. Among the aristocracy, hierarchy is everything, after all. Since Noah was also an incredibly high-ranking noble, the mere fact that he'd been the one to make the final decision was persuasive enough for her classmates.

"In that case…I guess we just have to accept it."

"I mean, if Noah thinks she's worthy…"

"We don't have a right to gripe."

No one was criticizing Yuffie now. Just like the rumors of her joining the student council, it would only be a matter of time before this too spread to other classes.

Edward harrumphed triumphantly, like he was saying, "My work here is done." Then he walked over to her seat. He stared down at her. She looked like she was on the verge of death. He might as well have ripped her heart out of her chest and stomped on it. But his expression said, "I told them what's what, so be grateful, (you commoner)." Then he sat down in his seat.

"That was a bit harsh, don't you think?" Erina came over, looking annoyed, her gaze reproachful.

"Says you. As for me, I was simply carrying out the mission given to me by Lord Noah," he countered.

"I think calling her an underachiever was a little too much."

"I did mention she was an 'exceptional' underachiever, didn't I?"

"Which does nothing to take away from the insult. Would you be happy if someone referred to you like that?"

"Agree to disagree. What matters most is that we were able to put an end to the confusion created by Yuffie joining the student council. She should be grateful, not resentful."

"Mmm… I still think you could have been nicer about it."

Erina looked unconvinced, and Edward sighed with disappointment at her.

"Nobles are creatures with a great deal of pride. The quickest way to convince everyone here was to position her as inferior in both rank and ability."

"O-Oh, then that was your way of being considerate, Edward?"

"I…*may* have been a bit harsh with my choice of words, so for that, I'll apologize," Edward responded uncomfortably.

Erina put her hands on her hips in exasperation. "Goodness, you honestly are so terrible at communication… Anyway. Yuffie, are you all right? You seem dazed," she asked, concerned.

Yuffie, whose HP had gone to zero after all the damage she'd taken, raised her head with a smile. "Yes, yes, I am fine. Very fine indeed. I am just a dung beetle crawling around the neighborhood, after all. I do not mind what people say about me. Ha ha haaa."

"You're clearly *not* fine at all," Erina replied with a rueful smile.

"Yuffie." Lyle appeared seemingly out of nowhere and placed a gentle hand on her dainty shoulder.

"Aaack!"

The sudden touch startled her. Lyle leaned close to her ear and whispered softly, "Everyone in the student council, including me, knows you have great powers." Then he gave her an encouraging pat. "So don't worry. Be confident."

"Lord Lyle…" Her face brightened, like a lost child who had finally found her mother. Yuffie was simple-minded and, therefore, easy to cheer up with just a little bit of praise.

"Lord Lyle! Good morning!"

"Lord Lyle, you're in a good mood today!"

Two girls came over, looking nervous.

"Good morning, Anna, Sophie. You're both looking even more radiant today."

"Oh my gosh! To hear you say that is enough to give me the strength to do my best today!"

"Thank you so much! I'll remember today as the day I got to talk to you for the rest of my life!"

Their eyes were wide, and excitement filled their voices.

"Haha, please, you're making me blush… Oh, right, this is a good chance for me to introduce you to the newest member of the student council, Yuffie… Huh?"

Yuffie had vanished without a word.

"Where is she?" Lyle asked Erina as he surveyed the classroom for her.

"She left so quickly, she might as well have been a blur."

"Ah…" He scratched his head like he had an epiphany. "Apologies, Yuffie's a bit shy…"

"Please don't! That's not something you should apologize for, Lord Lyle!"

"It's really nice of you to give a commoner the opportunity to introduce herself!"

"Thank you for your kind words," he replied with a smile that pierced straight through their hearts. The two girls swooned in reaction.

Meanwhile…

Darn it… He was nice enough to give me the chance to talk to them, and I did what I always do… As soon as she left the classroom, Yuffie started drowning in self-loathing. The moment she thought someone would talk to her, she ran away automatically. *Socializing is still so hard…*

Lyle and Erina were the ones who always initiated conversations with her, so it was easy with them but tough for her to be proactive. The Terror of Speaking to Others' Disease that had been eating away at her body for fifteen years was still very much alive and well.

"I hope I can manage someday…" she mumbled to herself.

"…You are ridiculous. I can't stand you."

A voice filled with clear hatred rang out.

"Huh…?"

She looked around but saw no one else nearby.

Am I imagining things?

Yuffie tilted her head in confusion.



DURING lunch break, Yuffie found out it wasn't just her imagination. In a busy corridor, no less.

I think I'll eat in the courtyard again today…

Yuffie was walking along, carrying a lunch box filled with burdock salad, heading for a secluded spot to eat lunch, when a particularly glamorous female student appeared in front of her. Behind her were other girls who seemed to be part of her entourage.

Wow, she's so pretty…

Yuffie's eyes were drawn to her. The girl's beautiful blonde hair was styled in large, distinctive corkscrew curls that hung so far down. They swayed with her every movement. Her large blue eyes sparkled like jewels; she looked like a porcelain doll come to life. Although the uniform was the same, on her, it accentuated her elegance even more.

Yuffie's negativity activated then.

The big city really is amazing… Compared to her, I'm just a plain, hunched, and squirrely looking thing from the countryside…

Corkscrew Girl's lips twisted in a derisive sneer. "Oh, no, I tripped!"

Her foot rammed into a bucket. It looked like she kicked it on purpose—and Yuffie just so happened to be in its direct path. Time suddenly felt like it was slowing down, and her brain did its best to analyze her next course of action.

If I trip over it and crash into her, that will just cause trouble for other people, and they'd look at me in disgust!

Unable to bear the thought, Yuffie reflexively thrust her hand out, about to unleash a low-level lightning spell to knock the bucket away. But then, Lyle's words crossed her mind.

"You're not allowed to use offensive magic in front of anyone other than us, and you're not allowed to tell anyone that you can use it either."

Oh, right, she was strictly forbidden from using attack magic in public. If anyone other than the student council found out, she was headed straight for human experimentation.

That would be so much worse!

So Yuffie snatched her hand back.

Oh, no, here we go… I'm sorry in advance for crashing into you…

Apologizing in her mind, she tried to trip over the bucket. Except…

"Whoooaaa, there!"

A voice cut through the air, followed by a gushing flame hitting the bucket directly. It was a fire spell unleashed by Jack, who came out of nowhere. But, maybe because he misjudged how much power he put into it, the bucket blew up, pieces scattering everywhere. To make matters worse, the flames spread to Corkscrew Girl's hair.

"Noooooooooooo! My hair! My hair's on fire!"

She ran around like a headless chicken as the vertical curls, her pride and joy, erupted in flames.

"Water Ball!"

SPLASH!

"Hmpf!"

Lyle showed up this time and used his water magic to put out the flames on Corkscrew Girl.

"Whew, safe. That was close." His face was the picture of calm.

"Thanks for cleaning up my mess, man," Jack said like it wasn't a big deal at all.

"Not a problem. I know how hard it is to fine-tune fire magic."

"Omigosh! What were you even thinking?!" Corkscrew Girl shrieked in outrage.

The students passing by stopped in their tracks, wondering what was going on.

"My bad, my bad, I just screwed up the output a bit," Jack shrugged.

"This is *not* a problem that can be fixed with a casual 'Oh, sorry!' Look! Look at what you did to my beautiful hair…!" Corkscrew pointed to her head, where a truly magnificent afro now billowed out.

"Lady Catherine… Your hair… Pfft…"

"Shhh… Don't say…pfft…anything… Bahaha!"

The girls standing behind her couldn't contain their laughter at the sight, which only made Corkscrew Girl, now Afro Girl, even angrier.

"Aaarrrgggh! How dare you make fun of me?!" She stomped down the hallway and pointed her fan at Jack. "Even if you *are* the son of the Gallini family, I, Catherine, the eldest daughter of the distinguished Duke of Kulkovich, will never forgive you! I demand an immediate and sincere apology and payment for a perm!"

Afro Girl, now known as Catherine, was flushed bright red with fury.

Jack's attitude suddenly changed and he spoke, his eyes cold, "Fine. I'll apologize for turning your hair into an afro. I'll even pay for the perm. *However*." His gaze shifted from the remains of the bucket to Yuffie, then back to Catherine. "Shouldn't *you* be the one apologizing to Yuffie?"

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

"'Cause it sure didn't look to me like you tripped."

Catherine's face stiffened for a moment at Jack's words, but then she snorted contemptuously. "Well, that's *your* opinion. I really did slip. So stop making baseless accusations…"

"I agree with Jack too," Lyle, who'd been watching quietly, spoke up, his voice resonating. "It looked to me like you intentionally kicked the bucket to trip Yuffie."

"Lord Lyle Elvard…" In a complete about-face, panic now filled Catherine's expression. "I-I don't mean any disrespect, but honestly, it really was just a careless mistake on my part…"

"Then are you saying I'm blind?"

"N-No, of course not…!"

Among the aristocracy, hierarchy is everything. In front of Lyle, the third prince of this country, even the daughter of a renowned duke couldn't lie. Catherine gritted her teeth.

"All of this is *her* fault!" Realizing she was at a distinct disadvantage now, Catherine jabbed her fan in Yuffie's direction.

M-My fault?!

As Yuffie stared blankly back at her, Catherine continued her abusive tirade.

"You're just a pleb who can't even use healing magic properly! It's ridiculous that you're even in the student council! I should have been the one to join!" She glared ferociously at Yuffie. Jealousy and hatred burned in her clear eyes.

Lyle clapped his hands in an "Aha!" moment. "So that's how it is. Let me remind you, my lady, that harassing someone out of a personal grudge would bring shame to the Kulkovich family name."

"And *I* think it's a disgrace to the Elvard family to allow a filthy *pleb* to join the student council."

"Are you disagreeing with President Noah's decision?"

"Well, I'm certainly questioning his wisdom at the very least."

Their words flew like barbs as sparks of animosity zapped between Catherine and Lyle.

Aaahhh! This is all my fault! What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?!

The tension almost led Yuffie into a mental breakdown. The idea of others falling out because of her was too much for the timid girl to bear.

"P-Please, won't you stop fighting?!" She couldn't stand it anymore, so she spoke up. Unfortunately, much louder than she had

intended, and silence fell over the corridor.

"So the kitten *can* roar." Lyle's eyes widened in admiration.

She took his reply as a cue to keep going. "I-I'm sorry that this happened because of me. I don't know if this will be enough as an apology, but I hope it helps calm you down…"

And with that, Yuffie handed her lunchbox to Catherine.

"What is this?"

"Burdock salad made with burdock from the village where I was born and raised. I'm sure you'll like it…"

"Burdock salad?!" The other girl was stunned.

"Oh, I'm sorry, do you not like burdock? In that case, I'll head to the school store now and buy you some bread or whatever you want…"

"As if a Kulkovich would be crass enough to use others as gofers! Never mind that, though! It was *you*?! You were the one who put burdock in front of my room every day?!"

"Huh…?"

Yuffie's brain froze for a split second at her unexpected remark, and then the pieces of the puzzle quickly fell into place.

"Y-Y-Y-Y—*You're* my neighbor?!"

Aside from the student council members, the only other person she'd given burdock to was her next-door neighbor, whom she had never met before. So she was shocked to realize that Afro Girl was the one she'd been annoying on a daily basis with her dramatics.

