

## Heartfelt Vows

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# Heartfelt Vows

by [Milieva](#)

## Summary

Umi knew marrying Clef was a big step to make, but she didn't expect their wedding to overwhelm her with so many emotions.

## Notes

Okay, so I haven't actually finished the entire draft. I have about four out of five chapters drafted. I need to go back and rewrite a few scenes that don't flow right and finished the last chapter. I've been struggling with the emotional bits, and trying to keep the tone right. Also, just the general struggle of my medication making it difficult to make the images in my head into words on a page...

I just wanted to get something up today, because this week is going to be a little chaotic. The surgery I was supposed to have back in March has been scheduled for Thursday, 1 October. Which will obviously interfere with writing and all that.

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

# Chapter 1

Between detailed housework lessons, looking for an apartment, and everything else that happened in the past month, Clef really didn't have a lot of time alone to spend dwelling on things, so he managed to avoid giving very much thought to his feelings for Umi until the day before the wedding. Even then, he didn't choose to consider it so much as have it forcibly brought to his attention again.

They arrived at the venue in the morning. Umi's parents sorted their check-in, while Clef and Umi were led away to a room lined with racks of suits and dresses, where Clef found himself being helped into a more formal set of robes than he'd been given to wear for their New Years shrine visit. As far as he was aware, neither he nor Umi had requested this costume for the photographs, so it must have been Umi's parents who wanted it included.

Once he was dressed and the hairdresser was resigned to his hair's refusal to be tamed, Clef was led outside to a garden surrounded by trees just coming into bloom. The flowers were a delicate shape, soft pink against the otherwise bare branches.

As soon as he was introduced, the photographer gave Clef a direction - at least that's what he assumed with the hand gestures - in a language he was starting to recognise without knowing a word of it.

"I cannot understand English," Clef said, still amused by the number of times he'd had to use the phrase. "Please would you speak Japanese?"

"Ah. My apologies," the photographer said. "Would you please stand over here?"

Clef took his place and exchanged a few pleasantries with the photographer and her assistant before he heard Umi call his name. He turned, and his breath caught.

The elegant styling of her hair combined with the beautiful robes she wore elevated Umi's natural beauty to an almost ethereal level. Clef couldn't stop himself staring, as she walked over the little wooden bridge toward him - so entranced that he barely registered the sound of the camera.

"What are you gawking at?" Umi complained, cheeks flushed. "You've seen me in kimono before."

"You're beautiful." The words tumbled out of Clef's mouth before he had a chance to stop them.

The blush darkened across Umi's cheeks and she bit her lip, turning away as she took her place beside him, looking fixedly towards the photographer. "You look good too," she murmured.

Dozens of photos were taken of them standing under the trees, looking up at the flowers, sitting on a bench, and even standing on the little bridge crossing the fish pond before they

were ushered back indoors to be changed into the first of the costumes they'd chosen themselves. Clef was able to dress himself this time, putting on the suit for the ceremony - the one he was going to wear to pledge his loyalty to Umi in front of at least fifty witnesses.

Standing in front of the mirror, he needed a moment to breathe at that thought; and another as he thought to wonder what Umi was going to be wearing this time.

If Clef thought Umi was dazzling in the kimono, the way she looked in the intricate white gown was utterly beguiling. Lace wrapped about her arms and over her chest, and scrolled white-on-white over the dress itself.

He couldn't take his eyes off her, but that didn't seem to bother the photographer in the least. Umi, however, kept glancing at him and then away again, and Clef struggled to concentrate on listening to the photographer's instructions and not staring.

The second set of photographs was taken in a large indoor garden space with a grand staircase that was perfect for showing off the long sweep of fabric that flowed from the back of Umi's full skirts. Making sure he didn't trip down the stairs at least gave him something else to concentrate on.

\*

Once she was wearing it, Umi started second-guessing the final dress. While the white ceremony gown's body was just as low cut, it had the layer of lace that covered her from neck to wrist. The royal blue one she'd chosen for the reception left her feeling more than a little exposed; though, she wasn't sure if that was from the amount of skin it showed or the way Clef kept looking at her.

There was something more to his gaze. The same warm fondness was there but there was a new level of something, too. She had the sneaking feeling that it was the kind of look her mother's romance novels would call 'the sort of desperate desire of someone lost at sea seeing land for the first time'. Or maybe more like 'someone wandering through the desert finding their first drink of fresh water in days'.

