

## Cursory Education

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# Cursory Education

by [Milieva](#)

## Summary

Clef knew settling into his new life in Japan would involve learning a lot about his new home, but he didn't expect to learn about his own heart.

## Notes

Hello all!

I hope this finds you well, and you and yours are fine. Things are alright here. I've not been able to concentrate on much of anything writing-wise, except this silly nonsense. I didn't want to start posting this until I had most, if not all, of this bit finished. I'm more than halfway through, so I should be able to maintain a semi-regular posting schedule of a new chapter ~~twice~~ once a week for the next few weeks. (Edit: Got a little over-excited about the idea of posting more often. I can probably only manage a definite once a week on the chapters for this.)

I have slightly modernised the setting closer to present day, so I could have the smartphones, tablets, and social networks that did not exist in 1996.

I hope you enjoy this. It's brought me a smile the past several weeks.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

This follows on almost directly after Unwilling Exile.

In the rush to make all the arrangements to bring Clef to Tokyo, Umi hadn't once considered whether the translation spell would work as expected when bringing someone from Cephire to Tokyo instead of going the other way.

Ferio had made it to Tokyo twice. He'd never made it farther into the city than one of the cafes in the Tower, but there had been no problem communicating with him. Also, everyone's families had communicated with ease when being introduced to Cephire, so it had never occurred to any of them that the spell might be selective - that Umi and Clef could have a perfectly normal conversation on the ride back to the house, but that neither Clef nor Umi's parents would be able to understand a word the other said.

Clef looked horribly ill when the realisation dawned on him.

Umi's parents, on the other hand, shifted to using Umi as an interpreter as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And Umi took some relief in the realisation they couldn't go asking him any awkward questions without her knowing about it.

But there was another benefit Umi could see to the fact that Clef wouldn't have the translation spell to deal with. It was an advantage she didn't have in Cephire. "Hey, you can actually learn to read Japanese this way!"

She had hoped to reassure him, but Clef only looked greyer at the prospect. "I hadn't even thought about that being a problem," he murmured.

Clef stayed rather quiet most of the evening. Umi did understand a little of what he was going through; from her family moves when she was a child, and the shock when she had first fallen into Cephire. She hoped knowing there were people around he could count on was some form of comfort, if nothing else.

Umi did her best to help him settle in. She hadn't thought transitioning from magic habitat controls to technological ones would make much of a difference, given her parents' house had voice controls set up for the main lights and aircon and almost everything else; which wasn't so different to telling a spell what to do. But now all the commands were in a language Clef couldn't speak, and the computer system didn't recognise a thing he said. Umi showed him the basics of how the control panels for the toilets and the bath worked while Papa found her the instructions for the smart hub.

She set the bath to run for him while they programmed in a simple 'lights on' and 'lights off' in Cephiran - though to Umi it still just sounded like Japanese - so he could function in the house more easily. But beyond recording the commands, Clef didn't say very much. Umi couldn't help but worry he might be regretting his choice.

That thought lingering kept Umi from settling down to sleep despite the fact she'd barely slept the two previous nights. She fluffed her pillows and readjusted her blankets multiple times before finally getting up to get a cup of tea.

On her way to the kitchen, she stopped by the guest room in the hope Clef might still be awake and keep her company as usual.

When she called his name through the slightly open door, Clef jolted up in bed with a gasp and was still panting for breath when he spoke. "Umi? Is that you?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," Umi murmured hastily as she opened the door a little further.

"It's fine." Clef fumbled with the bedside light before managing to get it on.

Even in the low light, Umi could see that his eyes were red and damp. She impulsively took a rushed few steps toward him before stopping herself as she realised that she'd be climbing into bed with him if she wanted to give him a hug. She swallowed down the impulse. They didn't really have a physically affectionate sort of relationship - that hug this morning was more of a one-off than anything.

"I was going to ask if you wanted a cup of tea," Umi said.

"That would be wonderful." Clef pushed back the duvet and climbed out of bed. Papa's pyjamas were so large on him that he had to roll up the hems. They definitely needed to get him some decent clothes as soon as possible.

It felt strangely intimate to be in together in their pyjamas, so Umi focused on showing Clef how the kettle worked and where all the tea-things were kept while the water came to a boil. He nodded along to her explanations, but he didn't ask any questions. By the time they were settled in the sitting room with their drinks, she was chewing on her lip to keep from blurting something out to fill the awkward silence.

With a quiet voice, Clef spoke first. "I dreamed Cephiro fell."

Umi swallowed. She didn't know what to say; with Clef here, it was technically a possibility.

"But I know it's not true." Clef looked down at the mug clutched tightly in his hands. "The connection is painfully stretched, but I can still feel her. And no matter what the Council wants, Cephiro still recognises me as Guru." When he looked up at Umi, fresh tears were glittering in his eyes.

"This whole thing sucks," Umi said. "Are you really sure you want to spend the next decade with me?"

"I'd rather be stuck with you than never see you. And your Tokyo seems distractingly different."

When they headed back up to bed, Umi paused awkwardly in the doorway of the guest room - unable to think of anything heartening to say - until she finally gave in and threw her arms around Clef.

Though the hug seemed to startle him at first, Clef wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close, burying his face in her hair. "Thank you," he whispered, his breath against her neck ticklish enough it made her shiver.

Clef looked so lost and broken when she let go of him, that Umi didn't have the heart to leave him alone. "I could stay with you?" she offered.

"You don't have to," Clef said, his voice weak.

Neither of them got much sleep last night, and Clef had certainly not slept well for days - probably weeks - before that. If it would help, she was willing to stay; getting him to rest was more important than whatever her parents might think in the morning.

"You don't do anything weird in your sleep, do you?" she asked, walking into the room.

"What do you mean by 'weird'?" Clef asked, crawling back under the covers.

Umi tried not to think too hard about getting into bed with him. "I don't know. Things like sleepwalking - or sleep-tickling..."

Clef let out a quiet huff of a laugh. "I'd forgotten that story."

"Well, forget it again and lie down," Umi said.

Putting a hand on Clef's shoulder, she firmly shoved him down onto the bed.

Clef gasped, staring up at her, and the look on his face contained a whole lot more than just surprise.

For a single moment that felt like forever, Umi was frozen in place looking down at him, unable to tear her eyes away from his. A hot flush spread from her face through the whole of her body as her heart raced.

The spell was broken when Clef shut his eyes and swallowed hard.

Umi ripped her hand away from him. She might have bolted from the room but the idea of leaving him alone filled her with enough guilt to keep her in bed.

The two of them turned their backs to each other and both shifted to the farthest edge of their respective side of the bed.

"Goodnight," Umi muttered.

"Goodnight," Clef responded.

The new rough edge of his voice sent a shiver through her.

\*

Clef would have liked to just sleep that first week away, just close his eyes and forget everything that had happened. But Umi only let him have one day to feel sorry for himself before she started dragging him out of bed and of the house.

The first of their outings involved dressing up in formal robes and visiting a shrine with Umi's parents.

Clef was too overwhelmed by the number of people present to pay much attention to what they did there. Mostly he just held tightly to Umi's hand, afraid he might lose her in the crowds. There were people everywhere. When Ferio had complained that Tokyo was loud and crowded, Clef had thought he was being overdramatic, but this was far more people in one place than Clef had ever experienced in his life - and that included while sheltering the whole population of Cephire in the Castle.

When they got home, Clef needed a strong cup of tea and a nap before he was willing to even face the idea of going out again, let alone the reality of it.

The next day, Umi took Clef out on her own. She still held tightly to his hand, talking him through everything they were doing as they took a different and painfully crowded transport to get to the shops.

After years of picking fabrics and having his clothing custom made, Clef did find it a little strange to walk into a place and simply pick articles of clothing off a shelf. It wasn't that shops like that didn't exist in Cephire, they just weren't the type of shops that Clef tended to frequent. Not when the vast majority of his clothing for years had been limited to his official robes, and therefore nothing anyone else would wear.

He looked around at the dress-forms wondering how he was even supposed to begin deciding what he wanted. Half the items weren't even displayed, just hanging on racks.

But Umi seemed to have made a list of what they needed in a little notebook that she pulled out of her bag.

"Let's start with trousers," Umi said before pausing to stare at the signs by the shelves of folded trousers. "We probably should have measured you before we left, so we aren't guessing at your size." She looked him over then picked up a few pairs in solid deep colours and held them against his waist before pushing him toward the dressing rooms with the ones that seemed most likely.

The fit was unlike anything he'd worn before, but they weren't uncomfortable.

When he walked out of the dressing room to ask Umi's opinion, she gave him a nod of approval and handed him a few shirts to try as well.

They left that first shop with two shirts, two pairs of trousers, a pair of shoes, and a selection of socks and underwear. It seemed enough to start with, and Clef wasn't feeling up to going to another shop. When he said as much, Umi laughed and led him into a nearby cafe where she ordered him a pot of tea and a slice of cake.

The next few days passed much the same way. They would go out first thing in the morning, taking a break in a quiet cafe when Clef was feeling overwhelmed by the constant crowds. Depending on how well he recovered after his cup of tea and either a snack or lunch, they headed home or off to another location.

By the end of the week, shopping with Umi for clothes had shifted to visiting chapels and banquet halls with Umi's mother also coming along, both asking Clef what he thought of them. At first, he didn't have much to say, as everything still felt so strange and foreign, but there was one stone chamber he was rather partial to. He couldn't precisely describe what it was that he liked about it - maybe that it reminded him of the lower chambers of the Castle of Cephiro. Umi's mother had a fond look of amusement on her face as Umi tried her best to relay his confused thoughts.

\*

Spending the whole of each day with Umi ended almost as abruptly as it had started when she went back to school the next week. He almost felt he should be relieved to finally have a bit of quiet to unwind and pour out his thoughts into the journal he'd acquired on one of their previous outings, but Clef found he actually rather missed Umi's energetic company.

He wasn't left on his own all day. After lunch, Umi's mother presented him with something rather like one of the datapads they used on Autozam.

She demonstrated how to tap an image on the screen so you could see the room on the other side of the device. When she moved the datapad so the chair was centred in the screen, she tapped a circle at the bottom.

The chair appeared in a second little box at the bottom of the screen that Umi's mother then tapped so it came up and stayed on the screen.

"Oh! A *camera*," Clef said, repeating the word he'd heard Umi use for the device she used to make pictures of her travels.

Umi's mother nodded and smiled. She said something else before pressing a button on the side of the pad which released a pen. She then handed the pad and pen to him and pointed at the chair saying a single word.

It took her making a writing motion for Clef to understand what she was meaning for him to do when she pointed at the chair and said the word again.

"I see." Clef wrote down a close approximation of the word she said, realising it must mean 'chair'.

Taking the pad back a moment, Umi's mother wrote two characters below his note, sounding them out to him before giving it back and pointing at the table. Clef took the photo this time and they repeated the labelling steps.

After spending most of the afternoon going through and learning the words for just about all the basic items in the house, they sat back down at the table with a pot of tea and some snacks and Umi's mother showed Clef how to turn off the camera function and got him to tap a little square picture of a very fluffy animal holding a pencil. The screen burst to life with terrifyingly happy music - she showed him how to adjust that - and bright colours.

When he tapped a long rectangle, three squares came up. Each one contained one of the characters Umi's mother had been using to write with and a cheerful voice called out the sound one of them made. Thanks to the previous lesson, Clef was able to confidently pick the right character, and the game - at least it seemed like a sort of game - played out a triumphant noise.

He wasn't sure how long he spent quizzing himself with it, but by the time Umi came home, he was definitely getting more right than he was wrong.