"Well, isn't this just perfect timing?! Because I've been trying to decide when to chew you out!" Catherine pointed the fan at her, and Yuffie cowered.

"Ngh, I'm sorry! I guess you really don't like burdock, huh? I'm so sorry…"

"No, you dolt! Burdock has a very rich flavor and a crunchy texture, and for someone like me who usually eats heavy meals, it's a refreshing and delicious change of pace. So much so that I want to eat it every day… Wait, no, that's not the problem!"

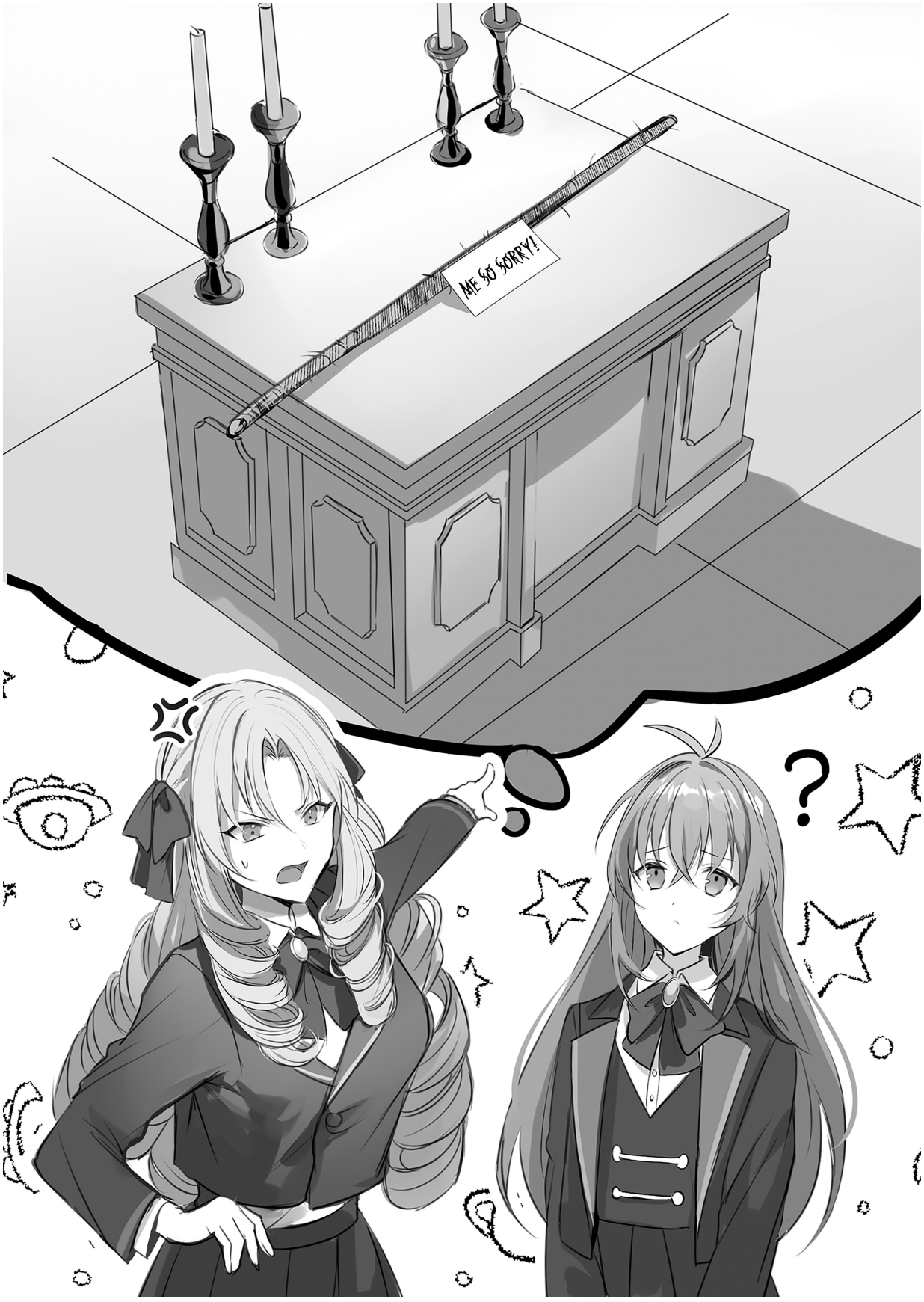
"Then what *is*…?"

"The problem is how you give it to me! Do you have any idea how scared I was when I opened the door to head out for the first

day of class, only to see a creepy altar dedicated to burdock with the words ‘Me So Sorry’ scrawled in awful handwriting?!”

“O-Oh, so you didn’t like the altar? I personally thought I did a pretty good job…”

Yuffie had figured it would be bad to just place the burdock on the floor in front of her door. Instead, she bought a small altar set at the school store—apparently, they sell it for religious reasons because of international students—and added a message apologizing for the noises she always made.


ME SO SORRY!

"It looked like some sort of macabre artifact straight out of a horror story! I didn't know who brought it, and I was afraid I'd be cursed to death if I didn't eat the burdock!"

"Oh, so you *did* eat it. Thank you, that makes me very happy." Yuffie bowed repeatedly. Catherine nearly fell from shock.

"Ugh… Whatever. I'm starting to feel like an idiot for getting so angry."

"I-I'm sorry for upsetting you?"

"Anyway! Next time you give me burdock, just do it like a normal person. And…" After scratching her cheek, Catherine continued under her breath, "…the burdock salad this morning was delicious too. Please make it again when you have time."

Yuffie's face brightened at her words. "Yes! Of course!"

She looked so happy that Catherine sighed as if the anger had been sucked out of her. "All right, ladies, we're leaving."

"R-Right behind you!"

Taking her entourage with her, Catherine walked away.

She was sort of terrifying, but she ate the burdock and *the burdock salad… So Lady Catherine must be a good person…* Yuffie wiggled her fingers in relief.

Lyle piped up then. "I might be missing something here, but do you actually know each other?"

"Not exactly. We're just two souls bound by burdock."

"Huh… I'm definitely missing something, but I'm glad things didn't escalate."

"Ack! I'm so, so, so sorry for all the trouble I caused."

"Don't worry about it. That was just Lady Catherine being jealous, so there's nothing you need to apologize for."

Ugh… His kindness is dazzling…! Yuffie almost covered her eyes, afraid of being blinded.

"If we're done here, Lyle, let's hop to it. I need meat in me stat, or my sore muscles won't recover from my morning training."

"You never get tired of torturing yourself, hm, Jack? Oh, I just had a brilliant idea." Lyle looked at her and asked, "How about we have lunch together, Yuffie?"

"Huh…?"



"OH, dear, so that's what happened," Erina remarked, her tone comforting after Yuffie told her what happened with Catherine. Her eyes shone with sympathy and affection. "What a disaster. You poor thing."

Erina's soft hand stroked her head gently and had a mother's soothing warmth. Even as she relished the touch, she couldn't help her awkwardness as she replied.

"Ha ha ha… It was a very bad time…"

The reason for her stiff expression had to do with where they were: the school's special dining hall. Only high-ranking nobles were allowed to enter. The ceiling was, of course, decorated with a magnificent chandelier, and the tables and chairs were so luxurious that just one piece would sell for a fortune if someone had a mind to help themself to it. The garden looked lush and dazzling from the windows lining one entire wall, making the location feel both open and opulent at the same time.

If Lyle hadn't invited her to lunch, Yuffie would never have been here. It was a stark contrast to the courtyard she usually sat in for lunch, so the glittering and gorgeous atmosphere was something she could…*not* enjoy.

Imagine getting expelled over burdock… Keep it together, girl.

Yuffie ate her burdock salad with the same care an archaeologist dedicated to an ancient ruin. As a commoner, she worried that she might spill sauce on the table and be charged an insane amount for cleaning fees.

"I wish Edward and Noah could have eaten with us too, but they couldn't get away from the mountain of student council duties." Lyle was eating his lunch with a calm expression.

Yuffie was more interested in his food than his words. *What in the world have I been eating up until now…*

It was so fancy that it made her question her own dietary choices. The first thing that caught her eye was the golden,

sparkling seafood paella. A medley of shrimp, scallops, and squid was beautifully arranged on top of the rice, cooked to perfection, with the sweet and fragrant aroma of saffron wafting through the air. Other dishes included tender roast duck breast, a colorful salad of fresh vegetables, and chocolate mousse sprinkled with gold leaf. The special course designed by a top chef hardly looked like a typical school lunch.

Yuffie's stomach growled at the delicious scents rising to tickle her nostrils.

So this is what rich people eat for lunch…! She found herself feeling overwhelmed and astonished by how extraordinary everything was. But she also felt another kind of tension. *Ugh… My nerves are getting to me…*

This was the first time in her life that she shared a meal with someone other than her family and teachers. Eating alone had been the norm until now, so Yuffie didn't know if there was a right way to eat with others.

I'm so worried I might do something rude by accident… Gah! Maybe I'm eating too fast?! Her hands shook as anxiety tightened her chest.

"By the way, Yuffie, is that all you're eating?" Erina asked, looking at the burdock salad.

"Oh, yes, that's right."

"Are you on a diet?"

"No?"

"No way that's enough food," Jack observed while stuffing his mouth with gobs of thickly sliced steak. The meat, carefully grilled over charcoal, was lean and looked like just the thing for building muscle.

"This was all I had, so…" *Because I overslept this morning.*

Her words startled Erina, and her expression was of someone who had just realized something.

"Don't tell me that's all you eat in your dorm too…?"

"That's right. This is what I've been eating for the past few days." *Because I still have a ton of burdock I brought from home.*

The other three froze at her nonchalant response. Then they glanced between their sumptuous meals and her lunch, looking uneasy.

Ummm… Did I say something weird…?

When Erina started crying, that only deepened her confusion.

"Yuffie, you're a growing girl who needs to eat a lot, yet here you are… Goodness, I can't even imagine how much your family had to scrimp and save in order for you to enroll in the Academy…" she spoke as she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

"It's the duty of royalty to make sure the people have enough to eat… I can't believe we have citizens in such dire straits… I'm sorry I didn't realize until now, Yuffie." Lyle looked at her like she was an abandoned child.

"Huh? What? Why are you apologizing to me?"

Jack thrusting a mountain of meat at her didn't help alleviate her confusion either.

"Um, Jack…?"

"Eat it. I'd feel like an actual loser if the person who kicked my ass had to eat like a pauper."

"N-N-N-No, I can't do that to you!"

SWISH!

Next came paella and roast duck.

"It's not much, but here's some from me too."

"L-Lord Lyle…?!"

SWISH!

"I'll share with you, too."

"Erina, not you too!"

Yuffie stared wide-eyed at the growing pile of food in front of her.

"My food should be served to people like this…" Even the chef standing behind her said the same thing in a tearful voice.

I-I'm pretty sure this is a huge *misunderstanding…*

But it wasn't the right time to say that out loud. Normally, she would have felt terrible about accepting everyone's lunch. However, the opportunity to eat such sumptuous dishes was a rare one, and above all, she couldn't ignore their kindness.

"Then… I gratefully accept…" Half-surrendering to her appetite, Yuffie put a thick slice of meat from Jack into her mouth.