Either way, that look combined with the heat of his hand on her side as they posed gave Umi a butterfly feeling in her stomach, and made her remember Junko's words:

*"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?"*

Did she turn him on?

The thought made her oddly proud and just as equally discomforted, especially knowing she would be sharing a hotel room with him for the next two nights.

It wasn't that she didn't trust him. That couldn't be further from the truth; she had complete faith that he would never do anything like that without her wanting him to. She was just a little afraid of the part of her that wanted to ask him to, and staying on their own, with no excuse not to think about it.....

She was just curious, that was all.

But no matter how good he looked in a suit, or how distracting it was that she actually knew how to get him out of that kind of clothing - unlike the complicated layers of his Cephiran robes - the last thing she wanted was to make their living arrangement awkward by asking to do *that* on a selfish impulse, so she pushed the thought away until they were finished with the photos, so firmly that she'd nearly forgotten it by the time they were safely back in their own clothes and joining her parents for lunch.

At least it was forgotten until Mama announced, "I've booked you two on a crafting excursion," and handed over a printout. "I know you've been doing a lot of them lately, I hope you don't mind." The last was directed rather apologetically at Clef.

"Oh! I've not done a wind chime," Clef said, looking at the picture.

"They should be a nice memento for your new home together," Papa said.

Clef agreed with a nod, but Umi was staring at the date on the paper. "This is for the seventeenth. We check out on the *sixteenth*."

Her parents beamed at them.

"We extended your stay," Mama said.

Papa added, "For a mini honeymoon!"

"But we only packed for two nights!" Umi tried very hard not to shout, but she wasn't quite managing it.

"I've taken care of that." Mama waved off her concern. "It's only two extra nights, after all."

"We can send you on a nicer trip during your summer holiday," Papa said. Both of them looked so pleased with themselves.

Umi swallowed. Two more nights would be fine. If they couldn't comfortably spend four nights together in a hotel suite, they would definitely need to rethink the little one-bedroom apartment they'd picked.

All the same, a hotel was different - especially one they were staying in because they were getting married. Wasn't it?

Clef didn't seem bothered, no matter how she'd thought he was looking at her earlier. Maybe she was just overcomplicating things.

Not looking at any of them, she carefully folded up the information on the class and tucked it into the front pocket of her handbag, wishing she could do the same with her traitorous imaginings. Despite feeling ridiculous, she couldn't face going upstairs with Clef after lunch - not even just to see what sort of suite her parents had booked for them - and talked him into taking a walk in the garden instead.

The walk was reassuringly normal. They were an hour or so into a wander around the hotel and probably five minutes into an argument about who was the better partner for the protagonist in the most recent drama they'd been watching together when Umi's phone buzzed.

She stopped mid-rant to read the message from Hikaru asking if she and Fuu could bring their Cephiran guests up to Clef and Umi's room for a short visit. Umi immediately shot back a message with the room number, saying they'd head up to meet them, before realising she hadn't asked Clef if he wanted company. He hadn't exactly had a quiet moment all day.

"Sorry, is that alright?" Umi asked after she told him what she'd done.

"It's fine," Clef assured her as they made their way to the lifts.

They had barely been in the suite long enough to investigate the tea options left for them and to put the kettle on when someone knocked on the door. Clef went to open it while Umi sorted out the refreshments.

Umi missed the start of the conversation in the doorway as she collected all the snacks from the minibar and carried them over to the table. It wasn't until she went back to make the tea that she realised what she was hearing; Clef was speaking a language she'd never heard before, one that sounded nothing like Japanese.

\*

Clef had expected Ferio and Lantis to arrive with Hikaru and Fuu, as that's what they had all agreed, but it was Presea standing in the corridor with Ferio.

"Something came up back home, and Lantis couldn't make it," Hikaru explained. "Don't worry, we already cleared it with Umi's parents."

"Is something wrong?" Clef asked, but Hikaru shook her head.

"It's nothing they can't handle."

Beside her, Ferio cocked his head, switching from staring curiously down the corridor to staring curiously at Clef. The first words out of his mouth were "You've gained weight!"

"Hello to you, too." Clef rolled his eyes and finally waved them into the room.

"It's not a bad thing," Ferio said. "Those last few months, you were looking practically skeletal."

"Any mage will lose weight if they are overextending their magic, and gain if they stop magic use altogether," Clef said. "I can't use magic here. It's not exactly a marker of health."