\*

Umi knew this whole situation must be overwhelming for Clef. She'd thrown a lot at him this first week, and she still wasn't entirely sure he realised he'd helped pick their wedding venue.

Her parents were insisting that if she was going to be married, they were going to throw her an appropriately large wedding, complete with ceremony and multiple receptions. She wasn't sure their enthusiasm didn't have something to do with Mama catching her coming out of Clef's room that first morning. Umi wasn't up to trying to argue that the relationship wasn't what they assumed, especially after a box of condoms appeared on her desk.

Like she wouldn't think to buy her own if she was sleeping with him.

Still, it would probably be a good idea to get Clef prepared for the scale of the parties they would be hosting in a few months. Though maybe it would be a good idea to let him settle in a little bit before she dropped that on him too.

It was enough, right now, that she was abandoning him not even a week after she'd brought him home with her. Not only had she gone back to her regular school lessons, but she'd picked up even more of the extra study courses after school to better prepare for her upcoming exams. And since she was the only person in the house that Clef could actually understand, Umi did feel guilty for barely being around.

When she got back home after dinner-time Monday night, she immediately went to check on Clef, only to find him contentedly curled up on the sofa with one of the new Ryuzaki tablets.

"Hey," Umi said, walking into the room.

Clef looked up, brushing his hair out of his eyes as he smiled at her. "Hey."



The tablet in Clef's hand called out the name of a kana in a cutesy voice. When Clef tapped the screen, it then let out a celebratory noise.

Umi crossed the room to sit down beside him and peer at the screen. "What are you doing?"

"Learning your writing system," Clef told her. "At least, I think so. It's the characters your mother was writing with this afternoon."

When the tablet called out 'ka', Clef tapped on the little purple square with the correct hiragana in it and the screen exploded into fireworks as a chipper voice declared his victory.

"Now's probably not the time to tell you that's only one of four different writing systems we use here," Umi said.

"No, give me a moment to think I've accomplished something today," Clef said, confidently closing out of the app like he used tablet computers all the time.

"It's a good start! That's the most important one. You don't need to worry about the others yet."

Clef set the tablet aside and turned his attention to Umi. As he changed position, Umi couldn't help but notice how good he looked in his new clothes. She hadn't thought about him having a sense of style, given all he'd ever worn were the Guru's robes, but the combination he'd put together today looked striking on him.

Apparently, she'd failed to hear what Clef said while she stared because he waved his hand to get her attention.

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere," Umi said, her face getting hot. "What did you say?"

"I asked how your day was," Clef said, raising an eyebrow at her.

Umi groaned and flopped back into the cushions. She didn't want to think about school. Studying for exams had been stressful enough when university was just a precursor to life in Cephire. Now that she was going to be keeping Clef, it was the all-important step to joining the family company, and she wanted to do it right.

"I'm so ready to be finished with all these exams," Umi complained.

Clef gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "I'm sure you're going to do just fine. You're not a bad student."

Umi snorted. "You're only saying that because you don't have to teach me anymore."

"Well, I was never going to be your assigned teacher. That would never have ended well." Clef laughed. It was the first real laugh Umi had heard from him since this whole situation started. "It's only six more weeks until your last exam, right?"

"But it'll be another whole month after that before I find out the results." Umi dragged one of the throw cushions into her arms. "I hate not even knowing if we'll be moving until then."

"We're moving?" Clef stared at her. "I thought we were going to be living here."

Umi swallowed, realising she probably should have mentioned her plans when she'd proposed this whole marriage scheme to him. "I'm applying to university in Kyoto." She picked up his tablet and pulled up a map to show him. "It's only a few hours by train, and it shouldn't really matter if we're miles away from Tokyo Tower since we won't be going back to Cephire right now."

"How soon would we be moving?" Clef's voice was quiet.

"Two and a half months?" Umi switched over to the calendar app so she could show him how many days that was. "Sometime around the end of March, given classes start in April."

Clef nodded quietly as he took the tablet back from her and scrolled through the calendar.

"I- we don't have to. One of my back-up universities is in Tokyo. That'd be fine, if you'd rather stay here," Umi offered hastily, regretting that she hadn't warned him. For someone Clef's age, moving so soon probably felt like leaving as soon as you'd arrived.

With a sigh, Clef shook his head. "No. You should take the course you want. There is no reason you should change your plans for me. As you said, it shouldn't matter where we are."

## Chapter 2

Clef's language lessons continued through the week. They went from just naming household objects and practising greetings and courtesy words to Umi's mother talking him through simple household tasks. Every activity was an opportunity for another lesson.

Umi's mother showed him how to use various devices around the house. It was a simple overview, as he couldn't understand explanations of the details of how things worked. The most complicated seemed to be the clothes washing device. There were apparently symbols on clothing labels that corresponded to which settings you were supposed to use, but the writing on the machine was far too complicated for him to understand.

Umi's mother then said something about Umi and Kyoto, so Clef assumed it was something he was going to need to know before they moved, and he'd get another lesson when his language skills progressed.

Part of him wondered if Umi's parents hadn't agreed to him coming to live with Umi just so they had someone they could send to Kyoto with her to look after her. Especially when lessons shifted to cooking.

Every time they made something new, Umi's mother would start by having Clef photograph and label the ingredients as she'd done with everything else. Then, as they worked their way through the various recipes, Clef started picking up words like 'cut' and 'mix'. He quickly learned where everything was kept in the kitchen and how to say 'please may I have the-' and respond accordingly when asked to find a spoon, or a whisk, or a particular vegetable.

Clef wasn't sure if the emphasis on cooking was so he could feed Umi, who baked but still did not cook, or if it was just the easiest place in the house for him to communicate with Umi's mother. Demonstrations of what to do made sense even if he didn't understand the accompanying words.

Whichever it was, his first proper sentences in Japanese were about how to slice vegetables.

"This should be cut thin?" Clef asked double-checking with Umi's mother before taking his knife to the long green vegetable.

"No. This one goes like this." As she showed him how to slice it, she said something about an... ear?

"I don't understand."

Umi's mother laughed. She picked up his tablet - that was what she and Umi called his datapad - and pulled up a picture of a horse and pointed to its ear.

"Ah!" Clef laughed. He had completely forgotten that horses existed in this world too. "Yes, a horse's ear!"

Umi's mother had a lot of the patience her daughter lacked, and she excelled at finding situations to get Clef interacting in Japanese. She had him writing his schedule on the whiteboard in the kitchen like all the other members of the family. His handwriting looked like a child's scrawl compared to Umi's parents, but Umi's wasn't much better, though she did use more complicated characters.

By the end of the first week Umi was back in school, Clef actually felt like he was making decent progress.

\*

That weekend, Umi took over the kitchen.

Clef knew she baked to relax. She'd told him so often enough when she turned up with cakes and cookies at unusual times. It didn't take much to realise that the more detailed they were, the more stress she was under. This weekend, they were fairly detailed.

It was the first time Clef had ever seen Umi so focused on something that wasn't a spell. Nothing else existed to her as she worked. No matter how hard he tried to make himself leave her alone to decompress, Clef kept finding excuses to come back into the kitchen. Eventually, he just gave up, dropping the pretence of wanting tea or a snack as he stood in the doorway watching Umi work with chocolate while her cakes cooled.

The way she drew those complicated spiral web designs was captivating. She moved with such a smooth grace, Clef couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Why are you staring?" Umi asked, setting the bag aside as she turned toward him.

"I just-" Clef started, not sure what to say since he'd been completely fascinated not by what Umi was doing, but how. He let out an embarrassed laugh. "Sorry. It's the first time I've seen you bake."

Umi laughed at him. "It's not like you haven't eaten my cakes before," she said before walking across the kitchen to get something else. "How did you think I made them?"

He found himself watching Umi move and decided maybe he needed that cup of tea after all. Once it was in his hand, Clef made himself take it to the farthest sitting room from the kitchen, to not disturb Umi's baking.

\*

Even if it was disconcerting to have Clef in her house, Umi was enjoying the fact she could come home and talk to him at the end of *every* day, rather than having to wait for weekend visits to Cephro.

This was especially true when the wedding invitations went out.

Umi hadn't once considered what her friends would think about the wedding. She certainly hadn't expected the invitations would start gossip flying around school, but that it certainly

did. She couldn't escape the barrage of questions during every break time, and the whole day dragged terribly.

Why hadn't she come up with some acceptable version of how they met or anything like that, *before* all her classmates suddenly knew she had a fiance and was getting married just a few weeks after high school graduation?

When Umi got home, she flopped onto the sofa by Clef's side and expounded at length about everything that had happened.

"And then Satomi had the nerve to ask if I was pregnant!" she wailed, flailing her hands. "*Pregnant*. Just because I'm getting married right after graduation! Like I'd be foolish enough to get pregnant at seventeen."

"Accidents can happen," Clef said, sipping his tea. "Even when you're careful."

"How could we have had an accident?" Umi glared at him. "We're not even sleeping together."

"But your classmates may assume we are," Clef said, far too calmly. "And given I can barely speak your language, I'm sure they won't be the only people to assume the basis of our relationship is physical."

Face going hot, Umi stared at him. She hadn't considered what it would look like that he barely spoke a word of Japanese.

This was worse than Hikaru and Fuu thinking she'd neglected to mention a relationship. She wasn't the sort of person to sleep with someone she hardly knew! And she certainly wouldn't *marry* someone based on their sexual prowess.

No, she'd apparently marry someone to keep him close to her.

Clef watched her over the top of his cup, the quirk of his lips told her he was fighting off a laugh. Did he really think it was funny people thought she was keeping him for his body?

"Your face," he said with a snort. "Did that really never occur to you?"

"Shut up." Umi threw a cushion at him.

Clef blocked the cushion with his free hand but nearly knocked it into the teapot on the table.

"It's bad enough that my parents think I'm having sex with you," Umi said, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. "Now, I guess everyone else is assuming it because I'm marrying you, and that's kind of expected."

"We don't have to get married if you don't want to."

"It's the best excuse for you to be living here," Umi said fiercely. Not marrying him wasn't an option, but... "Just don't think I'm going to sleep with you because I signed a piece of paper, okay?"

A strange look flitted across Clef's face. "Of course not."

"It just feels weird, people thinking I'm doing something I'm not," Umi said quietly. "I don't like it."

Clef reached over and placed his hand over hers on her knee. "Just think of it as people believing the ruse."

"I guess," Umi said.

She hated people believing things about her that weren't true. But for there to be an entirely false story wound up in something she was actually doing was worse than things with no basis at all.

There was probably going to be some sort of writeup in one of the terrible gossip magazines about her upcoming wedding. Someone was bound to think it was worth the story; her family was too well known to avoid it. But Umi took a little comfort in knowing the rumours would probably not be anywhere as outlandish as the truth of the situation.

\*

Over the next few days, Umi tried to put the idea out of her head. She had more important things to be worrying about than what people thought she was doing with her spare time. But all the frustration came boiling back to the surface the day she met Clef's language tutor.

Umi hadn't given much thought to Mama hiring someone to keep teaching Clef how to speak Japanese, besides the fact they needed to make sure Clef could understand the right number system and read a clock and calendar well enough he passed for European as his new paperwork claimed him to be.

Teaching him how to read clocks wasn't too terrible. They'd discussed the differences of their worlds enough over the past few years that Clef already knew days were split into twenty-four hours compared to Cephro's twelve, and that there were only twelve months in a year, so it was more a matter of getting him comfortable reading the numbers.

Only, Umi hadn't considered that focusing on numbers rather than words would make meeting Clef's tutor just that little bit more awkward.