Her eyes popped wide in an instant—the delicious flavor of the red meat spread throughout her mouth. The spiciness of the black pepper used in the seasoning brought out the richness of the cut, and the sweetness of the onion sauce left an amazing aftertaste. As she chewed, she felt like the combination of the meat and sauce was enveloping all five of her senses. Then she swallowed and said with a bright smile, "It's… delicious…"

"Damn right it is! The chefs here are amazing at cooking meat." Jack crossed his arms in satisfaction.

"It's been a long time since I've had meat…" *Since I love vegetables more.* As Yuffie reached for another piece, Erina couldn't help but hug her. "E-Erina…?"

"Oh, don't mind me. Just take your time and savor your meal."

"A-All right…?"

I have a feeling this is only making the misunderstanding worse…

Still, Yuffie didn't resist her friend's irresistible aura of kindness as she stuffed more meat into her mouth with gusto.

Next time, I'll have to thank them all with a burdock salad.

Such were the thoughts running through her head while she enjoyed a lunch beyond her means.



LUNCHTIME for nobles wasn't just about eating. After lunch, Yuffie enjoyed tea time with them.

"Oh! This is delicious…" she said, taking a sip of the fruity, mellow-smelling black tea. She normally didn't drink black tea, but this one, made by the personal chef of a high-ranking nobleman, had a complex flavor. "This is the first time I've ever had such flavorful tea."

"I'm glad you like it. The tea leaves are from my very own garden," Erina replied.

"Wow, you grow your own tea…?" At her home back in the village, her family only had a burdock field.

"Look at you fancy schmancy people drinking fancy schmancy tea," Jack piped up, sipping the contents of a large wooden cup instead.

"J-Jack, what are you drinking?"

When Yuffie asked, he leaned forward eagerly. "This is muscle soup."

"M-Muscle soup?"

"It's my original recipe. I mix steamed chicken into soup seasoned with salt and pepper! Just drink a cup of this and your muscles will be on cloud nine."

"I…see."

The topic of muscles befuddled her since they weren't something she really thought about.

"Eh, I bet it'd be wasted on you anyway." With a wry smile, he took another sip from the cup.

Yuffie gasped then. She tried to open her mouth to speak, then closed it almost immediately. But a moment later, she made up her mind and pursed her lips determinedly.

"Um, um…"

"Go on. Spit it out."

"It's about…earlier… I wanted to…thank you for helping me…"

"Sure. I didn't do much, so no need to go overboard."

"Maybe it wasn't much to you, but it made me happy." *Because people usually ignore me.*

Jack scratched his head uncomfortably at her shy smile. "Uhhh, you're welcome, I guess."

"My, my, Jack, aren't we acting so humble in Yuffie's company now?" Erina grinned slyly at him.

"My personal philosophy is not to defy anyone stronger than me. 'Cause power is greatness!"

"If you say so," Erina grinned.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Stop looking at me like that," Jack snapped.

"Fine, fine. You're no fun. By the way, Yuffie, are you interested in tea?" Erina asked cheerfully.

"T-T-T-Tea?! Um, I, well…" she answered, flustered. Frankly, she wasn't. She'd never had anything so fancy in her life.

B-But it feels wrong to say no after all this… Then again, I also don't like lying… She glanced at her friend and found her beaming. *Urk! So blinding…! I'd feel so guilty for disappointing her!*

Yuffie racked her brain for a bit before she said a few words softly. "…A little bit."

"Really?!?! Then you should visit me at home!!! I grow all kinds of tea in my garden!"

"A-A-A-A-A-Are you inviting *me*?!"

I don't think I can handle such a monumental event!

"You don't want to come over…?"

Those puppy dog eyes are so unfair!

After a very, very, *very* long pause, Yuffie uttered, "I'll go."

"Yay! I'm so excited!" Erina clasped her hands together. Her smile was so lovely that Yuffie wanted to paint a picture and frame it. "I'm sure my Black Hole Seraphim and Demon Overlord God Phoenix will be happy to see you too."

"U-Um, I've actually been wondering for a while about that. What exactly are they…?"

This was a good time to find out. Judging from the names, she thought the creatures must be something like a lion or a crocodile. In which case…

I'm the perfect prey!

Imagining herself being gobbled up by a crocodile with a row of sharp fangs, Yuffie felt a chill run down her spine. Depending on Erina's answer, she would have to be strategic about her visit.

"Black Hole Seraphim is a dog, and Demon Overlord God Phoenix is a cat."

She almost spat out her tea.

"D-Did you just say a dog and a cat…?" she gasped.

"Yes! They're both small, cuddly, and sooo very cute! Ah… I can't wait to see them myself…" Erina put her hand on her cheek like she was dreaming of a lover separated from her by a tragic fate.

Yuffie, on the other hand, tilted her head with a number of invisible question marks floating above it.

"I'm sure you've already figured it out, but let's just say Erina's naming convention is a bit…unconventional," Lyle offered, reading Yuffie's mind.

"Oh, pish posh. Black Hole Seraphim and Demon Overlord God Phoenix are super cute names!"

"They sound like evil gods, not dogs and cats," Lyle said.

Yuffie nodded vigorously. Inside her head, though.

"How rude, Lyle! Jack, you understand, don't you? The names I choose are awfully cute, right?"

"Don't know, don't care."

"See, he agrees."

"I didn't even say that! Are you deaf, woman?!"

Yuffie smiled a little, watching the three of them bicker.

They're really close, huh…

Since they were all part of the royalty or aristocracy, she figured they'd probably known each other for a long time. Yuffie was utterly awed by the deep bond they obviously shared.

Should I even be here with them…

Negative thoughts assailed her suddenly.

I mean, they let me into the student council because of my attack magic…

And not because she had any appeal as a person.

Without my magic, I'm just a gloomy, annoying girl…

No matter how good her offensive magic was, she worried that they would be disappointed in her as a person. Darkness clouded her heart. Just the fact that she was here at all made her feel like there was a lump in her throat.

"Yuffie, what's the matter?" Lyle asked.

"Huh?"

"You were spacing out, so I just wondered…"

"Oh, it's nothing! I'm fine, thank you!"

"If you're sure, then."

Lyle's concern both warmed and pained her. Guilt consumed her as she wondered whether she should be around such good people.

I know I'm asking for the moon, but…

She wanted to stay with them for as long as possible. Let herself bask in their kindness and care. That was Yuffie's wish.



IN a hushed forest not far from the school, the moon cast an eerie light on the trees. Thousands of fallen leaves clung to the wet ground, resembling a deep copper-colored carpet. A section of it disappeared, replaced by a summoning circle drawn on the ground. Animal carcasses, such as bears and deer, were placed around it.

"I summon you from the abyss, one who brings forth ruin from the depths of darkness…"

Standing outside the summoning circle, a man named Gordo raised his hand and chanted.

"Heed me! Manifest, King Cyclops!"

His voice shook the air, and the magic circle radiated an intense light. Soon, the earth rumbled, and a giant shadow appeared.

"I did it…"

Even though he was out of breath from using up so much mana, the corners of Gordo's mouth turned up in satisfaction at the successful summoning.

A giant figure towered over him—a King Cyclops, a monster with a danger level of A. It was as large as a mountain, and its well-trained body was reminiscent of a rock wall. Thick muscles bulged from its shoulders down to its arms, its strength sure to overwhelm anyone who saw it. The creature held a brutal iron club in each of its four rock-hard hands, and its glowing red eyes emitted a savage bloodlust mingled with resentment.

"*Grrroooaaarrrr*!!!"

Its roar echoed through the forest. The trees shook, as if they were afraid too, and the animals living there woke up all at once. The monster glared at Gordo, ready to crush him, but there was no sign of fear on the man's face.

"Ruler of the forest…" He pointed his palm at it and spoke forcefully, "Respect my authority and obey my command!"

His fingers glowed. In contrast, the light in the monster's eyes gradually faded. When just a moment ago it had been ready to tear him apart, it now stood there as docile as a dog in front of its owner. The area fell silent again, and Gordo smiled with satisfaction.

"Allow me to tell you what this is—a ring of subordination. An excellent item, one that's particularly effective against monsters of your rank," Gordo explained, looking at the magic item on his middle finger. Then he glanced back up at the King Cyclops again, and his lips twisted into a sneer. "You may have killed a Flame Cerberus in one blow, but even you are no match for this one, girl…"

The trees began trembling again in unease.

Chapter 5: You're the Only One I'll Never Forgive

THE next day, Yuffie arrived in the student council office after school for her first official day.

"Starting today, Yuffie will be helping us with the student council duties," explained Edward as he pushed up his glasses pompously.

Despite the tense atmosphere, she bowed energetically and exclaimed, "Th-Thank you in advance for your guidance and *adbice*!"

Gaaah! I messed up! Why do I always do this at the worst moment?! She kept her head bowed and quivered with embarrassment.

"You don't need to be so tense. Take a deep breath and relax. Nice and easy." Lyle's gentle tone returned a smidgen of peace to Yuffie's heart.

"It's only natural to feel nervous on your first day. We've all been there." As always, Noah, the president, comforted her.

"Urk… I'm sorry for being such a pain in the neck all the time…"

Erina pressed herself against Yuffie. They were sitting side by side on the sofa. "You're fine just the way you are, Yuffie. In fact, I'd like you to stay that way."

"Th-Thank you very much?"

While she was grateful for Erina's unconditional acceptance, she cocked her head, confused by how much closer than usual the other girl was.

"Might we please return to the topic at hand?" Edward's low voice brought the tension back into the air. "First, I'll explain what we do. Our duties include reviewing the school's systems, managing

school events, and fulfilling requests from students through the suggestion box. Each of these responsibilities plays an essential role in the running of the school."

"I see, I see." Yuffie nodded along earnestly, writing down his words in her notebook.

"As far as the first duty on the list goes, there's nothing in particular to do currently, since the semester only just started. The next school event is the May Festival, which is a month away, and we'll be holding discussions on that front at a later date."

"Hey, does that mean I can go?!" Jack, who'd been lying in his hammock with a bored look, jumped up like a fish in water. "Awesome! I've got plenty of time for training then."

"Though it pains me to disappoint you, there was a request in the suggestion box." Edward's merciless words made Jack almost fall off the hammock.

"Damn you for getting my hopes up."

Edward ignored the sulking Jack and read out a palm-sized piece of paper. "'The puppy I was taking care of here ran away during our walk in the mountain behind the dorm, so I'd like you to find it.' This person goes on to describe the dog—a brown, miniature dachshund big enough to fit in the palm of one's hand."

Lyle raised an eyebrow while listening to him. "That's all?"

"Seems so."

"No name on the paper?"

"No. But they're requesting the student council look after it, should we find it."

"Interesting… Strange that there's no sender listed…" The expression on Lyle's face said he suspected something as he rested his chin on his hand, deep in thought.

"I say we go look for it right away!" Erina slapped her hand on the coffee table and stood up. "I know exactly how this owner feels because I, too, own a dog! They must be incredibly shy and withdrawn to go about this anonymously. After unexpectedly losing one of their beloved family members, Dark Galaxy Destroyer Royal Dragon…I'm sure they want to find the pup. They just don't have

anyone to rely on, so they decided to turn to the student council's suggestion box… Yes, that must be it!"

Silence fell over the room during Erina's passionate monologue.

"Dark Galaxy… What was the rest?" Edward asked with a frown.

"Dark Galaxy Destroyer Royal Dragon! I just thought up the name for the dog."