Presea dropped into a chair. "You look better rested - happier, even. Tokyo definitely seems to be agreeing with you." She glanced behind him and lowered her voice. "Though perhaps it's the company, not the location, behind the improvement."

Clef followed Presea's gaze, turning to find Umi standing behind him with a mug in each hand and confusion on her face.

"That's - Is that Cephiran?" she asked, and Clef mentally cursed himself for not telling her about the translation spell before this. Umi's eyebrows furrowed. "If I can hear that - Clef, have you been speaking Japanese this whole time?"

"Only the past month," Clef admitted with a shrug. "The translation faded away a little before your final exams."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Umi set the mugs down in front of Presea and Ferio before turning her attention back to Clef. "I could have been more helpful, or at least more formal, or something!"

"It wasn't instantaneous, it faded over a couple of weeks. And we manage, don't we?" Maybe he was wrong and they'd been miscommunicating more than he thought. But if she'd not noticed the change, surely there couldn't have been anything drastically wrong.

"I guess." Umi sighed and walked back to the minibar for the rest of the drinks. "I'm sure I could have done *something* to help"

"You had enough to worry about. Besides, I already had to learn in order to talk to anyone else." Clef followed Umi and took two of the mugs to Hikaru and Fuu before sitting down.

Umi took the seat beside him and thrust the last mug into his hand. "But it's going to be annoying," she muttered.

Ferio tapped Clef on the shoulder. "Um... I'm not sure if it's important, but I can't understand a word the two of you are saying."

"The translation spell faded off Umi about a month ago, so we're using the local language," Clef explained in Cephiran. He glanced between Umi and the others. "I suppose that *is* going to make this evening a little annoying."

"You learned an entire language in three months?" Ferio stared at him, flabbergasted.

"Just enough of the basics to get by." Clef shrugged. "Umi's been busy with school and university entrance exams, so it's not like I have anything better to do with my time."

"And yet you look so well-rested," Presea said with a grin, and Clef winced as he realised what it sounded like.

He forcibly ignored the innuendo. "Almost every moment I'm not alone is effectively a lesson, as it's what everyone around me is speaking the whole time. Even if I wasn't trying, I think I would be picking up a lot."

Beside him, Umi sipped her tea and nodded. "Yeah, this is definitely annoying."

"Sorry. You haven't missed anything important," Clef reassured her, switching language again. "Just comments about my learning Japanese and gaining weight."

Umi studied him a moment then poked him in the shoulder. "I guess you are less pointy than when they last saw you."

Across the room, Hikaru snorted and then repeated what Umi had said, much to the others' amusement.

"Did anyone say why Presea's here and not Lantis?" Umi asked.

"Just that something has come up," Clef answered in Japanese before switching to Cephiran to address their guests. "I'm happy you're here, Presea, but why couldn't Lantis make it?"

The other four all exchanged a worryingly serious look before Presea said, "Cephiro's been a bit unstable since you left. Maybe a better word is unhappy? I don't know. The earthquakes are a little more frequent and stronger, and lately, there have been more nightmares manifesting as monsters."

Ferio nodded. "The whole of the Guard are on call right now. I think LaFarga might have let Lantis have a pass considering the reason for his holiday, but it would definitely count as special treatment."

"And what about you?"

"I'm still not officially part of the ranks." Ferio reached for a packet of crackers. "I have too much work to do with the treasury."

With a nod, Clef turned back to Umi, to find that Fuu had been leaning in and repeating the conversation quietly. He sighed, thankful he didn't have to try and translate that himself.

"Sounds like Cephiro's not impressed with this whole exile situation," Umi said, looking at her drink. "Maybe the Council will realise the mistake they've made sooner than you thought."

"Maybe so," Clef agreed, feeling less enthusiastic about that prospect than he knew he should.

"Speaking of Cephiro being unhappy," Ferio said, lowering his voice. "Are you sure it's a good idea to go through with this wedding thing?"

"It's not as if I'm agreeing to anything new. Umi and I have already done all the paperwork, so I've been part of the Ryuuzaki family for the past week." Clef felt Umi shift beside him when he said her name.

"Giving an oath is a bit different than signing a document."

"Yes. Here, the document is the binding part. Besides, there is no reason why I shouldn't be allowed to have a partner, and if Cephiro doesn't agree, maybe I'm wrong to stay Guru," Clef bit out, with more of a growl than he intended.