Umi was on her way home from school when she spotted Clef coming out of a nearby cafe with a woman who looked vaguely familiar. As the woman was her parents' age, there was no telling where Umi might have met her before, so she didn't even try to guess.

Clef spotted her and waved her over.

"You know Sato-san, right?" he asked before turning to the woman and saying. "Do you know Umi?"

Umi was so startled by him having an accent that it took her a moment to realise she was actually hearing him speak Japanese, not Cephiran through the translation spell.

"I haven't seen you since you were small," Sato-san declared before Umi had a chance to respond or even try placing how she knew her. "And I hear congratulations are in order."

No matter how subtle, Umi noticed the flicker of Sato-san's eyes toward her middle. Between Umi's winter coat and her school uniform, she wouldn't have been able to see anything even if Umi was pregnant. The nosy assumptions were irritating, but Umi held her composure. This wasn't some prying classmate, this was someone her mother trusted with Clef's education.

"Thank you for taking care of Clef," Umi said, hoping her politeness didn't sound too forced.

"Of course." Sato-san smiled. "As you're here, why don't I leave Clef-san to your care." She gave Umi a polite bow before telling Clef they'd continue lessons next week.

Umi watched her disappear in the direction of the station before turning to Clef and grumbling "Why did you have to be right?"

"Right about what?" Clef asked. He stuck close to her side as they started walking, but didn't reach for her hand like he had the first week.

"What people think." Umi gripped the handle of her school bag with both hands to avoid giving in to the impulse to reach out for him. It meant she couldn't gesture with her hands as she complained.

Clef patiently listened to her rant the whole walk home.

When they got back in, he gave Umi a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "I'll go make us some tea."

Umi cocked her head to one side as she watched him head for the kitchen. Sato-san must have taken him shopping again. Those new trousers of his fit well, and he looked really good in them.

If people thought she was marrying him for his body, at least he was good looking.

## Chapter 3

The first day of Umi's exams, Clef stood in the kitchen staring at the clock as he tried to work out if he had enough time for a cup of tea before Hikaru arrived. Despite the fortnight of practice, he still struggled a little with reading the time. While twenty-four hours was a simple adjustment from twelve, sixty minutes in an hour was proving to be a bit of a stumbling block.

He glanced at the whiteboard on the wall and the time in the note that said he'd be spending the afternoon with Hikaru. So long as he'd calculated it right he had half an hour before she arrived.

Plenty of time for a cup of tea.

And he was just washing out his cup when the buzzer rang and the call screen showed Hikaru's brightly smiling face. He hadn't seen her since he'd had to leave Cephire. She'd called a few times to check in and let him know that Cephire was still whole, but neither she nor Fuu had had time to visit in the past three weeks.

Clef pulled on his jacket and slung his satchel over his shoulder. Making sure to lock the door behind him as he'd been shown (and triple-checking that his key went in his pocket), he went to meet Hikaru at the gate.

Hikaru looked like she was about to bounce with excitement as she called out a hello. Beside her was an animal Clef was pretty sure was her dog, fluffier and smaller than the wolves he'd known, who *did* actually bounce toward him with great enthusiasm. "This is Hikari," Hikaru said. "I thought you might be missing your creature friends, and Hikari loves new friends."

The dog waved his tail and took another expectant step forward. Clef wasn't sure how to greet him. As far as he was aware, dogs were pets, but they didn't exactly communicate in the same way Fyula might. He started by holding out his hand to be sniffed, as that seemed likely to be the same as with any other animal whose nose was so prominent.

"He likes it if you give him a scratch behind the ears," Hikaru told him.

"Hello," Clef said, crouching down and ruffling the animal behind the ears. He was rewarded with an excited lick on the cheek and laughed, then stood up wiping his face with a sleeve as he realised he hadn't actually greeted Hikaru with anything more than a wave as he'd walked down to the gate. "Hi," he said. "How are you?"

"That's probably what I'm supposed to be asking you," Hikaru smiled at him. "You look well; you should tell me what you've been up to on the way."

As they walked, Hikaru asked Clef what he thought of Japan so far, and Clef probably said more than he should have while venting about how weird it was to have to learn how to turn on a light or use a toilet when he was halfway through his eighth century.



Hikaru laughed. "Yes, Umi's house has all the mod cons, doesn't it? My house just has switches and the lights are either on or off in most rooms."

"If 'mod cons' means to have to learn a dozen different phrases to adjust the lights in a room, then yes, Umi's house has an abundance," Clef said with a sigh.

"But you and Umi must be getting along well," Hikaru said with an inquiring sort of smile. "I haven't heard of a single argument since you got here."

"There's not been much time to argue," Clef said. "With all her studying, we've barely seen one another the past fortnight."

"That's too bad." Hikaru tugged Hikari's lead to slow down his rush forward to greet the dog coming toward them from the other direction.

"It's just a few more weeks, and then she'll be finished with all these exams." Clef was pretty sure he was reassuring himself with that statement more than Hikaru. At least they saw each other more regularly now, no more wondering all the time when she would be able to visit again.

When they made it to the cafe Hikaru had told him about, the staff greeted both Hikaru and Hikari by name. One girl who seemed about Hikaru's age came around the counter to scratch Hikari behind the ears before showing them to a table half surrounded by plants. There was plenty of space between the tables, so the cafe didn't feel crowded even though it was fairly busy.

Hikaru took responsibility for ordering for them, and Clef wasn't entirely sure what to make of the frothy concoction he was presented with a few minutes later, but it proved to be very nice.

"Even though Umi's been busy, have you two managed to go out anywhere since you got here?" Hikaru fed Hikari one of the little dark biscuits that had arrived with their drinks.

"We visited a few places while we were picking a location to host the wedding," Clef said before taking another sip of his drink. Umi would never suggest he try something so ridiculously sweet, but that was one of the reasons he wanted to experience Tokyo with the other two as he learned his way around.

"I meant more going somewhere nice to enjoy yourselves, like the aquarium or a museum or something."

"No, she's been too busy studying the past few weeks. And before that, it was all shopping and location scouting."

"Then you should take her out on a really nice date after the last one," Hikaru said.

Clef set his drink down and looked seriously across the table. "You are aware that Umi and I are not actually courting, right?"

"Friends can go out together," Hikaru said, laughter brightening her words. "And anyway, Umi won't be courting anyone else once she's married to you. So it might be nice to take her out once in a while."

Their meals arrived then; sandwiches with fillings Clef hadn't tried yet and salads with vegetables he now knew. He picked up his fork and stared at his plate. He hadn't thought about this whole marriage agreement beyond being amused that he'd gone from being one of the highest-ranking people in Cephiro to being classed as little more than Umi's 'foreign lover'. It hadn't occurred to him how much she might be giving up to give him a place to wait out the Council's decision.

"Don't worry about it, I'm sure she'd rather go somewhere with you occasionally than go out with anyone else," Hikaru assured him, and when he looked up at her sharply she just giggled and cheerfully gave him a dozen suggestions for places they might like to go.

Clef pulled out his datapad to find out more about these places. Hikaru was more than happy to make a list for him that linked the words to pages of information about each of them with far more information than he could currently read. But, maybe in a few months, he'd be able to understand more of it; and in the meantime, there were plenty of photos.

"That's a lot of choice," Clef said, realising the list had expanded beyond what could be seen on the screen at once. "I don't think there's any way we could visit all of these places before we leave Tokyo."

"Well, you should have a few occasions before you go," Hikaru told him, counting off on her fingers. "Celebrating the end of exams is one, but before that is Valentine's Day, then after is Umi's birthday and then graduation. And results day if she gets into one of her top choices..." She paused with the expression of someone who knew they were forgetting something. "Oh yeah! White Day, too."

Clef stared at her. Umi's birthday and getting her results he understood - and he believed Umi was going to get very good results. She was studying with the same kind of determination she usually turned on learning a new piece of magic, and he'd never seen her fail once she'd set herself at a challenge. But as for the others... "What are Valentine's Day and White Day?"

"Valentine's Day is when girls give presents to the people they like - usually chocolate - and White Day is for return gifts a month later - but they're both good excuses to go out together. They aren't for a little while yet, though."

Hikaru then spent the rest of their lunch showing him more things he could do with his datapad that would not only keep him entertained in his downtime, but also allow him to see pictures she shared of Cephiro. Hikari, on the other hand, had sidled up to Clef, laying his head in Clef's lap and stared longingly up at the end of the sandwich on his plate. If Hikaru noticed Clef slipping the dog a little of the ham from his sandwich, she didn't say anything.

\*

Umi's first day of exams passed well enough, but the second day got off to a bad start almost immediately.

Even though Umi hadn't been expecting her period for at least another week, the cramps started about halfway through her second science exam. During the breaks, she managed to get some painkillers, but it took everything in her to push through her last two exams before she retreated for home.

When she got back, only Clef greeted her. His stumbling "Welcome back" wasn't echoed from anywhere else in the house, and Umi had a vague recollection of her mother saying she and Papa were going out that evening.

"You have impeccable timing," Clef said, evidently switching back to Cephiran as his words flowed naturally. "I just put the kettle on. Did you want some tea?"

"Yeah, that'd be good," Umi muttered, trudging into the parlour for the nearest sofa.

Her bedroom felt too far away, and the cushions were comfortable enough, even if there wasn't a television or anything to distract her. She curled up miserably and closed her eyes, trying to will the pain to pass.

Clef said something she didn't catch as he walked into the room, but he fell silent a moment later. The tea tray rattled as he must have set it down before pressing a hand to Umi's forehead. "Are you ill?"

"I'm fine." Umi waved his hand away and carefully sat up.

Clef sat down beside her, but he was quite obviously paying more attention to her than the tea he was pouring. "Did something go wrong with your exams, then?"

Umi gratefully took the cup he offered. "I think I did okay."

Rather than relax and lean back as he usually did, Clef stayed alert, and having his whole attention on her made Umi's face go hot. "Umi..." Clef started.

Shaking her head, Umi said, "Don't worry about it."

Clef sighed. "Okay, you don't have to tell me what's wrong, but is there something I can do for you?"

She nearly waved him off again - she'd go up and have a nap after she finished this tea - but he was so sincere, she decided to take him up on that offer. Once she'd talked Clef through fetching and filling her hot water bottle, he disappeared for a few long moments before returning with it. When Umi curled around the hot plushy penguin, she nearly cried with relief.

"Is there something else I can get you for the cramps?" Clef asked quietly, not sitting down and obviously having worked out what was up. "I'm sorry. In Cephiro I know about six different remedies that might help, but here, I don't even know how to treat a headache, let alone other ailments."

Pulling out her phone, Umi typed out the three letters which made up the logo of her usual brand and showed the screen to Clef when she told him where her family kept the

medication.

When he returned again with the tablets and a glass of water, Clef asked, "Is there anything else?"

Umi shook her head and murmured a quiet "Thank you."

Clef settled back down beside her, this time sinking back into the cushions and drinking his tea.

Sometimes Umi forgot how different Cephro was to Japan. Considering how casually Clef was able to discuss things like sex, it probably made perfect sense that he'd be just as relaxed about menstruation.

(That had been a strange revelation, back when her school friends started talking about sex so much of the time and she'd been so irritated she'd grumbled at him about it. He'd been a better source of information than any of her classmate's magazines.)

She could probably just complain to him about the pain and the annoyance like she did with her mother and he'd not think anything of it, just ask if he could help like he would if she were grumbling about a headache.

"When did my parents say they'd be back?" Umi asked.

"I don't know. Late probably. Your mother said something about giving us time to relax." The way Clef emphasised 'relax' had Umi staring at him.

He couldn't mean what she thought he did.