"A terribly confusing mouthful. I suggest we call the animal 'John' and leave it at that."

"Ugh, Edward, why are you so mean?! You know the name I gave it is super sweet… Poor Dark Galaxy Destroyer Royal Dragon…" Erina pushed her index fingers together like a pouting child. "But it's fine! In any case, I'm sure the owner is devastated. Likely on the verge of tears with their precious family member missing…" Her expression was forlorn.

"Erina, I completely understand…" Yuffie, who had already started tearing up, mumbled softly. "I have a cat too… If Friend suddenly disappeared, I… I…"

"Yuffie…" Touched, Erina snuggled up to her. "I'm so glad you can relate…"

Something about owning a pet bonds people together, and Yuffie and Erina solidified their bond by holding each other's hands tightly.

Edward scratched his head in confusion, then turned to Noah, silently asking him to step in.

"I think that's fine," the president said in a relaxed tone. "Obviously, a student is in trouble, and it's our role to take their troubles seriously and, if possible, resolve them. Besides…" Noah turned his attention to Erina and continued, "If we choose not to act now, *someone* might run off on her own."

Erina scowled back at him, her expression saying, "Shoot, you found me out."

"As you wish…" Edward exhaled softly in resignation. "Then we'll begin our search for John, whose real name is to be discovered." He glanced at Yuffie then. "Of course, you'll help, won't you?"

"Y-Yes! I'll do my best not to hold you back!"

And so, the entire student council set out to search for the missing puppy, who had been temporarily christened "John." Only Lyle looked dubious, frowning in deep thought.



THE mountain behind the school was known as a place to relax. The trees were spaced apart, making it relatively bright and open for a mountain. It was located opposite the area where the Flame Cerberus appeared the other day, and students could often be seen walking there for exercise on holidays.

"Damn it, I thought I could head home early today." And in what should have been a pleasant place, Jack complained.

"Stop swearing and keep your eyes peeled. Even if it *is* just a hunt for a pup, it's still a job for the student council," Edward retorted.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Jack muttered back.

Yuffie, Lyle, Jack, Edward, and Erina had decided to split up in their search for the puppy. Noah stayed behind in the student council office to take care of paperwork.

"This mountain is fairly large, so let's look carefully but don't push yourselves too hard." With a relaxed expression, Lyle led the way slowly at the front.

Meanwhile, Yuffie was desperately searching for the dog with Friend on her head. *It'd be nice if I found him first…*

She looked around restlessly, squinting her eyes as she let her imagination run wild.

"I found John!"

The others surround Yuffie, holding up the puppy.

"Excellent work, Yuffie!"

"Gosh, Yuffie, well done!"

"I wasn't expecting much, but I suppose even you have your days."

"Woo hoo! Thanks to you, I can train! Nice job."

"Heh… Heh heh heh…"

Uh-oh, she was drooling. Yuffie rubbed her mouth, and Friend meowed above her head.

"He's so darn cute." Erina smiled happily, stroking Friend. "What was his name again? New Phoenix Crusher Dragon?"

"No, it's Friend," Yuffie corrected her.

"Right, sorry."

She had stopped thinking too deeply about Erina's naming choices.

"How is Friend doing? Do you think he can find Dark Galaxy…I mean, John?"

"I'm not sure. I'll ask him. Friend, sense anything?" Yuffie asked, and he answered telepathically in his usual relaxed tone.

"Hm, nothing yet."

"…Ummm, he says we might find it soon!"

"How wonderful! I knew your cat would be a clever little one."

"Ha ha… Ha ha ha…"

Yuffie was dripping with cold sweat as she recalled the events leading to now. After the student council had decided to explore the mountain behind the school, she returned to the dorm and brought Friend out with her.

"Since they're both creatures of the fluffy kind, I figured maybe he can sense something and find John."

In hindsight, it had been a strange thing for her to do, but it was also Yuffie's way of trying to help. Having said that, Friend was being possessed by Yuffie's imaginary friend. Since their conversations always took place in her head, it was hard to say that they were actually communicating. So far, the only thing they'd accomplished was Erina's obsession with his cuteness.

"You really are one of a kind, Yuffie."

She was a little relieved that Lyle accepted her too, eccentricities and all.

A-Anyway! I have to do what I can to help them! Vowing to herself, she desperately searched for John. Unfortunately, her enthusiasm backfired.

"Aaaahhh!"

She was so engrossed in her search that she stopped paying attention to where she was going. Her foot got caught on a tree root, and she fell.

"Yuffie!" Erina cried out in surprise and ran over to her.

Meanwhile, Edward was staring at Yuffie in amazement, wondering what she was doing.

"Are you all right? You're not hurt, are you?" Lyle, who was nearby, offered his hand.

"Th-Thank you, I'm fine… Ouch!" She had a minor scrape on her knee. She must have tripped over a rock because the cut was bleeding.

"Wait right there, I'll heal you in a jiffy!" Erina placed her hand over her knee, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. *"O god of healing…"*

She chanted the spell, enveloping Yuffie's knee in a pale light. In the next instant, the skin was back to normal, and the pain had vanished like…magic.

Erina's healing magic is so amazing…

"That should do it." The girl nodded in satisfaction.

"Th-Thank you so much… I'm really sorry for all the trouble…"

Yuffie bowed her head in apology, and Erina gently placed her hand on her crown. "Stop worrying, will you? I often trip over nothing too."

Urk… Your kindness makes my heart ache…

Guilt filled Yuffie over forcing Erina to comfort her. A few minutes later, she regained her composure and resumed searching for John.

"We won't get anywhere at this rate, so I suggest we split up," Edward said. So they did just that, dividing into two groups. Yuffie went with Lyle and Erina. Edward went with Jack.

"We have to find John as soon as possible and return him to his owner…" Erina narrowed her eyes in earnest, digging through the brush.

She's so kind…

Yuffie couldn't help but ask what had been on her mind for a while now. "Erina, why do you want to be a Saint?"

Her friend's eyes widened in confusion since the question came completely out of the blue.

"Ack, I'm sorry, Erina, I just think it's amazing how you can work so hard for others… So, I wondered if that's where your desire to become a Saint came from. Actually, I guess I was just curious… Sorry, I'm all over the place," Yuffie rambled nervously.

Erina replied with a gentle smile. "Well, the reason I wanted to learn healing magic was…my grandmother. When I saw how much she suffered from her illness, I felt so helpless that I couldn't do anything… I think I told everyone this at the entrance ceremony."

"Ahhh! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! You're right, I completely forgot…"

I'm such an idiot! How much ruder could I be?!

Yuffie bowed again and again. Friend jumped down in surprise, meowing indignantly. Meanwhile, Erina laughed in amusement.

"Actually, there's one more reason."

"Oh?" Yuffie looked up timidly at her.

Looking serious, Erina asked her, "Do you know about Ultilaugh disease, Yuffie?"

"Ultilaugh…?"

"I can see that you don't. It's an incurable disease with very few cases, and no medical treatment has yet been established. I was infected when I was five years old…"

"That young?!"

Yuffie was shocked. She didn't know what Ultilaugh disease was, but judging from Erina's somber air, it must be a very serious illness. One where you probably had a high fever of over 40 degrees for days on end, with your head hurting so bad it felt like it was going to explode, and blood spurting from every orifice in your body…

"If you get that disease…"

Yuffie swallowed in breathless anticipation.

"…you can't stop laughing!"

"Huh?" she squeaked out.

"You heard me. It's the ultimate laughing disease… You laugh from morning to night until your stomach hurts and you can't eat properly… Your abdominal muscles cramp up, your jaw aches, and

you even laugh in situations where you shouldn't. You can't even imagine how hard life is with it."

"I-I see…?"

It sounded tough. It really did. But…

That's not what I expected to hear…

Yuffie couldn't help her skeptical expression, so Lyle added on, "Didn't you get it from a certain type of mushroom growing in your garden at home?"

"Correct! The 'once you start you can't stop laughing' fungus really does resemble a mushroom, doesn't it? I'd had beef stew for dinner the night before, and the mushrooms in it were delicious, so I just thought…"

"Th-That is very unfortunate…"

D-Doesn't that mean it's your own fault…?

Yuffie was trying really hard not to show her thoughts on her face while Erina rubbed her head bashfully.

"Fortunately, it wasn't a life-threatening illness, but I laughed all the time. When I say all the time, I mean it. I didn't want abs like Jack's, so I went to the doctor. But as I said before, Ultilaugh disease isn't something that can be cured with medicine or surgery. Then the Saint back then visited us and used her healing magic on me. With her power, my laughter stopped all at once, and life thankfully went back to normal for me…"

Erina continued reminiscing. "I can still remember that clearly. I would laugh so hard that my stomach cramped and I had trouble breathing, but the Saint hugged me gently and rubbed my back… Considering the nature of the illness, my friends and family couldn't take it seriously. The Saint was the only one who genuinely cared for me."

Before Yuffie realized it, she was hanging intently on each of Erina's words.

"After that experience, I wished with all my heart to become a Saint myself and help people. So there you have it, my other reason for learning healing magic."

Then she stared expectantly at Yuffie.

"Th-Thank you for sharing your story with me! You went through so much."

Setting aside the question of the actual disease, she could relate to Erina's admiration of healing magic after seeing the Saint performing her miracle because Yuffie's story was pretty much the same. Setting aside the question of the actual disease (for the second time), her friend's motives were purely altruistic, and her kindness, the picture of sainthood, dazzled her…

Compared to her, my motive for using healing magic is so not *pure!*

"Oh my goodness, Yuffie, you're melting! What is happening?!"

While Yuffie liquefied in despair at her shallowness, Lyle chimed in. "I've known Erina for a long time, so I know how serious she is about wanting to be a Saint. I respect that part of you from the bottom of my heart."

"Stop it, Lyle, you're embarrassing me."

Erina rubbed her slightly flushed cheek and continued, "Ultilaugh disease was a painful disease to deal with, but it was a good experience in that it gave me direction in my life. Although…" A shadow fell over her face again. "The Saint's power didn't cure the aftereffects…"

"Wh-What do you mean…?" Yuffie braced herself for anything.

"I laughed so much that my sense of humor went positively haywire!"

Yuffie stared in silence, processing her words, but ultimately couldn't. "…Can you…elaborate…?"

"My sensibilities warped after my sickness. Things that others find funny don't come across that way to me, and names that I think are cute don't seem that way to others…"

"Ohhh…"

That was Yuffie's lightbulb moment. Black Hole Seraphim, Demon Overlord God Phoenix. Her somewhat unique naming style was an aftereffect of Ultilaugh disease…

"No, you've always picked odd names, Erina."

"What?! You're joking."

"What was the name of the parakeet you had when you were little?"

"You mean Mr. Sushi?"

"If you were to name a parakeet after a niche eastern dish, I'd say something was off from the start."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't pick that name *now.* Let me see…if I were to name one now, I'd probably name it…Roadmail Gilgamesh or something along those lines."

"Just because you went in a different direction doesn't mean it's still not weird," Lyle pointed this out, and Erina puffed out her cheeks unhappily.

You really are so interesting, Erina…

Yuffie had thought she was pure and ladylike, just like a Saint, but the two of them actually had a few things in common. Plus, Erina had been kind enough to become friends with her, warts and all.

I have to try my best too…

Yuffie clenched her hands into fists. After hearing Erina's story, she felt even more determined to work hard at mastering healing magic.