Umi reacted to his tone before Fuu could translate that for her. She reached over and put a hand on his arm. "Clef?"



Covering her hand with his, Clef shook his head. "It's fine."

"Now that you have voiced your concerns, can we let it lie?" Fuu said with the frustration of someone who has heard the same argument several dozen times. "You have already been told that you are worrying about nothing."

"How does Hikaru know it will be fine?" Ferio demanded. "She keeps saying it, but how does she know?"

"Former Pillar, remember?" Hikaru said. "Cephire and I are still pretty close, and the rules I set haven't changed."

"I, for one, trust Hikaru's judgement on that. Anyway, we came here to celebrate our friend's relationship, not dissect its impact on Cephire," Presea said, and Ferio flinched. "Is there any alcohol in here? We should have a toast!"

"There should be something alcoholic in the minibar." Hikaru bounced to her feet and across to the little refrigerator. She pulled out one of the bottles and looked at Umi, asking "Presea's suggested a toast - is it okay if we open this?"

"Sure. I doubt my parents would mind." She let out a laugh. "Honestly, I think they'd be happy to know we were celebrating."

After the first toast to new beginnings, Umi stepped away to order dinner for them. The number of dishes she rattled off into the phone made Clef wonder if she'd ordered everything on the menu. When it arrived, Clef wasn't entirely sure she hadn't. The dishes covered so much of the table there was hardly any room for their individual plates.

The conversation during dinner was filled with easy laughter, with Ferio calming down a lot once explaining the food gave them an easy distraction. Clef asked his friends their thoughts on Tokyo and was reassured to find their answers matched his first impressions - big, crowded, and confusing. They, on the other hand, looked almost worried by Clef saying the city was growing on him, but they were more interested in what Clef was doing with all the free time he now had.

"Well, I've been practising my Japanese and learning how to live here," Clef explained. "But when we move to Kyoto, I'll be keeping house - cleaning, cooking, and all that."

"You're going to cook?" Ferio asked.

"Just because it's been a few centuries doesn't mean I've forgotten how it works."

Presea smirked. "I bet Umi's heard that statement before."

Ferio nearly choked on his drink, and Clef wasn't sure if it was that or just the comment that had Fuu snickering, but he rolled his eyes at the lot of them.

"Do I want to know?" Umi asked, eyebrows raised.

"Presea's making dirty jokes."

Umi laughed. "Someone's been spending too much time with Caldina."

Clef shook his head and grinned. "No, she's always been like that after a little alcohol."

"On that note," Presea said, getting to her feet, "We should probably let you two have your space back to yourselves."

"Tomorrow will be hectic," Fuu agreed. "You should get some rest."

As they were all leaving, Ferio turned back and threw his arms around Clef. "I'm really happy for you. I don't know if I've said that, but I don't want you to think that I'm not."

When the door was closed and locked, Clef and Umi stood in the middle of the sitting room looking at one another. Sharing space with her shouldn't be any different than it had been before Clef realised his feelings for her. It wasn't as though the feelings were new, just his realisation of them. But he still couldn't help but feel he might be wrong.

If he was, that one-bedroom apartment was going to be more of a challenge than a few days here. But, hopefully, he was just tired, and anxious, and fretting about things which would turn out fine. After all, Umi was still one of his closest friends, no matter what else he might feel for her.

Umi yawned and rolled her shoulders - a movement that caught Clef's eyes a bit more than he would like to admit - before saying, "I want a bath. Mind if I go first?"

Clef shook his head and Umi headed for the bedroom. He watched as she opened the door and noticed what he had several hours ago when he'd shut it.

"There's only one bed!"

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

I'm am home and doing alright.

I hope all of you, my lovely readers, are doing well where you are.

Umi froze in the doorway, unable to move as she stared at the single massive bed in the middle of the far wall.

There was no reason why that should have been surprising. Her parents had been the ones to book the room, and they knew she'd slept in Clef's room before, as well as their firm belief she and Clef were a couple. But something about the fact they were here to get married gave it entirely more weight than it should have.

"It's bigger than the one in my room at your parent's house," Clef said. "Maybe you won't kick me."

"I don't kick!" Umi spun around to glare at him.

He grinned at her and put the kettle back on, and Umi paused. If he was on the other side of the room, how could he even see the bed?

"How do you even know how big the bed is?" she asked.

"Who do you think shut the door before our guests arrived?"