"Shut up," Umi said, clutching her hot water bottle. "They *did not* leave us alone to have sex."

"Your parents seem to be under the impression that's something we do," Clef said with a shrug. "Just think of it as them giving us some time alone together, so you can be sure you want to take me with you to Kyoto."

"I'm not planning to change my mind." Why would she want to? She'd apparently ended up with the perfect boyfriend without even having to go out on a single date. Well, fiance - they were getting married in two months, but-

That thought stalled as Umi's mind caught up with what Clef had said about her parents.

"Wait. What have they said to you?" Umi asked.

"Don't worry. I've assured them that there will be no unexpected children," Clef said, with a tone of false reassurance.

"*What?*" Umi's voice went painfully shrill. "Why didn't you say we're not- *like that!*"

"That would involve a much larger vocabulary than I can manage yet. And 'Yes. No children' seemed to suffice." Clef laughed. Of course, he found this funny.

Umi swatted at him, but he was just out of reach. "You have more vocabulary than that."

"I don't think words like 'chop' and 'saute' belong in the same sentence as our conceptual children."

So much for her parents not asking awkward questions. Umi rubbed her hands over her face, and took a deep breath to calm herself, only to become more aware of her discomfort again.

"But if I were pregnant, at least I wouldn't be in pain right now," she complained.

"You're right," Clef agreed, gathering their empty tea things back onto the tray. "You'd probably be feeling ill."

Umi wrinkled her nose at him as he walked out of the room.

\*

By the time Clef had made them a fresh pot of tea, Umi had relocated to the less formal sitting room and turned on the television. Clef hoped that meant the medication had helped and she was more comfortable now.

"Feeling better?" he asked, sitting

Umi grimaced at him. "No. Moving was a bad idea."

"Are you sure there's nothing else I can do?"

Three weeks in Tokyo barely able to communicate or navigate, and only tonight did he truly feel out of his depth. Umi was unhappy and uncomfortable, and he had almost no idea what he could do to help. Of the half-dozen things he could offer her in Cephro most could ease the process and end the pain, but here -

Here, all her pain reliever seemed to do was just take the edge off. And that was unacceptable to him.

"It'll pass," Umi assured him, taking her fresh cup of tea from him.

Clef settled back into the cushions with a sigh. He'd been looking forward to spending time with Umi tonight. The past few weeks felt like months, and he missed their wandering conversations. But Umi didn't seem to be interested in talking, and he couldn't blame her. It was certainly one of the last things he wanted to do when he felt poorly.

Umi did get him caught up on the story she was watching; however, she only gave him a vague description of what was happening in each scene as it played out. The acting was melodramatic enough he could more or less follow along, despite only understanding a handful of the words being spoken.

It was a basic enough romance. Jealous interlopers trying to break up the main couple was not a plot twist Clef ever really enjoyed, but it seemed to be distracting Umi from her discomfort, so he would endure it to keep her company.

When the characters in the story sat down to a meal and Umi shifted a little beside him, Clef knew he should get up to cook the dinner he'd planned, but he was reluctant to leave Umi on her own that long. He knew it was silly. This was something Umi endured regularly, but that didn't change the fact he wanted to be close by should she need anything.

"That pizza looks so good," Umi said. "What do you think about ordering pizza for dinner?"

"That's fine," he assured her. Delivered food meant he wouldn't have to leave her any longer than it took to boil the kettle or answer the door.

Umi pulled out her phone. "Do you care what kind?"

Clef shook his head. He'd had pizza a few times in the past few years when Umi had brought some to Cephro as an after school snack. It reminded him a little of the flatbreads made during harvest celebrations, but he didn't have enough experience to have an opinion on toppings.

About half an hour later, someone delivered a pizza with a different topping combination on each quarter and a salad for each of them. Clef fetched plates, while Umi spread everything out on the low table in the sitting room so they could continue watching Umi's drama together.

The irritating sub-plot came to a head when one of the interlopers refused to acknowledge the heroine rejecting him.

"Ugh, I hate guys who won't take no for an answer," Umi complained. She waved her fork at the television. "If she says she doesn't want to date you, she means she doesn't want to date you."

"That sounds like you're speaking from experience," Clef said.

"My looks plus the promise of my family's money has encouraged a number of insistent creeps," Umi huffed. "And apparently my 'age and inexperience' make me 'even more appealing'. I sent *that* asshole running before he knew what was happening to him. Like I was going to marry someone like him!"

Clef stomped hard on his first reaction - Umi only sounded irritated, not like she needed a belated offer of support. And she knew he would do anything to help her; she wasn't ever shy about asking.

If someone were wanting the power that went with money, insinuating themselves into the Ryuuzaki family might be a good way to get it, and there was no denying Umi was beautiful, and when she focused on something she was utterly captivating.

"Is that why you wanted to marry me?" Clef found himself asking. "So you were no longer available?"

"No, I just didn't want you going away to Autozam," Umi said. She gave him a considering look, and then laughed, her cheeks going pink. "But I'd be lying if I didn't say it was a benefit to this arrangement."

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

Should I be sleeping? Yes. Am I? No.

And because I am an impatient child who has been sitting on the edited version of this chapter nearly as long as the last chapter has been posted, I'm going to share it before bed.

So, have some more Umi and Clef being more than a little oblivious about their feelings for one another.

As the next few weeks passed, Umi was spending more time studying and working on admission essays than spending time with Clef, and she was starting to actually miss him.

While she was definitely seeing him more than she would if he were still in Cephro - there was no way she'd have had the time to squeeze in a decent weekend visit for at least another month - they'd barely had any of their usual conversations, and Umi was feeling frustrated by that.

But Clef didn't even seem to mind.

In fact, he had assured her that he would prefer she study these first few months, teasing, "I don't want you complaining you didn't get on the course you wanted because you were teaching me how to buy a shirt."

And it wasn't as if she were abandoning him with nothing to do. Clef was having language lessons nearly every day with Sato-san. Their lessons seemed to include going shopping for more clothes, going to cafes and restaurants, and other things that would teach Clef how to function on his own in Japan. They even spent several afternoons navigating public transportation.

Umi was glad that he was enjoying himself, but she was equally frustrated that she wasn't the one showing him around. She wanted to be the one teaching him about the world she'd brought him to, but she was stuck at home and at school trying to focus all of her energy toward getting into a good university.

On a Sunday, Umi was taking yet another exam, and Hikaru and Fuu took Clef to the Museum of Nature and Science. When Umi got home that evening, Clef was more animated than she'd seen for years as he told her all about the things he'd seen. His enthusiasm was so enchanting that Umi wanted nothing more than to have been there with him, to see his face as he saw dinosaur skeletons for the first time.



He presented Umi with a pen decorated with the cutest illustrations of dinosaurs Umi had ever seen, and Umi clutched it tightly in her hands.

"I want to take you to the aquarium," she declared.

"Okay," Clef said. "We can go after your last exams."

"You can't go with anyone else first," Umi told him, knowing she sounded like a spoiled child, but she didn't want to miss every one of his 'firsts' because of university stuff.

Clef laughed. "I promise. It's a big city. I'm sure there are plenty of other things I can do in the next few weeks instead."

After that, every time Clef went somewhere new, he brought little souvenirs back for Umi. Mostly they were little things like teas or flavoured crackers - just something he thought she'd like, but Umi looked forward to the little presents after a long day of stuffing her head full of information.

The promise of a surprise made every day a little brighter, and even after her extra cram sessions, Umi was nearly bouncing with excitement as she made her way home each day she knew Clef had been out.

One evening at the beginning of February, Umi was packing up her things, wondering what snack or trinket Clef might have brought her that afternoon when her friends invited her out with them to let off some steam. Their normal classes were finished at school, and most of them were wrapping up extra lessons this week as the wild hell of exam season was coming to a close; it was pretty much the last chance they would have to do this all together.

Umi was sorely tempted but she didn't want to properly abandon Clef for the evening, so she gave him a quick call on his tablet, hoping he'd be nearby to answer it. They really ought to see about getting him a phone soon, so he'd be contactable outside the house places that didn't have wifi - though given he misplaced the tablet fairly frequently it might not help all that much. He was so used to just carrying everything around in his ring that remembering to actually carry things was a bit of a work in progress.

"Hey Clef, I might be back late," Umi told him when he answered the video call, covering the screen of her phone as her friends giggled nearby, trying to catch a glance of her 'mysterious fiance'. "My friends want me to go to karaoke with them."

"You've been working hard; you deserve a break for the night," Clef said, and Umi wasn't sure why she was surprised. He was an adult and perfectly capable of entertaining himself.

"That's okay?" she asked.

"Go have fun with your friends," Clef told her, laughter in his voice.

And Umi did. She had a great time, even if she kind of wished she had given in to the impulse to invite Clef to join them.

It was rather late when she did get back home, so she was pretty quiet when she announced, "I'm home."

Clef called out an equally quiet "Welcome home" from the parlour.

With a happy little skip in her step, Umi went in to see him, only to stumble to a halt just inside the doorway. "You cut your hair!" she yelped, voice louder than was polite at this hour.

"Yeah. My fringe was getting a bit too long to have loose." Clef rubbed the nape of his neck. "Normally I just take a blade to it, so this feels a bit different."

Umi took a few timid steps toward him to get a better look. It still had a similar shape, longer in the front than in the back. But at this length, it made him look rather like some sort of a pop star or a model. Long enough to still have that slightly unkempt look, but short enough it no longer obscured his eyes.

"Is it acceptable?" Clef asked.

Their eyes met and Umi bit her lip. Her cheeks flushed hot, as she simply nodded in response, not trusting herself to avoid saying something embarrassing about how good it looked on him.

Clef turned away and ran a hand through his hair. "The shampoo the hairdresser used was really nice, so I brought some home."

Umi blinked at him. "You bought me shampoo?"

"I bought *me* shampoo, but you can use it if you want," Clef said with a laugh.

"Oh." Umi tried not to be disappointed. He didn't have to get her something every time he went out without her. That would get expensive.

A moment later, Clef thrust a bright paper bag into her hands. "I got you these."

Inside was a collection of a half-dozen different bath bombs, each about the size of her fist.

Umi wasn't sure if she was imagining the slight pink tinge to Clef's cheeks, but he failed to look at her when she thanked him.

\*

The translation spell was fading.

At first, Clef thought he was just hearing more Japanese when Umi spoke because he was learning the language, but as the days passed, more and more words he didn't know were slipping into her sentences and he kept having to ask for her to repeat herself.

If it was fading for Umi too, there was a good chance she hadn't noticed yet; once he'd started using simple sentences, he'd been trying to use as much Japanese as he could even when he spoke with her, to the point he was now only using Cephiran words when he didn't know the

Japanese word for the thing. And if she *hadn't* noticed, he certainly wasn't going to mention it right now, and have her fretting about it during her exams.

It hadn't happened with Hikaru and Fuu, though. When they spoke, he still mostly heard Cephiran, making him come to the conclusion it was related to the transport spell they used to visit Cephiro. The translation spell must be cast each time they travelled to Cephiro, and fade after return to Tokyo. He had only ever travelled away from Cephiro, so it had never attached itself to him, and it must have faded from her parents as it was now from Umi.

All the more reason not to worry Umi with that yet. She had firmly declared she wasn't going to return to Cephiro until Clef could, so he wasn't about to ask her to do that for something as silly as having someone to speak his native language with.

If he learnt Japanese well enough, he could simply teach Cephiran to Umi. But before he could think about that, he needed to get himself fluent enough he and Umi could properly understand one another when they did move to Kyoto, so he used it as a push to concentrate his efforts on gaining new vocabulary.