AFTER that, they continued searching for John, but to no avail. The sun was already setting, dusk nearly upon them.

"I can't find him…" Erina complained, dejected.

"We haven't come across a single wild animal, let alone a puppy…" Lyle's expression was grim.

The fact behind his words made the whole thing more unsettling.

In the end, I was useless this time too…

The only thing they had found was a rusty old metal knife and a beautiful butterfly. The knife was dangerous, so they picked it up under the pretext of a student council cleaning activity. Yuffie held onto it, but considering that she tripped and forced Erina to use healing magic earlier, that might not have been such a good idea.

I'm a walking disaster… She moved along, shoulders slumped.

"Meow…" Friend voiced weakly from his perch on her shoulders.

"What's wrong?"

"Yuffie, I think we should head back. I have a bad feeling about this."

"Huh…?"

She frowned at his uneasy words, all the more unusual because he only ever said positive things. The gears in her brain turned. Friend was an imaginary friend, and in a sense, a part of her ego. In other words…

Am I *having a bad feeling about this…?*

"Why don't we call it a day?" Just as Lyle spoke, it happened.

BANG!

Not far away, a roar shook the ground.

"What the hell?! What's going on…?!"

"Hrngh! Jack…!"

Then, from somewhere, they heard Jack's and Edward's desperate cries.

"Wh-What's happening?!" Erina cried out in surprise.

Another blast followed. This time, flames rose from the west.

"Something's wrong," Lyle muttered, sweat trickling down his forehead.

"Um, shouldn't we hurry to where the flames are shooting from?" Yuffie asked tentatively, holding Friend tightly to her chest for whatever reason.

"You're right, of course! Yuffie, Erina, let's go…"

"Soaring Gale."

"Whoa!" Lyle and Erina cried out in unison because their bodies suddenly began to float. A swift wind had appeared out of nowhere, wrapping around the three and lifting them lightly.

"Wh-What…?!"

"W-We're floating…!?"

They started struggling when they realized, but they couldn't escape the wind.

"Keep your eyes closed," Yuffie told them.

WHOOSH!

They heard the sound tearing through the air at the same time Yuffie spoke.

"Gah…!"

"Eeek…!"

Ignoring their bewildered shouts, Yuffie raced through the sky at lightning speed, pulling her friends with her. The whipping wind made a mess of their hair and clothes.

"I…I'm… flying… Nooooooooo…!"

The gale carried them onward regardless of Erina's screams. As they approached their destination, Yuffie adjusted her control to make sure they landed safely.

"We're here! I figured this was the fastest way to travel right now… Ack, are you both okay?!" She ran over to Lyle and Erina, their faces pale and their breaths shallow.

"I-I'm all right, Yuffie. But how am I alive? I *am* alive, aren't I…?" Erina questioned, patting herself down.

"I'd heard rumors that wind magic could be used to fly, but I never thought they were true…" Lyle wheezed, disbelief written on his face.

"S-Sorry, was I going a little too fast? I should have slowed down a bit…"

"No, not at all. Good job, Yuffie." Then a burning stench reached him, enough to make him frown. Lyle regained his composure and looked ahead. Yuffie, drawn in by his action, raised her head as well.

"Jack! Edward!" she shouted.

Trees were engulfed in flames and smoke. Not too far away, the two boys were collapsed on the ground.

"Oh my goodness, this is awful!" Distressed, Erina cried out and ran over to them.

Lyle and Yuffie rushed after her.

"Shit… Owww…" Jack grumbled with a wound bleeding from his head. His clothes were torn to shreds and stained with blood.

Both boys were seriously injured, but Edward was still lying unconscious with deep wounds crisscrossing from his chest to his abdomen, his blood turning the ground red.

"Oh, no, this is terrible…" Yuffie blurted out without thinking.

Jack and Edward, two people who had accepted her as a friend, were in critical condition. As soon as she realized that, her heart started pounding.

Wh-What's wrong with me…? She didn't understand why she was panting like this.

Friend stared up at her.

"Hold on! I'll heal you right now… *O god of healing.*" The moment Erina started treating Edward, a terrifying roar echoed through the forest.

"*Grrrrrraaaaaarrr*!!!"

The monster mowed down trees with the iron club in its hand.

"You *have* to be kidding me…" Lyle trailed off as he realized the creature was responsible for the state their friends were in.

Built like a rock wall, it looked as big as a mountain. Thick muscles bulged from its shoulders down to its arms, and four hands as strong as boulders clutched sinister iron clubs. Drool dripped heavily from its mouth. With sharp fangs bared and its shining red eyes radiating a thirst for killing, the thing stared at its surroundings in hatred.

"This can't be happening! A King Cyclops is an A-ranked monster!" Lyle was basically yelling at this point.

The creature continued its relentless march toward them. A monster with a danger level of A was a powerful enemy that could only be defeated by dispatching an entire brigade of the royal army. Normally, such creatures only inhabited demonic domains where miasma was particularly strong, so it really shouldn't exist in the middle of human territory—even by accident. If you encountered one, the only thing you could do was run away as fast as possible, and even then, your survival rate would be less than 1%. Naturally, then, it wasn't an opponent that students could handle.

"Jack, what in the world happened?!" Lyle demanded.

"The hell if I know… I woke up and bam, that King Cyclops was right there, and then…" He bit his lip and pointed in the direction of the monster. "That man…"

Lyle squinted and, sure enough, saw a hooded man standing at its feet.

That's… His eyes widened. He recognized the magical item on the man's finger. *A ring of subordination… No wonder…*

A King Cyclops was a ferocious monster that ravaged anything it saw. However, right now, this one just glared at them, growling low in its throat without attacking.

Lyle took a step forward and spoke to the man. "Are you the one who's controlling it?"

"Indeed, I am." The man clapped politely in mock appreciation. "Luck is on your friends' side, eh? If they had just died quietly, their suffering needn't have been so prolonged."

"Who are you?" Lyle asked in a sharp voice.

"My name is Gordo."

"…I've never heard of you. You look human, but you must be a minion of the Demon King."

"What would you say if that were the case?" Gordo taunted him with a twisted sneer.

"Then…*you* were the one who unleashed the Flame Cerberus and put the fake letter in the suggestion box saying the puppy had disappeared, weren't you?"

"Very perceptive. As expected of the third prince." Gordo whistled inappropriately and removed his hood, revealing a man with a shaved head and painful-looking burn marks all over his face.

"Why are you doing this? What do you want?! Answer me, Gordo!" Lyle shouted.

The fact that he was able to remain undaunted in the presence of a King Cyclops, the very symbol of despair, was probably the result of the spirit trained into him as a member of the royal family.

"Come now, don't tell me you actually think I'll answer? The third prince has guts, but not much in the way of brains, eh?"

"As they say, doesn't cost a thing to ask. And I must say, it's *quite* an honor to be praised by someone who can command a King Cyclops."

Gordo chuckled at the prince's sarcasm. "You flatter me, Your Highness. As amusing as you are, however, you're all going to die

here. So, allow me to tell you something as a parting gift on your journey to the underworld." The man's tone remained dispassionate. "A thousand years have passed since the battle between mankind and the Demon King's army began… Though there's a lull now, it's not over yet. His Lordship's army is steadily gathering strength in preparation for the coming battle. We'll whittle down as much of the humans' power as we can until then. Your lot has defeated many monsters in the Eldora region, yes? We're simply returning the favor, doing to you humans what you've done to the Demon King's army."

"Interesting." Lyle nodded in understanding. "Then I guess that means you think highly of us to unleash an A-rank monster despite us being students."

"A Flame Cerberus should have been enough, but things didn't turn out as I expected." Gordo looked at Yuffie standing next to Lyle.

"Ahhh, I get it now." Lyle smiled ruefully when he realized something important. "It wasn't us, but *Yuffie* you were threatened by."

She took a step forward then.

"Yuffie?"

Ignoring Lyle, she spoke directly to Gordo. "Were you the one who hurt them?" Her voice carried an uncharacteristic icy chill.

"Isn't it obvious?" Gordo laughed, goading her.

"You're right. A stupid question on my part." Yuffie glanced at Jack, who Erina was treating, then Edward, who was still unconscious. Her eyes were cold, and her angry words shook the air. "You're the only one I'll never forgive."

Lyle stared in shock at her. He didn't know this girl with the terrifying look in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Gordo continued, the sneer never leaving his face. "You are an anomaly. I will admit that. I'd very much like to imprison you somewhere and find out everything your person can tell me, but eliminating the threat that is *you* comes first. Even if you defeated a Flame Cerberus, you won't fare so well against a King Cyclops!" he taunted with a raised hand. Pointing at Yuffie and her friends, Gordo commanded, "Kill them all!!"

"*Grrraaaaaaaarrr*!"

The monster's body shook violently as it charged toward them. Considering its enormous size, it moved surprisingly fast. It was so powerful that they knew they wouldn't be able to escape if caught in its rampage.

"Guys, just leave us and go! Get outta here!" Jack shouted. "Yuffie, even you can't fight off an A-rank!"

"We'll be all right," Lyle replied calmly. "I think."

"Vortex Lightning Blast."

The moment Yuffie murmured the words, a whirl of lightning suddenly erupted from her palm. The violently swirling lightning emitted an unbelievably bright bolt. Resembling a giant spider web or maybe a hurricane, the lightning bolt shot out of Yuffie's hand with speed too fast for the naked eye.

"Ngh…?"

The voice didn't belong to a creature that should have dominated this space. A pale blue flash had engulfed the King Cyclops. It was so bright that it was impossible to keep eyes open, as if God was raining down wrath from the heavens.

"Whoa…?!"

"Eeek!"

ZAAAAAAP!

The lightning strike penetrated the giant's body, the sound tearing through the air, and destroyed all its tissues. When Lyle opened his eyes, the King Cyclops's torso had been blown into pieces.

Gordo's eyes, mouth, and even nose were wide open, and his face was filled with shock.

Yuffie quipped then, looking bored. "Oh, I didn't think it would be so soft."

But the next moment, the monster's upper half began to bubble. New muscles grew at a frightening speed, blood vessels and skin expanded, and eyes reformed like a geyser exploding, a symbol of vitality.

"It can regenerate?!" Erina exclaimed in shock, astonished by the terrifying regenerative abilities of this A-rank monster, something she had never seen before.

"Heh heh heh… A King Cyclops's true terror is the fact that it can regenerate! While your attack just now was certainly an unpleasant surprise, you've now learned that an A-rank monster isn't for show! Go on, try again. I dare you."

"Hellfire Blast."

Yuffie cast a new spell, telling Gordo she didn't care about anything that came out of his mouth. A huge flame spurted out from her small hand and wrapped around the creature's massive body in a heatwave that could melt even iron.

"*Grrrrraaaaaaaaarrrrrr*?!"

The King Cyclops writhed on the ground, letting out a death cry.

"That's impossible! How can you maintain your composure while firing such high-output attack spells in succession?!" Gordo yelled in surprise.

Each spell Yuffie used required an immense amount of mana. Normally, her magic would be depleted by now, and she would have collapsed from the backlash, but she hadn't even broken a sweat. The knowledge made Gordo quiver in terror.

However, I cannot withdraw here…! He had to get results this time, or he would lose his life.

"Die! *Water Vein Shock,*" Gordo shouted.