Deciding she didn't want to ask why he'd done that, Umi strode into the bedroom and found what her mother had meant by taking care of the extra nights; there was a third bag tucked into the wardrobe area under the two hanging bags. Ignoring it, Umi pulled pyjamas out of her own bag, only to have a box tumble out and onto the floor.

One look at the label had Umi grabbing it and shoving it back into her bag. She hadn't actually packed those, had she? It might have briefly crossed her mind last night that it might be sensible, then she had told herself off for being silly.

A second glance told her that this was definitely not the same box she'd hidden in the back of her desk drawer. That had been a small pack, with maybe three in it and was more like a reminder that condoms existed and she should be using them if she wasn't already. This box contained a dozen and said something more like 'not sure if you remembered to pack any in the rush, don't worry and have fun'. A dozen seemed like a lot for only four nights but Umi honestly didn't know how many times you could actually do it in one night.

"We don't have to sleep together if you don't want to," Clef said, standing in the doorway with a cup of tea in hand.

Umi clutched her bag and stared at him, her heart pounding and her face burning. "*What?*"

"If you'd be more comfortable, I can sleep out here," Clef explained, gesturing to the other room. "The sofa's big enough."

Shaking her head, Umi stood up, clutching her pyjamas to her chest like they could hide her embarrassment for being so weird about this. "No. I'm sure it'll be fine. We've shared a bed before without incident."

"I don't think nearly bloodying my nose counts as 'without incident'," Clef said with a laugh. A moment later, he'd set his cup down and was crossing the room toward her, saying, "Before I forget."

Clef crouched down so close he was nearly touching Umi as he opened his own bag. Before Umi could catch a look inside to see if Mama had left him a similar surprise, Clef was thrusting something into her hands.

It was a bag from the same jewellery shop they'd purchased their rings from. It couldn't be the rings, because those were still safely tucked into Umi's bag.

"Hikaru told me about White Day," Clef said. "You don't like sweets, so I hope this is okay."

Umi untied the ribbon and pulled out a little velvet box a little wider and flatter than the one with the rings in it. She didn't know what to expect, but she found a delicate gold chain bracelet decorated with three tiny diamond-studded clouds. It was very pretty, but also something she would actually enjoy wearing. She touched one fingertip to the central little charm, making the stones glitter, unable to say anything.

It was the sort of gift that ought to mean something. At least, something more than a cake she'd already planned to bake.

Her parents must have had a hand in it, not least because Clef didn't have any money of his own. But she had no idea when he could have bought it. They'd barely been apart the last few weeks. Somehow he'd managed to plan this without her having a clue he was even getting her a present.

\*

Umi's silence made the knot in Clef's throat tighten. Maybe the bracelet was too much in response to a cake, but he'd liked it, and he'd wanted to get Umi something nice. The shop assistant had said it was a perfect gift for his betrothed, but theirs was not a typical love-match arrangement.

"It's beautiful," Umi said, finally, and Clef could barely contain his sigh of relief.

"Sorry, it's not too much?" Clef asked. He had no idea what he was doing. "I didn't really know what you might like, and clouds-"

Umi cut him off. "Did you get me something to represent my magic?"

Clef shook his head. "Partly, but - when I felt lost in the storm, you gave me hope that the sun would return. You sent the clouds away, and you gave me a home." He wanted to say 'shelter', but didn't know the right word in his still-limited Japanese.

Even so, the words sounded ridiculously poetic out loud. He flushed, looking down at the plush carpet.

It could have been a perfect opportunity to tell Umi how he felt about her, yet Clef still couldn't bring himself to. This was all still very new. If Umi didn't feel the same way, he'd chance making things uncomfortable between them not just for the four nights they were in this hotel, but for the next four years they shared that little apartment in Kyoto.

Besides which, if Umi felt the same, she'd have probably said something by now. She definitely wasn't one for keeping secrets.

Given everything, when would be the right time to say something?

There was no plan for them to live apart; Umi's parents had already promised to buy them a house when Umi finished university. Even with additional bedrooms, there wouldn't be much space to escape any awkwardness as things faded back to normal between them - if they even could after such a confession.

He loved Umi, and she'd given him the opportunity to stay with her, to live together and build a life here - for now, at least. What more did he need? What benefit was there to confessing these feelings? There certainly wasn't any need to rush and do so right now.

They had time, after all. Umi had given them that. If there seemed good reason to in future, or Umi came to see him the same way, he would say something then.