Each day he understood a little more. And his pronunciation was improving, too, according to his teacher.

Clef was getting comfortable enough with Japanese that he could sign for deliveries and run small errands on his own, but the true test of his vocabulary came one Saturday afternoon.

Umi was out for the day doing something university-related, and her father was out with a colleague, leaving Clef at the house with Umi's mother. And as Umi's mother spent most of the morning on a conference call, so Clef was more or less left to his own devices.

That was fine. He'd been spending much of his free time the past week working his way through reading a children's book of folk tales. It involved a lot of reading and rereading sentences, and referring to the dictionary on his datapad - occasionally he still couldn't understand the definition and he'd have to go beyond the dictionary by either try searching for an example or asking someone in the house what a word meant. But he'd managed to read several of the stories and it was getting easier to re-read them.

At one point Clef got up to answer the door and sign for a parcel. He didn't think much about it and left it on the table in the entryway when he went back to the parlour and his book.

Later that afternoon, Umi's mother came in with a tea tray. "I'd like your opinion on something for the wedding gifts," she said.

"Should we wait for Umi to come home?" Clef asked, setting his book aside. He and Umi had spent the last few evenings going through various catalogues as they tried to come to an agreement on what they wanted to give their guests. Barely knowing any of the people coming didn't stop Clef having an opinion.

Umi's mother waved him off. "It's a cake; Umi wouldn't like it. You know how she is with sweet things." Sure enough, she handed Clef a dainty little plate with a simple slice of some sort of fruit cake on it. "I thought it might be worth including something from Wales."

Something from Wales - the country Clef's new papers claimed he was from. He understood the gesture, but he wasn't sure he wanted to add to the deception.

The cake was denser than the fluffy things Umi often baked. Something about it smelled familiar, but Clef couldn't say how. At least not until he took a bite and he was suddenly struck by a flashback to his childhood home.

"Oh, that's strange," Clef said, staring at the cake in confusion.

"Is it not good?" Umi's mother asked.

Clef shook his head. "No. I remember this. Well, something like this. When I was a child."

"Really?"

The way Umi's mother cocked her head, intrigued, reminded him so much of Umi Clef couldn't help but smile.

"My mother would bake one particular cake. This tastes like that," Clef explained, wishing he could put into words how he hadn't had anything that tasted quite like that since his mother died. Not even his siblings could replicate it, despite having been taught how to cook by their mother. His closest sister Amica had always thought the secret ingredient was something foreign that they had possibly never even heard of. Maybe she had been right, but where could the spices have come from?

He smiled as he took another bite, remembering sitting on the stool in the corner of his mother's kitchen talking to her while she worked. It had been so long since he'd thought of those days. He rarely thought of his siblings, let alone his childhood.

"So, should it be part of the wedding gift?"

Clef nodded. He might not be Welsh, but he wasn't lying if he said it was a taste of home.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Hello, lovely readers.

Thank you for waiting. This chapter is a little delayed because real life has been very busy for Down and with all the work she's having to do for her job, I haven't asked for edits. The next chapter might also be a little delayed. But I hope the wait will be worth it.

Umi had thought that finishing with her cram school sessions would mean being able to spend more time with Clef before she abandoned him for an entire weekend to take her final entrance exams in Kyoto. But Clef apparently had just as busy a schedule as Umi did. His language lessons with Sato-san were still taking him out of the house and forcing him to interact with people almost every day and the trips were getting longer. He had graduated from shopping - there were only so many clothes he needed - to various cultural experiences. So far he'd attended a tea ceremony and workshops on things from origami and paper-making to drumming and cooking lessons, all in the name of experiencing new vocabulary.

It did mean the little presents he was bringing back were getting more interesting.

Having so much of Clef's time being taken up by other things was probably for the best, since not only did Umi still have a lot of revision she wanted to do, but she was still carrying through with one last Valentine's chocolate baking day for people from school.

Normally only five or six of Umi's friends come over to make little chocolate cakes together the week of Valentine's Day, but this year she had more than a dozen people asking to come over. She knew it was because of Clef; everyone in her class had been clamouring to meet him. At least he would be able to have a brief conversation with them now.

Umi knew perfectly well that at least half the girls asking to come over didn't have anyone special they wanted to make Valentine's chocolate for, but she was still going to do her best to make sure their cakes were perfect.

Still, the kitchen wasn't exactly equipped to have that many people baking at once. She could handle a handful of guests turning up for the day, but over a dozen meant they would either have to take things in turns or bring their own bowls - because she certainly didn't need a dozen extra mixing bowls, whisks, and cake rings when this was all over. She sent them all a detailed list of things they would need to bring while she worked out how to organise everything else.

It got a lot easier when Mama hauled a large box into the kitchen the day before everyone was due to arrive. "This was supposed to be a wedding gift," she said, setting it on the counter. "But I think you might need it tomorrow, so you can open it now."

"That's an oven!" Umi squealed when she saw the picture printed on the side, and she rushed over to get a better look.

It wasn't as big as the one she had been using the past few years - it was more apartment-sized - but it did mean that there would be half the time spent on getting all the cakes baked.

Umi helped her mother get it out of the box and set up, and then she just stood there staring at it. Her own oven! She wanted to be the first person to bake something in it, and it was still mid-afternoon, she had time.

They would be baking chocolate tomorrow, so she wanted it to be something different. Picking up her tablet, Umi closed out of her to-do list and pulled open the pinboard of cake recipes she wanted to bake.

"Just remember you need to be out by half-past five so Kondo can start dinner," Mama reminded her as she walked out with a mug of tea.

"I know," Umi said. She'd been shooed out many times when her baking projects overshot her allotted work time. That was one of the reasons why she tended to bake more on weekends rather than on weekdays, even during school holidays.

Umi scrolled through the pictures in the hope that something would catch her eye quickly. There were so many options, and she'd just gone shopping for extra ingredients, so she should have everything she needed for most of them. Unable to decide, she opened the smaller board labelled "Stuff to Take to Cephro?" and went through it. Clef was as close as she was planning to get to Cephro for the next several years, so she might as well bake these for him. She always wanted to know his opinion on anything she baked anyway, no matter who else tried them.

And he really seemed to enjoy trying the different cakes.

There was a pretty little orange spice cake that she kept coming back to, thinking about the tea-bread-cake-thing that Mama had ordered for their wedding guests. Which was silly because it wasn't much like it, with all the orange and no tea at all, but it did have a lot of the same spices. Maybe Clef would like it just as well.

But he may have just like the other because of the tea in it, anyway.

Umi certainly didn't have enough time to bake that one today. She'd looked it up when Mama had told her the name, and it needed at least six hours prep, but preferably a whole day. She only had a few hours before she had to be out of the kitchen. Clef would be home about the same time if his note on the whiteboard could be trusted - his timekeeping skills still needed a little work.

She could have this one done by then, if she worked quickly.

\*

During the downtime while the cake was baking, Umi double and triple checked she had everything for tomorrow and walked around the kitchen deciding how she was going to split up work stations.

While the cake was cooling, and Umi was busily preparing the frosting and decorations, she received a message from Yui saying her plans for the day had been cancelled and that she wanted to come over to bake. Umi pulled a face at the idea of having to rework the baking schedule to squeeze another cake in but sent Yui a copy of the list she'd sent everyone else and turned back to the icing.

She was just putting the finishing touches on the cake when Clef got home.

There was something so right about hearing him announce "I'm home" followed by her parents' chorused "Welcome back".

"Hey!" Umi called. "Come here."

"Where's here?" Clef answered, his voice already closer.

"Kitchen," Umi answered, stepping back to admire her handwork.

"That's pretty," Clef said, as he walked in. "Is that what you're making with your friends tomorrow?"

"No, I just wanted to try out the new oven," Umi explained gesturing at it. "It's actually for our apartment, but Mama let me have it early."

That was still a weird thought. Their apartment. Hers and Clef's. Where they'd be living together, like actual newlyweds. That thought made her face grow hot, and she immediately looked for a new topic.

The bag in Clef's hand was probably a good place to start with that.

"What do you have today?" she asked, nodding at the bag.

"We went to a glass etching workshop this afternoon," Clef said, stumbling just slightly over the words as he said them. He must be getting more confident in his Japanese if he was using enough that Umi couldn't tell which language he was actually speaking until he messed-up a word or two.

Clef handed the bag to Umi. "I don't know if these will be any good for the apartment," he said.

There were two paper-wrapped parcels in the bag; unwrapping them revealed two pretty little drinking glasses. Both of them were a sort of sea-green fading into a sky blue with little goldfish etched around them as if they were swimming. Umi stood staring at them for a long moment. "They're beautiful," she murmured, looking back up at him.

"I'm glad," Clef said, one corner of his lips quirking up into a smirk. "It would be rather disappointing if you hated them."

"You'd just have to use them by yourself, I guess," Umi told him.

Clef looked over at the cake. "You said 'come here'. For the cake?"

"Yeah." Umi carefully set the glass in her hand on the counter before picking up the knife. "Would you try it and let me know what you think?"

"Of course," Clef immediately answered, turning to open a cupboard and pulling down a plate eagerly.

Umi laughed. "Okay. Maybe you aren't a bad choice of a husband if you're this willing to be my guinea pig."

"You have never served me a cake that was bad."

Biting her lip and blushing hard, Umi quickly cut a slice and passed it over. "But this is the first time I've ever baked this."

Clef wasn't the least bit fazed by that admission and happily fetching a fork. Umi held her breath as he took a bite. As his lips closed over the end of the fork, Clef closed his eyes and a bittersweet expression passed his face. Umi might have thought it was a reaction to the cake if it weren't for the fond smile he then turned to her when he swallowed.

"It's lovely," he assured her and took another forkful. "You'll have to tell me about the spices in it, I don't think I've used any of them cooking with your mother."

Umi leapt at the opportunity to be able to teach Clef something about this world, especially something that he was interested in learning about. By the time they had to leave the kitchen, there were a dozen jars of spices scattered about them that they had to tidy up in a rush before they were shooed out of the kitchen for Kondo to work her magic.

\*

More than six weeks since he'd arrived and Clef was still surprised to wake up in Tokyo some mornings. It didn't take long to realise he wasn't in Cephire - the sounds were vastly different, as were the mattress and bedding around him - but those first few moments were seeped in a confusion that left behind a bitterness he needed a very strong cup of tea to wash away.

When he made it down to the kitchen to put the kettle on the morning of Umi's baking party, Clef found Umi already up and bustling about getting things prepared for friends' arrival. "May I help?" he asked.

Umi shook her head. "No, I'm nearly done."

"What about tea, then?" Clef tried, automatically reaching up into the cupboard for Umi's favourite mug even before she answered.



"Definitely." Umi set the last bag of flour on the counter before coming over to join him. "Where are you off to today?" she asked.

"A pottery class?" Clef was rather enjoying these little workshops Sato-san had been taking him to. Beyond the new words, he was enjoying learning new crafts. All of the classes had only been one-day affairs, so they weren't very in-depth, but perhaps he would discover a new hobby that could help occupy his time here. Things like yesterday's glass etching weren't something he could reasonably do without acquiring a number of specialised tools, but it was fun and he wouldn't mind going to do it again.

Maybe he could take Umi. That could be a fun outing, a date, even. Which reminded him of the date they hadn't scheduled.

Given how harried Umi looked, now was probably not the time to bring that up.

After tea and a quiet breakfast with Umi's family, Clef spent most of the morning in a pottery studio with his sleeves rolled up and clay coating his arms as he struggled to centre the lump of clay on the spinning table in front of him. It was as frustrating as trying to learn a new spell outside of his speciality, but that meant the satisfaction he got when he'd done it right was enough of a rush he couldn't help but let out an enthusiastic 'ha!', which led to him being taught how to say 'I did it!' in Japanese.