An enormous globe of water shot out from his hand and engulfed the King Cyclops. The flames died down with a whoosh. As steam billowed, its burns healed. The charred skin regenerated, and fresh flesh filled the torn parts, leaving its body whole once again.

"Your attacks are useless! You've underestimated the King Cyclops's regen—"

"Whirlwind Slash," Yuffie chanted.

FWISH, FWISH, FWISH!

In an instant, the wind turned into giant blades and blew away the monster's head and limbs. Blue blood spurted out from each opening like fountains.

"I'll just keep destroying it until its regenerative ability can't keep up," she said matter-of-factly. Her voice was flat and cold enough to freeze you if you touched her.

Is that really…Yuffie…? Erina shivered in shock. Her friend with the fluffy, absent-minded aura was nowhere to be found.

"Yuffie! It's probably getting a direct supply of mana from Gordo!" Lyle's voice cut in. "We won't be able to stop the King Cyclops unless we defeat that man!"

Gordo stiffened in surprise at his words. "So, you realized, eh? But it's far too late!" And with that, he took something out of his pocket. It looked like a small stone and emitted a special glow.

"Oh, no! An ultra-pure magic stone!" Erina cried out.

To magicians, it was a valuable item that could supply a large amount of mana.

"Correct! As long as I have this, my magical power will never run out. Well, at least until the morning!" Gordo cackled arrogantly. "Even you can't withstand this! Mwa ha ha ha ha!"

WHIZZZ!

A short, sharp flash of light burst from Yuffie's hand. With a crackle, it shattered the magic stone in Gordo's hand. A split second later, something stabbed into the tree behind him—the rusty knife they had retrieved earlier.

"…What?" Gordo sounded panicked now. Blood trickled down his cheek, and pieces of the shattered magic stone spilled from his hand.

"Rock Hammer."

Ignoring the stunned villain, Yuffie unleashed the finishing blow. The earth trembled, and a humongous boulder appeared above her head. It resembled a hammer as it hovered in the sky. Like she was delivering divine judgment, she swung it down on the King Cyclops.

"*Guh*…"

The only sound the monster could make was a graphic, strangled grunt as her rock hammer landed, causing the surrounding trees to shake from the wind pressure and shockwave. The symbol of despair itself that struck fear into anyone unfortunate enough to encounter it had been smashed into the ground, like a silly dream.

Yuffie waved her hand, and the rock hammer disappeared into particles of light. Only silence remained now. The pools of dark blue

blood splashed on the ground were the only proof that the King Cyclops had existed until just a moment ago.

No one said a word in the aftermath because they couldn't think of anything *to* say at the scene that had just unfolded.

"Ungh…" Yuffie groaned as she staggered and nearly fell backward.

"Yuffie!" Lyle caught her quickly and held her in his arms.



"Yuffie, are you all right? Hang in there."

"Lord…Lyle…? What did I…do…?"

Her voice came out small and dazed—she reacted as if she'd been unconscious until now.

"Yuffie, you're all right, it's all over now…" Erina called out gently to her.

She blinked several times, puzzled. "I'm glad that everyone is safe… Heh heh…"

Not even a trace of her earlier coldness remained in her weak chuckle.

Meanwhile, Gordo was trying to sneak away. His prized possession, the King Cyclops, had been defeated; fighting was no longer an option.

"Hey, asshole! Don't you dare run away!" Jack noticed and tried to chase after him. Unfortunately for him…

"Damn it all to hell! *Phantom Fog*!" In an instant, the villain's figure flickered and vanished like a mirage. It was probably a concealment spell applied by combining offensive magics. Though the King Cyclops had overshadowed him, Gordo himself seemed to be a high-level magician.

"Shit, he's fast!" Jack cursed in frustration.

Only traces of the battle with King Cyclops and the student council members remained.

❖ ✿ ❖

BY the time they returned to the student council room to sort things out and report to Noah, the sun had completely set.

"So that's what happened," he remarked, his expression serious after hearing the full story from Lyle.

"It boggles my mind to think of all that occurring while I was unconscious…" Edward folded his arms and frowned. Thanks to Erina's healing magic, his wounds had completely healed, and he had changed into a new uniform, so it looked like nothing had happened. However, the mental damage caused by the intense pain he'd suffered had left him pale.

"That bastard ran away without finishing the fight… He'll get what's coming to him next time I meet his sorry ass…" Jack, who'd been injured as badly as Edward, was lying in his hammock, back to his usual self. Out of all the student council members, he might be the toughest mentally.

Lyle spoke up next. "If he hadn't used illusion magic, we would have assumed until the end that Gordo was human. Which means he probably double-crossed the demons… Yuffie! What are you doing?!"

"I'm so sorry!" She suddenly thwacked her head on the ground and dropped to her knees, groveling. Everyone was stunned and confused by her behavior. "I…I think I got carried away and lost sight of everything around me… Anyway, I'm so sorry for being so pushy!"

"Yuffie, calm down, will you?!" Lyle bent down and tried to stop her as she banged her against the floor. "You don't have anything to apologize for. If anything, we're the ones who should be grateful."

"That's right! Without you, our lives would have been in danger… Thank you so much," Erina added.

"And I'm still alive because of you, Yuffie. You have my thanks." Edward gave her a short bow.

"Yuffie, you know you're a hero, right?! So be confident and swagger like one! You blew that disgusting thing away in one shot. You're so amazing, I wouldn't mind if you became my mentor!" Jack exclaimed excitedly.

"Huh…? N-No, I'm really not… You've got it all wrong…"

She was taken aback by the shower of gratitude the other four rained down on her. Their reactions were completely unexpected since she'd been sure they would rake her over the coals for what she'd done, so she blushed a little.

"I'm happy to hear you say that…" she kept going even as invisible steam born of embarrassment escaped from her head. "The truth is, I don't remember much about the battle with…what was it called? A King Cyclops? I was so far gone that after I came to my senses again, I worried that I might have hurt you all with my magic…"

"You didn't, so don't worry about that. It's just…"

"Yes?"

Lyle looked away.

*I can*not *make her angry…*

Everyone there was thinking the same thing.

Yuffie cocked her head quizzically, but Noah steered the conversation from there.

"I regret doing paperwork instead of accompanying you all because I would have loved to see such an incredible sight. In any case…" Noah continued with a serious expression. "This matter is too serious for us to handle on our own, so I think we should ask the school's administration for their advice. However, when we make our report, we'll have to mention Yuffie's ability to use offensive magic."

His words created tension within the rest of the student council.

"As I mentioned the other day, we need to be careful about who we loop in. Ergo, I plan on giving this issue a good, hard think. I'll let you all know once I've made my decision."

Everyone nodded. Noah was right; this latest incident meant that whatever was going on, it was too much for them to handle as mere students. The decision to ask for help from adults was the right one.

"Also, from what I've heard, I realize you had to use your magic because it was an emergency. But henceforth, unless it's absolutely necessary, please refrain from doing so again in public."

"Y-Yes! Of course!" Yuffie stammered, straightening up.

Then Erina suddenly asked, "That reminds me, I've been meaning to ask. How *did* you acquire such powerful attack magic, Yuffie?"

"What she said." The other three boys chimed in unison.

Everyone's attention was focused on Yuffie.

"W-Well, nothing serious…" she replied uncertainly. "I just practiced every day for about seven years."

"Every day for seven years?!" Erina shrieked.

"C-Can I ask where?" Lyle prompted.

"At first, in the forest on the outskirts of the village, but once my spells grew more and more powerful, I realized I could cause

serious trouble for the folks living there, so I used wind magic to move to the mountains in the north region and practiced there."

"The mountains in the north… Do you mean the Eldora region? Where there are barely any trees and just sharp cliffs and rock faces?" Edward asked, sounding surprised.

"I don't know the name, but the mountains are pretty pointy…"

"I thought as much! That's close to the Demon King's territory, a dangerous area thick with miasma! There are King Cyclops-class monsters everywhere. It isn't somewhere for ordinary people to visit!"

"Huh? Really? It seemed like a good place to practice since it was deserted… Now that you mention it, though, there *were* a ton of monsters…"

Lyle tapped his chin thoughtfully in response. "Come to think of it, I heard that the monster population in Eldora has gone down drastically in the past few years."

"Well, we learned in our church school that monsters were a threat to people, so I figured it would be a good idea to kill two birds with one stone by practicing my magic and getting rid of them," Yuffie said casually. "And that's what I did whenever I ran into one…"

"Ohhh…" three of her friends groaned at the same time.

"Your lot has defeated many monsters in the Eldora region, yes?"

Gordo's words rang in Lyle, Erina, and Jack's minds.

"What? What is it? Did I say something weird?"

An amount of practice too insane to believe. And the fact that Yuffie had unknowingly whittled away at the Demon King's army's strength. Both of these things were enough to shock everyone.

Except that their reactions only activated her negativity.

"So, it *is* strange for a girl to be able to use attack magic, huh…?" she panicked quietly. "I actually wanted to learn healing magic, not offensive magic." The words spilled out against her will. "When I was a child, I admired the Saint… I thought if I could learn healing magic, people would love me too, like they loved her…"

She didn't mean to say any of this. Blurting out something so dark would just make them all uncomfortable. Even though she

knew that, the resentment she'd been harboring for so long came flooding out, and she was helpless to stop the deluge.

"But I messed up, and for seven years, I devoted myself to practicing offensive magic. After that, I tried really hard to work on my healing magic, but no matter how much I practiced, I couldn't do it… In the end, attack magic was all I had." With a self-deprecating smile, Yuffie continued, "If you take away my offensive magic, there's nothing left. Without it…I'm just a gloomy, spineless, hunch-backed, annoying girl who only causes trouble for everyone…"

"That's not true," Lyle interrupted her.

She slowly raised her head at his words.

"You *aren't* just your magic, Yuffie. You were angry for your friends and tried your best for them—and that matters so much more." He smiled gently at her. "Even if you couldn't use offensive magic, I'd still be your friend."

She had always wanted to hear those words. "Um… Well… I…"

"You all agree too, don't you?"

While Yuffie fumbled for a reply, Lyle looked around at the student council members.

"I think you're a wonderful person, Yuffie. Otherwise, I would never have allowed you to join the student council," Noah commented, the corners of his mouth curled up.

"I hate that you're so timid despite having such insane power… Then again, that may be one of your strong points, Yuffie," Jack followed up, now lying in the hammock.

"At first, I thought you were a boorish lackwit, but now I know differently. My personal opinion is that you're a decent sort, Yuffie." Edward pushed up his glasses in his usual pompous manner.

"As for me, it goes without saying that I love you, Yuffie! You're cute, funny, and, more than anything, you're a very kind and wonderful girl!"

Their words of affirmation thawed and healed her frozen heart. She felt a sudden, unexpected heat in her eyes.

Huh…? Something's wrong…

Her vision was blurring too…

"Yuffie!" Lyle sounded alarmed.

"Oh my goodness, are you all right?!" Erina exclaimed.

They both panicked when she started crying.

"Does anything hurt? Hold on, I'll heal you right now! *O god of healing*…"

"N-no, it's nothing like that…" Yuffie answered, rubbing her eyes and shaking her head. "I'm just so happy…"

"Yuffie, you're always alone."

Those words might as well have been a hex binding her. Since a young age, she'd never been good at talking to people or doing things with them, so she had always been alone. Deep down, she wanted to be with someone. But her anxiety got in the way, and even when she tried her best and thought she had finally made a friend, they didn't think of her as that—leaving her alone again. She had given up, thinking that people were abandoning her because she was a boring person. After all, her personality kept others away.

Then Lyle told her she was wrong, and it made her happy to hear that. Yuffie was so glad that she cried for the first time in ages.

The student council members, who didn't know her backstory, had no idea what was wrong. Even so, they realized that her tears weren't ones of sadness or pain, but actually the exact opposite.

"You're so sweet, Yuffie," Erina soothed, hugging her tightly.

It felt so warm she thought her chest would explode.

Maybe it's okay for me to be a little bit confident in myself…

Maybe it was time to be more positive about herself as a person. This was what Yuffie thought after hearing what her first real friends had to say about her since enrolling in the Academy of Magic.

Chapter 6: Peace Is the Best, Isn't It?!

CHEEP, CHEEP, CHEEP.

"…Oh, no."

The next morning in her dorm room, Yuffie muttered to herself as she lay in bed, looking dazed. Probably a combination of having just woken up and feeling like she'd been drained of her soul. Of course, the reason she felt anxious didn't have anything to do with waking up.

"Aaaaaah! I wanna die, I wanna die, I wanna diiiiie!"

ROLL, ROLL, ROLL!

She covered her face and rolled around on her bed. Yesterday, she burst into tears in front of Lyle and the others in the student council room. Thinking about it made her so embarrassed that she just wanted to keep rolling until she reached her parents' house back in Millil.

THUD!

"Owww!"

But she got carried away and tumbled out of bed, crashing into the wall.

"Ouch… Ouch…"

Yuffie groaned in pain from the dull ache in the back of her head.

"Darn it! What are you banging around like that for so early in the morning?!" came a sharp voice from the other side of the wall.

"Eeek! I'm sorry!"

Jumping back from the wall, she ground her forehead against the floor. The sight of her bowing to the wall had become a regular

thing since she moved into the dorm. When silence descended again, Yuffie felt relieved.

"I have to gift her another one…"

She stood up and rummaged through her still-bulging backpack, taking out some burdock. This was also a familiar offering.

"How should I wrap it…?"

Burdock in hand, Yuffie mulled the problem over, especially since the girl hadn't been too keen on the altar. It was only the day before yesterday that she found out her neighbor was the daughter of a distinguished family. Lyle and the others came to her rescue when Yuffie was being harassed after facing criticism for joining the student council. The magnificent halo of hair created by Jack's fire magic had left a strong impression on her.

Knock, knock.

"Eeep?!"

The unexpected sound echoed through the room, and Yuffie jumped in reaction.

"W-Who is it…?"

She had no idea who could be visiting her. Gulping, she opened the door timidly.

"Good morning." Her neighbor stood there, arms crossed, expression sullen.

Yuffie's face froze at seeing Catherine in her doorway.

"Hey, stop that this instant! Why are you trying to shut me out?!" Catherine yelped as she jammed the fan she was holding between the door and the doorjamb.

"Ack! I'm sorry! No one has ever come to see me before, so I didn't know what to do and just…tried to run away."

"R-Really? I feel like I heard something incredibly sad, but maybe I'm just imagining it?"

"Um… R-Right. Definitely your imagination… Anyway, good morning…Ms. Cathevich?"

"You just mashed together my first and last names."

"Ahhh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"I just now realized I haven't introduced myself properly. I'm Catherine Kulkovich. Imprint that in your brain, hm?" she remarked with a sigh when Yuffie moved to grovel again.

"Th-Thank you, Catherine… Um, and I'm…Yuffie…"

Yuffie glanced at the girl's head. Bandages covered her beautiful blonde curls, making her look like someone who was seriously injured.

"Make a comment about my hair, and I'll use the full force of the Kulkovich family to crush you. I dare you."

"Eeek! I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry!"

Catherine sighed again seeing Yuffie genuinely freaking out. "As long as you understand. Anyway, was that burdock meant for me?" Catherine asked, pointing with her fan at the root Yuffie held in her hand.

"Oh… Yes, actually. I was being noisy again, so I wanted to give it to you as an apology… But you already figured that out."

"Like it was hard to? You have a pattern, you know. Every time you lose your mind, you come and share some with me."

"Wow! Is that mind-reading magic?!"

"As if I can use forbidden magic like that! You're just too easy to read. I didn't want you to build an altar in front of my room again, so I came to get it from you myself."

"Thank you so much for your kindness and consideration… And I'm sorry again. You won't hear another peep from me. I'll do my best to make this the last time I give you burdock, so please forgive me…"

Catherine looked like the world was ending when she heard that. "I don't mind…if you're noisy occasionally, you know."

"Huh?" Yuffie tilted her head in confusion at the unexpected words.

"Of course, only if you apologize to me with burdock every time you flip out. If you can do that, I don't care if you bang on the wall or scream."

Yuffie thought of a possibility then. Her eyes swiveled back and forth between the burdock and Catherine. "Maybe you *really* like this burdock…?"

"As! If! All right, fine. From a personal point of view, this burdock tastes so good that I *have* to give it a high rating. But it's not like I'm obsessed with it or anything. I'm just…eating it for my health. Yes, that's right, my health!" Catherine blurted out in rapid succession before she pointed her fan at Yuffie. "Anyway! I, the daughter of the Duke of Kulkovich, personally grant you the right to make noise in exchange for burdock. You should be grateful to me."

"Oh, yes! I'm very grateful! Thank you so much!"

Catherine blinked as Yuffie bowed. Then she scratched her head as if thrown off balance. "You…really are an oddball, hm?"

Though she sounded hesitant, a slight smile curved her lips.



"FRIEND, I'm off now."

"Have a great day at school, Yuffie."

After handing the burdock to Catherine, Yuffie got ready as usual and left the dorm. The sky was a clear blue, and the cool breeze felt good as it brushed her cheeks. It probably wasn't just her imagination that her heart felt lighter than usual.

"Good morning, Yuffie."

When she arrived in the classroom, Lyle greeted her cheerfully.

"Good…good morning, Lord Lyle."

Maybe because of her embarrassing display yesterday, her voice was more strained than usual. She sat down quickly and buried her head on her desk, trying to shut out information from the outside world until homeroom started.

"Yuffie."

"Y-Yes?" She turned around, only to find Lyle staring at her with a scowl. "Was I rude? Did I do something? Urk, I'm so sorry…"

"No, no, nothing like that." He scratched his cheek. "It's about time you stop with this 'Lord' business and just call me Lyle."

She understood right away what he meant. He was the third prince of the Kingdom. In terms of status, he might as well be the sun while she was just an ant, so to her, it had been natural to address him as "Lord Lyle."

But if Lyle himself says I don't have to…

Yuffie decided it would actually be less rude to do as he said.

"Then…um, Mr. Lyle?"

"Aw, come on, that isn't much better. I told you, just 'Lyle.'"

"I think that's a bit too high a hurdle for me. What would people say?"

Even if Lyle were okay with it, the majority of the other nobles wouldn't approve of her addressing him so casually.

"Ugh. Fine. I guess that'll do. For now."

He seemed a little disappointed, but Yuffie was relieved that he had compromised. She also felt closer to him now, and that knowledge warmed her heart.

This is really nice…

When she went to school, her friends said good morning to her. This was probably a normal thing for most people. But for Yuffie, who'd been alone most of her life, it was such a joyful exchange that it made her smile.

"You look really happy. Why don't you let me in on the secret?"

"It's nothing, Mr. Lyle."

And then.

"Lord Lyle! Good morning!"

"Lord Lyle, you're in a good mood today!"

Two young ladies, dressed just as gorgeously as the day before, spoke to him. Not wanting to talk to strangers, Yuffie buried her face in her desk again at the speed of light.

"Good morning, Anna, Sophie. You're both looking lovely as usual."

"Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh! I'm going to remember those words to help me get through the day!"

"Thank you! Thank you so much! I'll remember this day forever as the day I spoke to Lord Lyle!"

"Stop, you're exaggerating," he replied with a wry smile.

Maybe they were being thoughtful because today, they didn't show any signs of reeling her into the conversation like the day before yesterday.

Urk… I wish I could join in too…

The moment they started talking to her last time, Yuffie ran out of the classroom and vanished. She was fine when it was just Lyle, but she still got nervous when others joined in.

But…

Ever since coming to this school, she'd been able to talk not only to Lyle, but also Edward, Jack, Erina, and Noah. Her social skills used to be awful, but now she felt like she'd improved just a bit, and…

"Even if you couldn't use offensive magic, I'd still be your friend, Yuffie."

Lyle's words echoed in her head. Magical words that dragged her out of her negative mindset.

BANG, BANG.

"Ouch!"

She raised her head so quickly, that the back of her head struck the seat behind her. It hurt. A lot.

God, I'm such a mess…

Yuffie couldn't help the rueful chuckle that escaped. But this was who she was.

It is what it is.

"Uh, are you okay, Yuffie?" Lyle asked worriedly.

"Oh, no, what happened?"

"Um, you're Yuffie, right…?"

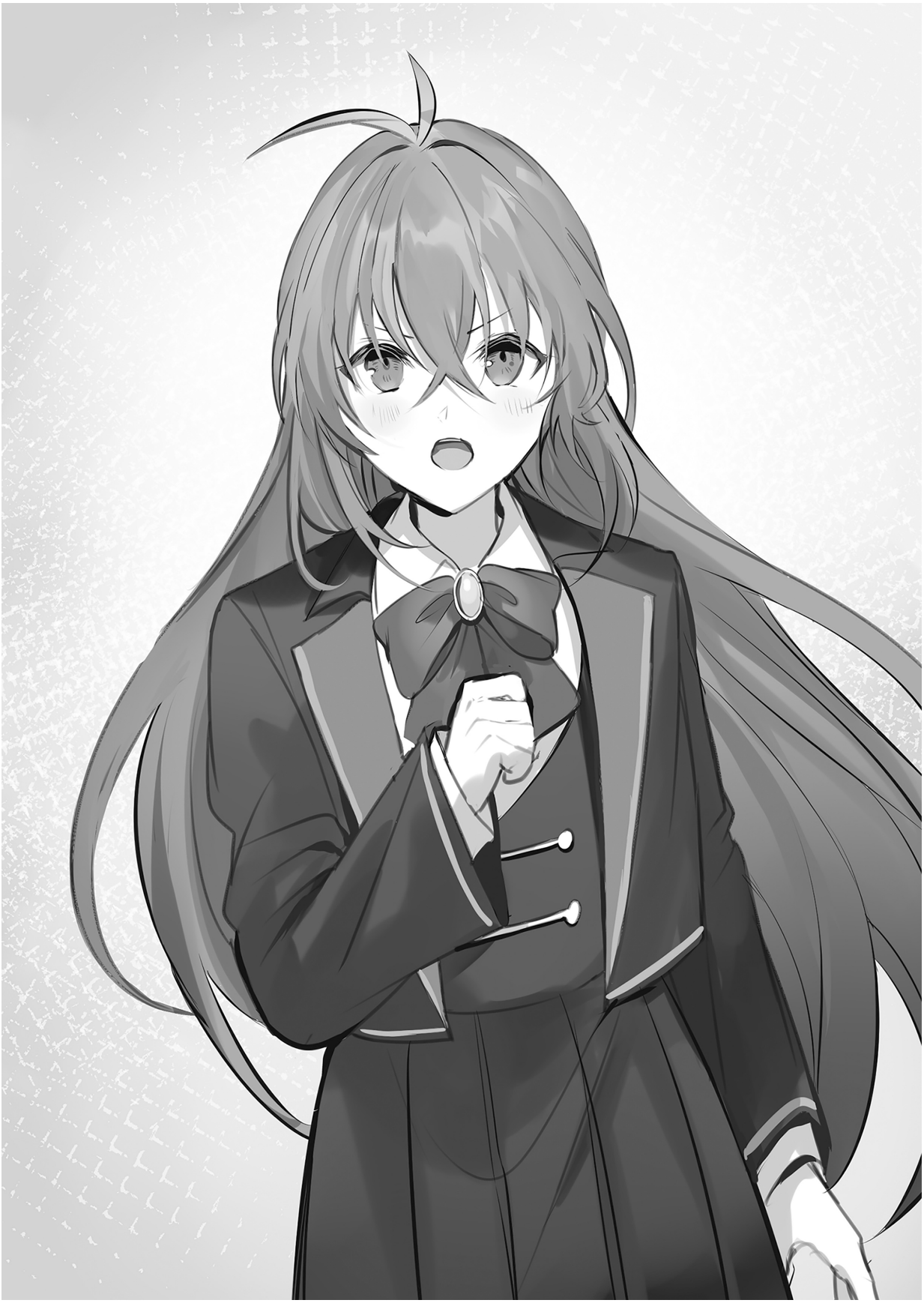
Her sudden movement after staying stockstill startled and confused the two girls.