Working the clay into the shape he wanted also took a number of attempts, but by the end of the session, he had a pair of cups that almost matched. He'd made them in the style of his favourite set from Cephire. Even still slightly damp, they felt right in his hands, and he was already looking forward to using them.

Clef took a few photos to show Umi and did his best filling in the form that would be handed in with them. As this was yet another one-day experience, the form was needed so the employees could later glaze the cups and finish them. He was allowed to choose up to three colours: one for the inside and two for the outside, and he managed to write most of it down with a little help from Sato-san - who had made a slightly lumpy teapot that she also seemed happy with.

It was definitely a test of his meagre writing skills, but he was pretty sure he explained what he wanted well enough they should look roughly how he expected when they arrived at Umi's house in a few weeks.

When Clef got back to the house, he had expected to be staying out of Umi's way for the afternoon and giving her time to spend with her friends. Instead, he had barely stepped out of the genkan before they all descended on him.

Umi appeared moments after Clef called out "I'm home."

"Good, you're back," Umi said, appearing in the sitting room doorway. Her friends crowded out of the door around her, all eyes on Clef.

"Hello?" he said, pausing halfway through putting his slippers on.

Umi swept over and took Clef's arm, leading him through the crowd into the sitting room where it was obvious from the array of teacups and untouched plates of snacks that they had just settled in.

"I thought you were supposed to be baking," Clef asked, as he was guided into one of the armchairs and Umi pushed a cup of tea into his hands. (Hers, he thought.)

"We have to let the cakes cool before we can decorate them," Umi explained, perching on the arm of the chair. "So, you're home in time to be entertained. Sorry."

She proceeded to introduce him to her friends. It was nice to put faces to a couple of the names he knew from Umi's stories, but he didn't expect to remember half the others she rattled off. Especially when he was overwhelmingly the centre of attention. It was one thing to speak before Council and answer questions one at a time before business moved on, but it was another entirely when he had over a dozen people clamouring for his attention and asking *personal* questions.

That, and in a language he barely had a grasp of. Though fortunately, the dramas that Umi's mother liked to have on around the house had given him more vocabulary about relationships than his lessons had.

"Did you know you wanted to be with Umi when you first met her?" one girl asked.

Another echoed, "Yeah, was it love at first sight?"

Clef let out a soft laugh. That was an easy question to answer. "When we met, I thought she was an argumentative child," he said, hoping he'd got the words right.

Umi's friends laughed and Umi playfully elbowed him in the arm. "I'm pretty sure the feeling was mutual," she said. "You certainly didn't look your age then."

That comment had one of the others ask, "How old are you?"

"His passport says he's in his twenties, but he's totally an old man," Umi answered before Clef even had a chance to remember how old those papers claimed him to be.

The next series of questions were the sort he'd already learned how to answer. When they asked what he thought of Tokyo, he answered "It's very crowded," and a few of the others laughed.

"It can be a lot if you're used to the countryside," one of them - Rika? - said.

Someone else asked, "How did you propose?"

"I didn't. Umi did. My job - ended, and I was going to go away. She said we should get married, so we could be together." Clef looked over at Umi. "I said yes. I wanted to stay together."

Umi gave him a playful shove. "You just thought you'd miss arguing with me."

"I told you there wasn't a baby," one girl said. At the same time, another asked, "There really isn't baby, then?"

"I told you I'm not pregnant!" Umi almost shot off her perch on the arm of the seat.

Clef put a hand over Umi's. "Now's not a good time for a baby," he said, gently. "Umi's going to university."

That statement got some attention.

"Are you going to Kyoto with Umi?" someone asked. And there was an echo of "Yeah, are you?"

"Of course Clef's coming to Kyoto with me," Umi said, holding tightly to Clef's hand like she was suddenly afraid he'd change his mind. "He'll be my husband."

"I came to Japan to be with Umi," Clef said, realising the truth of his words as he said them. That he came to Japan not just because he was curious, but because he truly couldn't bear the idea of being separated from Umi for so long. He threaded his fingers between Umi's as he looked up to meet her eyes. "I'll stay with her wherever she goes."

\*

Umi knew she'd made Clef agree to play 'loving fiance' but the affection in his gaze was so much more raw and honest than she could have ever anticipated. It was overwhelming to have him look at her like that, like there was no one else in the room.

Her chest clenched, and it was difficult to breathe.

Dropping Clef's hand, Umi bounced to her feet. She tried to keep her voice steady, but it came out as more of a squeak when she said "I should go check the cakes" before bolting from the room.

It was silly to think Clef meant anything beyond what they'd already agreed about this whole situation. That it would be awful for Clef to have gone to Autozam, and at least here he'd be with her and others he knew. It wasn't that he chose Japan because of her, it was just a better offer than Autozam.

Umi shook her head and laughed at herself. Clef couldn't actually be in love with her. He probably still thought of her as 'an argumentative child', definitely not a romantic prospect.

She was about to head back to the sitting room when Rika and Satomi joined her in the kitchen.

"I know you get sick of your parents being lovey-dovey all the time, but you can't just run away when your partner says something affectionate," Rika said, poking Umi's shoulder. "You might want to rethink this whole wedding thing if you're going to be embarrassed by public declarations of affection."

Satomi laughed. "You don't run away when he gets romantic, do you? Or worse, get all embarrassed in bed!"

Umi didn't know why she blushed so hard. It wasn't the first time someone had mentioned sex, and Satomi had been the first one to suggest she was pregnant. "We haven't done that," Umi admitted quietly.

She hoped that would be the end of the conversation. The other girls were starting to trickle back into the kitchen, and Umi didn't really want her nonexistent sex life to become the new topic of conversation. But she should have known Satomi wouldn't let it drop there.

"*What!*" Satomi's eyes went wide. "What do you mean you haven't done that?"

Before Umi could even answer, someone asked, "What hasn't Umi done?"

"Umi and that Clef guy haven't done it yet," Satomi announced.

An incredulous "Really?" echoed through the group, and Junko asked, "The guy moved all the way to Japan to be with you and looks at you like that, and you seriously haven't done it with him?"

"It's not like I owe it to him." Umi crossed her arms. "There's more to a good relationship than sex, you know. We're friends first and foremost."

"But even with your friends, sex is a nice bonus," Fumie said, and a handful of the other girls giggled.

"There's no rush," Rika said, stepping between Umi and the other girls. "They're probably getting used to living together. Plus, it's not like they have the place to themselves, with Umi's parents here."

"No rush?" Satomi said. "Next month, Umi's marrying a guy we didn't know existed until a few weeks ago! Isn't *that* a bit rushed?"

"Marrying him is the best way to keep him," Umi said, forcibly turning her attention to the cakes. All of them seemed to be cooled well enough. "It's not like he had any other way to stay in the country."

Rika cocked her head and asked, "Are you marrying him so you can date him?"

Chewing on her lip, Umi considered that question. She was marrying Clef so he wouldn't have to go to Autozam, so she could see him and spend time with him. Spending time together, just the two of them, was kind of like dating him, wasn't it? "Maybe," she murmured.

"That's so cute," Rika said.

A few more of the other girls agreed, and Umi's face heated even further.

"But you should totally make a move on him," Fumie said. "It'd be a good way to destress."

"Fumie!" someone squealed and Umi looked up to see Chidori flap a tea towel at Fumie.

"Are the cakes ready?" Junko asked. When Umi nodded, she clapped her hands. "Okay. Aoi, go get everyone else. Let's get these cakes decorated so Umi can spend more time with her fiance."

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

I hope this update finds you well. I'm glad to know that the little bit of nonsense I've been writing to stay sane has also helped so many of you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The night before her final exams, Umi woke from one of the worst nightmares she'd had in years. One which took her back years, as well, all the way to the time when Cephire was crumbling around them. Not only had she lost to Aska's control and killed Hikaru and Fuu, but she'd attacked the castle as well. When she finally broke free, it was too late to save anyone.

She woke with tears streaming down her face, unable to shake the image of Clef dying in her arms.

Shoving the covers off, she rushed through the hallway to Clef's room. She convinced herself she just wanted to see for herself that he was alive and whole, but the sound of him breathing quietly in the dark wasn't enough reassurance. And when she called his name, voice shaking, Clef woke immediately.

He fumbled with the light and sat up. "Umi, are you okay?" he asked, reaching a hand in her direction.

"Nightmare," she said, making her way across the room to him.

Clef shifted to make room for her to sit beside him and passed the box of tissues to her as she clambered into the bed. Side by side, she leaned against his shoulder, and he wrapped an arm about her back as tears rolled faster down her face. She tried to scrub them off before they could hit his pyjamas and get them damp, but she didn't succeed very well.

But Clef didn't complain, not even jokingly, and just held her tighter. It wasn't until Umi stopped crying so hard that he finally spoke. "You stay here. I'll make tea. Wait just a moment?"

Umi nodded, half afraid that if she spoke she might just burst back into tears again. She dragged Clef's pillow into her arms as she leaned back against the headboard. It smelled like him - like his new shampoo. Holding it tightly felt like she was hugging him, not cradling his lifeless body. She quickly shoved it back down on the bed beside her when Clef returned with the tea.

"You're going to do well tomorrow," Clef said, passing her one of the steaming mugs.

"It's just-" she sighed and stared into her tea. "If I'm going to university to work for the company, I want it to be this one."

"You're a good student."

Letting out a huff of laughter, Umi asked, "Why are you only saying that now you aren't teaching me?"

"You were always arguing with me." Clef bumped his shoulder against hers. "When could I have said it?"

He had a point, but Umi wasn't going to admit it. Instead, she leaned into his side and sipped her tea, murmuring, "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too." Clef wrapped his arm back around her, pulling her closer.

Umi bit her lip. Happiness welled up in her chest as a calm settled over her. She'd made the marriage offer on an impulse, not really considering what it might mean or how it would work. But it wasn't the worst idea she'd ever had.

\*

If Umi's alarm hadn't woken Clef, her hand smacking him across the face certainly did.

"Oi!" he yelped, swatting her away.

"Huh?" Umi blinked sleepily at him, her alarm still chiming behind her. It was a moment before she woke up completely and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Next time, you sleep on this side," Clef stated, rubbing his nose.

"Sorry." Umi silenced her phone and turned back to him. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine. Go get dressed."

Umi bolted from the room, and Clef let out a sigh.

It was his own fault for fetching her phone after she'd fallen back to sleep beside him, but this was not a morning Umi could sleep late. Clef wanted to be sure he wasn't the reason she missed her exams. He just hadn't factored in the fact he was sleeping where her bedside table normally would be.

Blinking at the open door he realised what he'd said.

He'd said 'next time' like he expected her to be in his bed again, and that was definitely not a habit he should be encouraging. Especially when, with her sleeping beside him last night, his mind had taken his memories of Umi - in particular the sense memory of Umi pushing him into the mattress that first awful night - and threw him some of the most intense dreams he'd had in a very long time.

He probably deserved that slap in the face.

Sighing deeply, Clef climbed out of bed to clean up and get dressed.

Umi greeted him with a bright "Good morning!" when he joined her family for breakfast.

Guilt stabbed through Clef's chest. Umi had come to him for comfort, and he spent the night beside her, making love to her in his dreams. "Good morning," he murmured, taking his usual seat beside her.

Cocking her head to study him, Umi asked, "Are you sure, you're okay? I don't see a mark, but is your nose alright?"

"I'm fine," Clef assured her. "I just didn't sleep well."

"Sorry," Umi said. Her expression was nothing but apologetic, and that only made Clef feel worse.

"Don't worry about it. Do your best today."

Umi gave him a fierce nod of a mission accepted. "I will."

When he looked up to see Umi's parents watching them fondly, Clef swallowed and turned all of his attention to his breakfast.

He couldn't understand what happened last night. He wasn't the type of person who felt sexual attraction often or quickly. All of his previous lovers had been long-time friends he'd known for decades. He'd known Umi for barely four years, so he hadn't thought there was any possibility of attraction on his side, and yet she had sort of crept into his life to the point he couldn't imagine being without her. Perhaps with her bringing him home to stay, she'd somehow become that close to him faster than anyone else.

But sex was not part of this arrangement. It would only add horrendous complications; not least of which was the fact he didn't even possess the vocabulary to have any of the necessary discussions required, such as a conversation about contraception. And he was still currently the Guru, his connection to Cephro stretched but otherwise unchanged, and he had no idea if Cephro might actually consider it a breach of his oath, despite Hikaru's changes to his role.

It would be better to just forget that ever happened, and carry on as normal.

Which was what he tried his best to do that morning, seeing Umi off after breakfast and helping clean up the breakfast dishes before making sure he had everything ready for Hikaru and Fuu's arrival that afternoon.

Rather than going out with Hikaru and Fuu this weekend, he was hosting them at Umi's house. It had been Umi's mother's suggestion, as it would give him an opportunity 'to practice his skills as a host' she'd said. While Clef agreed that it was a good idea, given he hadn't hosted a guest in a very long time - Umi didn't count, as she had always been more of a welcome distraction than a guest - it felt a little odd to be having guests in Umi's house when no one else was home.



Yes, it was where he currently lived, but that didn't make it feel like his home.

\*

Hikaru and Fuu obviously knew their way around the genkan after years of visiting Umi's house, but Clef still helped them with their coats before showing them to the parlour.

Thrusting a Tokyo Tower shopping bag at Clef, Hikaru proudly declared, "We brought you souvenirs."

The bag was full of little packaged snacks, many of which Clef recognised as ones the three knights would bring on visits. There were so many, and he was slightly at a loss of what to do with them. "Would you like to have some with our tea?" he asked.

"Oh no. They are a gift for you," Fuu said,

Hikaru nodded. "With Umi not travelling as much, we thought you might miss them."

"Thank you." Clef smiled sincerely at both of them. "In that case, would you like some cake?"

"All these exams must be stressful. I suppose Umi must have been baking rather a lot this week," Fuu said.

"Definitely more than usual," Clef answered with a nod. "And certainly more than I am capable of eating on my own; she's made multiple cakes for her parents and me."

"We'll just have to help then," Hikaru said with a grin.

Clef slipped out to the kitchen. While the kettle boiled, he cut three slices from the pretty little chocolate cake Umi had made while her classmates were over. As he'd been working his way through the spiced cake first, he hadn't had a chance to enjoy this one yet.

"What did you and Umi do for Valentine's Day?" Hikaru asked when he returned.

"Nothing in particular." Clef set out the cake and tea on the low table for them. "We just stayed in and watched a cute drama on television."

Hikaru sighed with exaggerated disappointment.

"You must have received some chocolates at the very least," Fuu suggested, sounding very much like she was joining Hikaru's ship of fancy that he and Umi were secretly courting.

"Only this cake," Clef said, and took a bite. The cake certainly didn't disappoint.

The other two immediately set their plates down untouched.

"We couldn't possibly take your Valentine's gift," Hikaru insisted.

Clef laughed. "Don't be ridiculous. The cake's just something Umi made with her friends. It doesn't signify anything."

"It is not typical that she puts so much effort into the details when she is making an example for her classmates," Fuu said, studying the decoration on her slice.

With a swift nod of her head, Hikaru agreed, "She usually focuses her energy on helping them decorate. This is far prettier than her usual examples."

Pausing with his fork partway to his mouth, Clef looked at the cake with more consideration. Umi had been blushing brightly when she'd thrust the finished confection at him with an abrupt "Here." Clef had just assumed she was still disconcerted by his earlier declaration, not that it had anything to do with the cake itself. But perhaps...

No. He wasn't going to let them lead him into their little fantasy. Especially when his mind was going to so easily be led astray.

"But as you said, this isn't a normal week. Either way, I couldn't possibly eat this much cake by myself while it still tastes nice, especially when I've barely finished the one she baked before it." He waved a hand at their plates. "Please, enjoy. It will honestly end up going bad otherwise, and I'd like to share it."

The other two picked back up their plates and after they each took a bite, they both sighed in pleasure.

"Given how much effort she went to, you need to do something nice for Umi on White Day," Hikaru told him.

"I'm thinking about it," Clef said, returning his attention back to his cake.

Fuu laughed. "I suppose a return gift would be so much easier if Umi actually liked sweets."

"It's not just that," Clef said. "Umi and I are very much not courting, and I would rather not chance a misunderstanding I can't resolve in my meagre Japanese. Any gift needs to be different but not much more extravagant than the other presents I've given her the last few weeks."

"Other presents?" Hikaru cocked her head inquisitively, a mischievous little grin curling on her lips.

"Just little souvenirs from my outings." Clef sighed. "Like you two encouraged me to get for her." He pointed at the bag of sweets they'd brought. "Like you brought me, in fact. Not courting gifts!"

Staring at him with an air of confusion, Fuu asked, "What would Japanese matter when speaking with Umi? Why can you not speak Cephiran with her?"

Clef shook his head and set down his plate. "The translation spell has almost completely faded from Umi, so we have been communicating nearly entirely in Japanese the last few weeks."

"Oh! Is that going okay?" Hikaru asked. "Can you understand us just fine, or do I need to change my phrasing?"

"I can understand both of you just the same as always. I assume the spell must be related to your travel to Cephiro, because I've been hearing Cephiran every time we've spoken since all of this began." Clef paused and switched to Japanese. "Is it different when I speak like this?"

Both girls blinked at him.

"Your accent's more pronounced," Hikaru said. "Have you been speaking Cephiran this whole time?"

With a nod Clef switched back to his native tongue. "It's nice to not have to think too hard about what I'm trying to say. I hope you don't mind."

"It doesn't matter to us," Hikaru said with a shrug. "We hear Japanese either way."

"That must be very stressful for Umi right now," Fuu said.

"I haven't told her," Clef admitted. He knew he should, but he wasn't sure how to. "There's nothing she can do about it besides return to Cephiro, and we all know that's not going to happen, and I don't want to worry her when she's focused on exams. She has enough to deal with right now." He pushed away the memory of her tears in the night before either Hikaru or Fuu could see him so worried. "Anyway, I'm getting better at Japanese every day. It'll be fine."

Whether he was attempting to reassure them or himself, he wasn't entirely sure.

"She hasn't noticed?"

"She's been rather busy," Clef said. "We haven't had that much time to talk, and it's not so bad now. Sato-san is a good teacher, and I've plenty of opportunity to practise, after all."

"Umi's phrasing is a bit different than you have likely been taught. This is not proving difficult?" Fuu asked.

Clef had the feeling Fuu's Japanese would be harder to understand, given how formal it sounded even translated through Cephiran, but he wasn't going to say that. "It's a little different to the standard forms Sato-san is teaching me, yes, but we've been working on informal versions alongside the polite ones. I've been able to pick up most of what I don't know through context, and it's getting easier now that we've been able to start spending a bit more time together."

"Speaking of spending time together," Hikaru said, leaning forward excitedly. "Have you decided where you're taking Umi on a date to celebrate the end of exam hell?"

"I promised to go to the aquarium with her," Clef said, and the rest of the visit was full of talk of the various fish that lived in Cephiro and wandered on to other topics.

It wasn't until they left he realised he hadn't protested that it wasn't going to be an actual date.

\*

Umi was bouncing with excitement when she walked in the door that evening. Not only was she finished with her exams and she felt confident that she stood a good chance of being accepted into her top choice university, but now that it was all over, she would have more time to spend with Clef.

"I'm home!" she called, unbuttoning her coat.

She was greeted with a chorused "Welcome home."

Clef stepped around the corner and smiled at her and the effervescent happiness swelled higher in Umi's chest and she couldn't help but grin at him.

"I'm done!" she announced.

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving. What's for dinner?"

"Your choice," Clef said. "We're going out."

Umi pulled her coat back on as Clef fetched his. "Are you taking me out for a celebratory dinner?"

"It was your mother's idea," Clef said, holding the door for her. "What about a burger or burrito? The diner down the road is nice."

Taking a moment to consider the options, Umi shook her head. "No. I want spaghetti. Let's go to Herb Kitchen." She hooked her arm around his and led him out the gate.

"There's more than spaghetti right?"

"They have pizza and risotto too," Umi assured him, knowing he was still struggling to eat long kinds of pasta with a fork. Cephireo didn't really have a noodle equivalent, and the knack wasn't so easy to pick up when they'd only had spaghetti a couple of times and he'd been learning how to use chopsticks effectively the rest of the time. "But we can go out for burgers another day this week if you want."

Umi let go of his arm as she realised how intimately she was clinging to him - like he was one of her best friends. Well, he *was* one of her best friends, but there was something different about holding him like that. Something that could possibly give the wrong impression.

"About going out," Clef said. "Tomorrow, do you want to go to the Aquarium?"

"What? Clef, are you asking me out on a date?"

"No," Clef said quickly, shaking his head. Then he let out a quiet laugh. "Not exactly, but you wanted to go to the Aquarium together."

"Oh, yeah." Umi's face heated as she remembered just how insistent she'd been.

"This week was busy. We could go another day?" Clef shrugged.

Umi waved her hands. "No, no. I want to go. Tomorrow's fine if we're not out too late tonight."

Clef blinked in confusion. "We're going for dinner. How would we be out late?"

"We could go to karaoke or bowling afterwards," Umi suggested. She hadn't gotten to do very much with him since he arrived and she was finally free to take a break and enjoy him being here.

"Are you asking me out on a date?" Clef asked with a laugh, his eyes glittering with amusement as he threw her own question back at her.

"Oh, shut up." Umi's face went even hotter, but she grabbed Clef's wrist and tugged him along. "Hurry up. I'm hungry."

## Chapter End Notes

Let's be honest. It might be another fortnight before I get the next and final chapter for this part of the series sorted and posted. In the meantime, let me share with you the playlist I've been writing to [on Spotify](#). If you have any suggestions of songs that remind of this story/series, please share them in the comments.

## Chapter 7

Clef started his morning with a bouncy song running through his head. It was Umi's fault. She'd dragged him out to karaoke after dinner, despite his poor reading comprehension and entire lack of local music knowledge.

Rather than force Clef to sing songs he barely knew when they got to their private room, Umi put on the ending theme of the drama they'd watched earlier that week and coaxed Clef into learning the dance that went along with it. They must have gone through the song several dozen times, and Clef got the timing wrong more often than not, laughing and singing along badly to the lyrics as the evening went on.

He hadn't laughed that much in a long time. If there had been anyone else with them in that little room, he might not have been willing to do something so ridiculous, but there was something wonderful about being able to be silly with someone you trusted.

Still humming the song to himself and bouncing a little on his feet, Clef went about preparing a lunch to take with them to the aquarium.

He was probably putting a little too much effort into this outing than he should have. Going to eat at a cafe would be far less effort than making this slightly-elaborate lunch, but he hadn't yet cooked anything for Umi on his own. He wanted to demonstrate his cooking skills - show her he could do this, and give her a taste of what she could expect from life in Kyoto.