She turned to them and did her best to relax her tense expression.

I need to be brave!

Yuffie straightened her hunched back, took a deep breath, and began to speak.

"Ummm…"



Epilogue: Well, This Is Disturbing

"YOU didn't kill anyone?"

In the dark cavern, a strange figure spoke. The voice was chilling, as if its owner were trapped in a coffin made of ice.

"Yes, that is correct…"

Gordo's voice trembled. His silhouette, kneeling on the rough ground and prostrating before the shadow, clearly showed him shaking with unfathomable fear.

"Even though you lost the King Cyclops and the magic stone, you ran away with your tail tucked between your legs and nothing to show for it?" The voice held a mix of anger and disappointment.

"I-I'm very sorry! But, please…!" Gordo's expression was desperate as he cried out, pleading. "Any way you look at it, that girl Yuffie is abnormal…"

Before he could finish his words, the shadow fired a merciless flash of light. It struck Gordo in the neck.

"Wha… Huh…"

His mind couldn't keep up with the sudden turn of events. And it never would. His severed head flew through the air and rolled, splattering blood on the cold cave floor.

"I thought I told you I'd burn you alive if you screwed up again."

Gordo's headless torso toppled silently to the ground.

"Yuffie…Abisus…" The deep, angry voice muttered the name of a girl as it vanished into the darkness. Only Gordo's corpse remained.

Short Story: Yuffie's First Earring

ERINA'S *ears…are kind of sparkly…*

During class one day, Yuffie was staring at the accessories that glittered on the other girl's ears as she sat next to her. Since she came from the countryside and had no friends, she didn't know much about fashion, including accessories. Yuffie had never seen the type that Erina was wearing and didn't even know what they were called.

So pretty…

She stared at Erina's ears in a dreamy daze. Yuffie was a teenage girl too, so, of course, she wanted to try wearing things that glittered in the sunlight streaming through the classroom window.

Gah! What am I even thinking?! She shook her head vigorously. *As if a loser like me could ever wear something like that! It looks good on Erina since she's going to be the next Saint…*

Those accessories shone because of Erina's beauty. If Yuffie were to wear them, they would lose their luster immediately, and their value would plummet to the same as a pebble lying on the road. As the saying goes, the clothes make the man, and Yuffie wasn't exactly the definition of stylish.

Crud, I have to listen to the lecture…

She sighed softly and moved her gaze from Erina's ears to the board.



AFTER class, Erina spoke to her.

"Yuffie, why were you staring at my ears so hard in class?"

"Y-Y-Y-Y-You knew?!" Yuffie croaked.

"I hit the nail on the head, hm?"

"Ahhhhhh! I'm so sorry!" She bowed her head as low as it could go. "A loser like me should never have looked at your ears! I'm sorry for making you feel uncomfortable!"

"Yuffie! Yuffie, calm down! I don't think that at all!"

"It's just that the sparkly things on your ears caught my attention, and I just…I just couldn't stop myself from staring!"

"Sparkly things on my ears…? Oh, you mean earrings?"

"Earrings?"

Yuffie finally lifted her face and stared at her curiously because she had never heard of the word before.

"That's what they're called! I tried wearing a pair as a change of pace, so to speak."

"I-I didn't even know that was a thing… The city really is amazing…"

"Here, this is for you."

"Huh?"

Before she knew it, Erina had taken off her earrings and handed them to Yuffie.

"Try them on. I'm sure they'll look good on you. Go on."

"N-No, I can't do that! You can't just give away expensive earrings to someone like me…"

"It's fine, it's fine! They're not that expensive. Only about 300,000 ennis."

"300,000 ennis?!"

A commoner could live on that amount for roughly three months as long as they were frugal with their spending.

I…really shouldn't be surprised that we think of money so differently…!

"Everything is an experience, Yuffie."

While Yuffie stood there gobsmacked, Erina deftly attached the clip-ons to her ears. By the time she came to her senses, it was too late to stop her.

Erina stared at Yuffie intently. Unable to endure her gaze, Yuffie looked down and to the side and started mumbling. The words almost sounded like a hex.

"Hardy har har… I know… I know, they look stupid on me, right? There's no way such pretty earrings would suit me, I'm sorry, I'll take them off right away…"

"So…cute…"

"…Huh?"

"Yuffie! You look so cute!"

"D-Do I really?"

"Yes! They look lovely on you!"

"Heh heh heh… I don't know about that… But if you say so… Heh heh heh…"

Erina's insistence made all the anxiety from earlier vanish into the aether. Light flooded Yuffie's vision, and a scene straight out of paradise unfolded in front of her. Her face was slack with pleasure at having been praised for the first time in her life.

Erina raised her finger and spoke to Yuffie. "By the way, there's another type of earring called a piercing."

"Piercing?" Yuffie cocked her head curiously. Another word she had never heard before.

"That's right. It's an accessory that you slide into a small hole in your ear."

"A hole?! *In* my ear?!" Yuffie's mind flashed with an image of herself bleeding profusely from her ear.

"I think piercings would look good on you too, Yuffie. Would you like to try?"

"N-N-N-No, thank you!"

There's no way I could do something as painful as pierce my ears! Just thinking about it made her tremble, and she crouched down out of reflex.

A delicious shiver raced through Erina at the sight of Yuffie like that…

"Ahhh… Yuffie trembling in pain… How charming… Squirming in agony…"

"Erina?"

"Oh, don't mind me."

When she looked up, Erina was beaming down at her with her usual saintly smile.

Yuffie wanted to believe that the slight flush on the other girl's cheeks was just a figment of her imagination.

Afterword

IF we're meeting for the first time, it's nice to meet you. If it's been a while, hello again. I'm Fuyu Aoki. Whether you're reading this after enjoying the main story or you're the type to read the afterword first, I'm so happy to be able to greet you here.

What did you think of this exhilarating, heartwarming, and off-the-beaten-path school comedy woven by the strongest offensive magician, Yuffie? As the author, it would be my greatest joy if you could enjoy the slightly(?) eccentric story of this girl as you sometimes laugh and sometimes cry at her antics.

All right, so my most loyal readers, the ones who buy my work because I'm the author (thank you always!) already know this, but Fuyu Aoki is a writer who doesn't stick to a specific genre. When I debuted, I was writing teen romantic comedies for a male demographic. Then I suddenly published a sweet Cinderella story for women. And now I've written a fantasy comedy with the strongest protagonist. As of January 2024, it hasn't been announced, but I also have an outline for a battle action story set in the present day, so more and more I'm starting to wonder, "What genre do I even specialize in…?"

I don't know how many times I've been asked what my style as a writer is because the themes are all over the place, but when you read my works, there *is* one throughline that runs through all of my stories. That is, "The protagonist is unhappy at the beginning, but winds up happy in the end." I'll avoid explaining my previous works because there isn't enough paper, even if I cut down all the trees in the world. In this work, though, Yuffie, who was unhappy because she had no friends, becomes happy after enrolling in the Academy of Magic and makes friends, including Lyle.

That's right. No matter what subject or character I write, the protagonist, who starts out somewhat gloomy, begins to smile as the story progresses. I think this is probably deeply rooted in my personality and is an unchangeable aspect of my style as a writer. To give an easy-to-understand example, an elf slave who's been

oppressed and deprived of anything decent to eat is picked up by a kind master, fed delicious food in a warm house, her scarred body is cleaned up, she wears a cute dress, her smile slowly comes back to her, she falls in love with her master, and before she knows it, the two of them are in love and get married and live happily ever after. I really, really, really love stories like that! (End otaku-like lightning-fast rambling). I'd like to write something like that someday.

I was pretty silly in the main story, so I thought I'd be serious in the afterword, but I ended up joking around again. This may also be an unchangeable part of my nature as an author. Anyway, I'll continue to make unhappy characters happy, so if you like the same style of writing, please check out my new work!

With that said, happiness without any challenges is boring. Yuffie is happy to have made a friend, but many people don't like her. I think she'll face many trials in the future, so I hope you look forward to seeing how she overcomes them.

While I maintain some modicum of gravity, I'd like to express my gratitude! To my editor, I-san, thank you for working on this story. Every time I receive advice from you, it becomes more magical and entertaining, and I'm so grateful. The strongest magician is you, I-san!

Thank you to the illustrator, Bodax-sensei, for the wonderful illustrations, which I'd love to project onto the giant screens at Shibuya's Scramble Crossing. I'm overwhelmed with emotion at how beautifully you transformed my incomprehensible instructions for a beautiful girl with a black cat on her head, clutching a burdock root and unleashing a powerful attack spell into an impeccable cover that will go down in the history of light novels.

I'd also like to thank my parents, who welcome me with open arms whenever I return to the countryside on those all-too-often occasions I get tired of city life, the readers who supported me through the web version, and everyone who was involved in the publication of this book.

Thank you so much!

I hope to see you all again in volume 2.

Fuyu Aoki



Welcome to Olivia's Magic Jewelers

By Rinrin Yuki Illust Suzaku

Betrayed by her sister and left with nothing, a talented magic jewelry artificer starts anew in the capital. She might start with nothing but her raw talent, but Olivia isn't going to give up. Experience her underdog story in Welcome to Olivia's Magic Jewelers!



Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing

By Sachi Konzome Illust Harenochihareta

Scarred and broken, but not defeated. Meet Miss Sophie, a girl with limited healing magic on a mission to mend hearts & skin-deep issues in this heartwarming isekai fantasy series!



The Hired Heroine Wants the Villainess to Gloat

By Hanami Nishine Illust Rin Hagiwara

Nina gets hired by a cat to play the role of heroine with the sole purpose of helping the villainess relish her downfall! Nina must work hard to make sure the villainess gets a satisfying triumph or she won't get her payment, but can she pull it off?



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