Perhaps it would help ease his worry that she might start to regret this agreement and what she would be giving up.

None of which explained why he'd gone through his entire wardrobe several times this morning before he settled on an outfit that *felt right*.

Maybe it was best to just not think too hard about the reasons behind his actions. Instead, he focused on putting the finishing touches on their lunch.

When it was all arranged in the boxes and Umi's mother gave him a nod of approval, Clef felt as proud of his handiwork as he had of learning any of his magic.

\*

Umi tried on nearly half her clothes before deciding what she was going to wear. Hopefully, the ruffled skirt and sweater would look cute without hinting at how long it had actually taken her to get ready. She finished the outfit with a casual knot of her hair, a few sparkly accessories, and a touch of make-up. The last she rarely bothered with, and she felt a little ridiculous caring now. It wasn't like she was actually going on a date.

Maybe she was going to so much effort because she'd never been on a date before.

It wasn't that she hadn't been asked, but no one asking had been someone she was willing to give up her weekend visit to Cephire for. Going out with Clef was probably as close to a date as she was going to get for however many years it took the Council to realise their stupidity, because she certainly shouldn't be accepting invitations from anyone else until he divorced her.

That was kind of depressing to think about.

Not that she was really going out with Clef, but the fact it would be years before she'd go on a real date, or have a relationship with someone who really *liked* her.

"Or have sex," she muttered, sitting down on the end of the bed. She wasn't entirely sure if she was interested in doing that, or if she was just curious.

If curiosity got to be too much, maybe she could talk to Clef? Of all her friends, he was probably the only one she'd consider doing that kind of thing with - and they were going to get married. Not for those kinds of reasons, but-

It wasn't as though she wasn't aware Clef was attractive, after all.

But that was not something she should be thinking about right now, when they were about to go hang out for the day as friends, because that was what they were, not - whatever else she was thinking about.

Rubbing her burning cheeks, Umi hurried downstairs for breakfast

While her parents were almost finished eating, it looked like Clef had only just started. There wasn't a bite out of anything but the slice of toast in his hand. He looked better rested than he had yesterday, but that was probably to be expected since no one kept him up late or accidentally slapped him awake this morning.

Clef's smile sent such a giddy feeling through Umi that she bit her lip, looking down at her plate instead.

"Did you sleep well?" Clef asked. His shirt brought out the colour of his eyes. Umi wasn't sure she'd actually seen either it or the cardigan he'd paired it with before now, but he'd gone shopping with Sato-san several times in the last few weeks.

Umi took her usual seat beside him. "Better than last night," she said. "You?"

"This morning, waking up wasn't painful." Clef grinned at her.

"I told you I was sorry," Umi complained, and pulled a face when Clef laughed at her.

"Will you two be home for dinner?" Mama asked as she set her cutlery down and picked up her teacup.

Umi picked up her toast. "Why wouldn't we be?"

There was something odd in Mama's tone when she said, "You might have other plans for the evening."

It was a reminder that, to her parents, Umi wasn't simply going out with a friend, but with her future husband. So while there were the usual options of going out for food or a movie or something, there was also the possibility they might decide to go to a hotel, to be alone and...

Umi's face grew hot again. She wanted to shout that their relationship wasn't like that, but the words wouldn't come, not when she'd barely shoved similar thoughts out of her own head. And it didn't matter; her parents would believe what they wanted, and what they wanted was for Umi to be marrying someone she was completely and utterly in love with - like they were with each other.

"We should be back for dinner," Clef said. "If our plans change, we'll let you know."

Glancing at him, Umi froze. Clef's ears had gone pink and hints of a blush coloured his cheeks as he focused on his breakfast. Why was *he* suddenly so embarrassed?

Had his mind gone the same place hers had, to what her parents thought they might get up to when alone?

No, that had to be her imagination. This was Clef. He had never been the least bit embarrassed talking about sex. And anyway, there were so many other things they could be doing, like karaoke, or bowling, or just going out for dinner. Yes. Dinner. That would be a safe topic change.

"Are you sure you don't want burgers this evening?" Umi asked, her voice squeaking slightly. "I did promise we could after I forced you to have Italian last night."

"By this evening, we might decide we want okonomiyaki," Clef said, glancing up at her, a definite blush on his cheeks.

Umi spent the rest of breakfast so red that they had better be back before dinner or her parents would assume they were going somewhere, given how embarrassed she was. It certainly didn't help that before her parents left, Mama slipped some more money to Umi 'just in case'.

She almost suggested they forget the aquarium and stay in, so her parents didn't get ideas. but staying in all day while her parents were out would lead them to the same conclusions.

There was no right answer.

Clef stepped up beside her and asked, "You okay?"

"When will it stop being so *weird* that my parents think we're sleeping together?" Umi wailed.

"When you decide it doesn't matter," Clef said, not actually looking at her. The pink tinge was returning to his ears.



"I knew it!" Umi said, pointing at him. "You were embarrassed! You thought the same thing when Mama asked that. You thought about going to a hotel - how we could go to a hotel as easily as anywhere else."

"I didn't." His face went redder as he shook his head and opened the coat closet. "I don't know what a 'hotel' is to think anything about it. Anyway, are you ready to leave?"

\*

The very last thing Clef wanted to ponder was the non-existence of his and Umi's sex life. He would rather shove any and all imagining about it ever existing out of his head. He'd done so well last night and had so much fun with Umi and completely forgotten the awkwardness.

Obviously they needed to just keep going and having fun together in other ways and he'd hopefully forget all about it more permanently.

Clef rushed them out of the house so quickly he forgot the bento he'd so carefully prepared and had to turn back at the gate to go fetch it. Then he had to work out the best way to carry it without tipping it upside down. For a brief moment, he debated on leaving it, suddenly self-conscious. The level of care he'd put into it could very well give the impression he was actually trying to court Umi. But, if he left it behind, Umi's mother would still ask about it, so there was no escape.

"What's that?" Umi asked when he returned.

"I made a lunch," Clef admitted, trying not to flush yet again.

Umi stared at the bag in his hands. "*You* made it?"

"I can cook," Clef said. "I've been learning how to use Tokyo's ingredients. When we move, who else will be cooking for us?"

"Right." Umi flushed and ducked her head.

With the way her hair was pulled up, that motion gave Clef a much better view of the smooth line of her neck. The sudden impulse to run his fingers over that skin made him turn away and focus on the road ahead as they walked to the station. But the busy train didn't help with the lingering tension, as they were pressed close together nearly the entire journey.

They arrived at the aquarium and Umi stopped him to pull her phone out of her bag and take a photograph of the two of them in front of the building. "Proof we actually went out together," she explained. "My friends accused me of neglecting you, now they believe you're real." She quickly sent it off before going to get tickets.

She returned with an odd look on her face.

"What is it?" Clef asked.

"I thought it would look weird buying a high school student ticket when I'm here with you, so I got an adult ticket. It's the first adult ticket I've ever bought." She stared at the tickets in her

hand. "I graduate next month, but I still don't feel like an adult."

"I'm not sure anyone ever does." Clef sighed.

"Don't you dare say you feel like a kid," Umi said, poking him in the shoulder. "You have hundreds of years experience in everything."

"Only in some things," Clef muttered, as they walked up the entrance staircase. "In others, I have almost none. Or it's been so long that it's the same as none." Then he thought through what he'd said and that was it, his face was burning yet again. "Like planning my own food for the week, or cleaning my clothes," he hastily added.

He certainly felt out of his depth with this new *appreciation* of Umi, despite the feeling being relatively familiar.

Once they were inside, there were plenty of new distractions. Some of the bright little fish reminded him of ones he knew from ponds he grew up swimming in, but others were like nothing he'd ever seen before. He couldn't help but stare at the translucent saucer-shaped creatures undulating in colourfully lit tanks. They were so ethereal it was difficult to believe they could sting as badly as Umi told him they did.

"Has it happened to you?" Clef asked.

Umi let out a laugh. "Yes. It was *not fun*."

Of all the things he saw that day, the penguins were probably the most fascinating. A confusing cross between a bird and a fish, they were unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

"Can they fly?" he asked Umi after noticing there was nothing keeping them in the enclosure but a wall that didn't reach the ceiling of the top floor.

"No." Umi smiled at him. "We can get you a book about them."

They walked through a little more of the aquarium before returning to the benches near the penguin exhibit to eat lunch.

"Oh, wow!" Umi exclaimed when Clef opened the boxes. "I didn't expect it to be so pretty."

That statement filled Clef's chest with a strange mixture of pride and embarrassment. He watched Umi lift the first bite to her mouth with an uncomfortable anticipation. He really did hope his cooking wouldn't be a disappointment.

Those fears dissolved when a smile of pleasure spread across Umi's face.

"It's delicious!" she declared, sounding just as startled as she had been with the presentation. The surprise didn't seem to slow her down as she enthusiastically set about trying everything and gushing out compliments.

Relaxing in his seat, he spent more time watching her relish the food he'd made than he did eating his half. While he knew this level of enthusiasm probably wouldn't last long, Clef

found himself looking forward to cooking for her in the future. Umi certainly wanted him to; she told him that she wanted him to make all her lunches from now on.

After they'd eaten their fill and bagged the lunch boxes again, Umi took his hand and led him around the second half of the aquarium. Looking at the various fish and underwater creatures turned into a game, with Umi guessing which were most like and unlike any creatures that existed in Cephiro. She kept making comments like "Are you sure you haven't seen one? I swear I've fought a monster that looked just like that" and "That one is so strange there *has* to be something like it in Cephiro."

No, it wasn't just cooking he was looking forward to, but having more time together like this. He needed to forget all this awkwardness, because he enjoyed the easy conversation and laughter they shared together. He was honestly looking forward to living together.

Their last stop was the gift shop to get souvenirs for their friends and Umi's parents. Umi spent a good few minutes contemplating the shelves of soft toy penguins, while Clef picked some cute little penguin-shaped snacks - mostly sweets that Umi said had sweet bean filling - to give Hikaru and Fuu in return for what they'd brought him yesterday. When he turned away from the tills, Umi had vanished.

He didn't see her again for several minutes until she bounded up to him with several bags, looking pleased with herself.

"Do you actually want to go for burgers tonight?" she asked as they walked out.

"What will your parents think?" Clef teased. "I thought that worried you."

"That ship sailed weeks ago." Umi waved a hand and sighed. "And burgers honestly sound good. Plus, if we eat around here, we can try a restaurant you haven't been to before."

"Sure," he agreed, and after a quick burst of searching on her phone, Umi dragged him off down the road and got them into a burger restaurant just a few minutes away.

"What did you buy?" he asked, curious, as they sat in the brightly-coloured chairs after ordering.

Umi had managed to wedge her bags under her chair. A grin burst onto her face as she shoved her hand down into one of them to retrieve a book which she proudly presented to Clef. "I think you can probably read this one now," she told him. "But I can help you do more reading online later, if you want."

It was a book about penguins.

He took it with shaking hands, as she beamed at him from the other side of the table, his chest almost painfully light and his breath catching as the realisation hit him with the force and subtlety of one of those big fish they'd seen earlier. He hadn't just come to Tokyo because it was convenient, at least more convenient than Autozam, and he would miss Umi. This new attraction wasn't just because he'd grown *comfortable* with her.

The truth was so much more than he'd ever expected - especially at this stage of his life.

He was in love with her.

## End Notes

The story will continue in Heartfelt Vows - in which Umi and Clef will be getting married.

I have that part outlined but not drafted, so I don't know when I will start posting that, but hopefully in the next month or two. I am now in a place I think I can get back to working on Sanctuary, so I will possibly be shifting that back to top priority.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!