Instead of answering him, Umi just silently stared at the bracelet, her face going a bright red.

Yes. It was too much.

"I should leave you to have your bath," Clef said, practically fleeing to the sitting room, and resolving to be more careful with his gifts in future.

\*

Umi was on edge all the way through getting ready for bed, especially after the surprise present. But in the end, going to bed with Clef was utterly anticlimactic. They curled under the covers on their own side, and Clef, yawning, muttered 'good night' and turned the lights out. That was it.

Umi had no idea why the thought of sharing a bed had been so disconcerting. It wasn't the first time. It wasn't even the first time they'd shared a hotel room, even. They'd stayed together a few times while they were looking at apartments in Kyoto - though they'd had separate beds those times. And like Clef said, the bed was much larger than the one in her parents' guest room.

With each of them on their own side, they weren't much closer than they'd have been in two separate beds. But Umi struggled to make herself stop thinking about how close Clef was.

If she just rolled over and reached out, she could touch him. She could run her fingers through his hair, curl up close beside him.

It was so easy to imagine Clef holding her when she'd already hugged him so many times, but that didn't stop her mind wandering further. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him. Heat spread across her cheeks and radiated through her body at the thought of his lips pressed against hers as he held her in his arms.

Letting out a sigh, Clef turned over, and Umi froze.

Even though she knew he couldn't possibly know what she was thinking, it still felt like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't - because she really shouldn't be imagining what things would be like if this were a different sort of wedding night.

Clef's voice was gentle with reassurance. "Don't worry about tomorrow. It's nothing we haven't already agreed."

He thought she was fretting.

Umi sank further into the blankets, despite the darkness being enough to hide her embarrassment. "I'm not worried."

"You're obviously thinking very hard about something."

"No, I'm not," Umi argued, her voice squeaking slightly.

"Then stop fidgeting and go to sleep," he said, sounding amused.

Clef turned back over, and Umi chewed on her lip, trying to not let her mind wander back down its previous train of thought.

"Good night," Umi murmured before settling more comfortably onto her pillow.

"Sleep well."

\*

The next day, dressed in the dramatic white lace dress, Umi fussed with her bracelet as she waited outside the chapel door with Papa. Little more than an hour had passed since they'd been out there for the rehearsal, but everything felt completely different, and not just because Papa was sniffing beside her. She swallowed hard as the doors opened and they took their first steps into the chapel, and everyone in the room turned to look at her.

Mama met them just inside the door, smiling proudly as she lowered Umi's veil down over her face.

All the while Papa continued to snuffle, getting louder as he and Umi started to walk down the aisle. He let out a loud hitched sob when he handed Umi off to Clef.

Under normal circumstances, Umi would have found it funny, but she was vibrating too nervously to pay attention to more than what she was supposed to do. She clutched Clef's arm tightly as they walked toward the dais. Signing paperwork, buying rings, and even choosing an apartment had all still felt more like they were just playing house, but taking the last few steps down the aisle by Clef's side, surrounded by family and friends, suddenly made everything feel so much more real.

Umi's heart thundered in her chest as Clef carefully repeated his vows. His voice was steady and full of confidence, and his eyes never left hers as he swore to uphold his promise until death.

When it was her turn, Umi's voice nearly failed her. She had to take a deep breath, and remember that she wasn't promising anything she wasn't already doing. Of course, she would love him; he was her best friend. And since he was her friend, she would respect him, and console him, and help him.

"Until death, I swear," Umi repeated, her voice trembling nearly as much as she was.

As the moment finally came for Clef to lift her veil, and Umi could hardly breathe as he gently smoothed it down back. She closed her eyes and waited for the touch of Clef's kiss on her forehead as he'd done in the rehearsal, but this time Clef's fingers touched her cheek and tilted her head up.

Clef's lips pressed softly against hers and Umi's chest felt like it was going to explode with a flurry of emotions.

A moment later, Clef pulled away. His hand stroked down her arm before taking her hand again.

Umi could still feel the ghost of his kiss when she blinked her eyes open. She had so many questions but she couldn't ask a single one in front of all of these witnesses. Especially when the one question she most wanted to ask was "Can you do that again?"

\*

After passing through a shower of confetti, Clef and Umi were shown to a small waiting room. Clef gratefully took an offered cup of tea, wanting to make the most of this quiet moment before their reception, but Umi was not nearly as relaxed beside him, merely clutching the bottle of water she'd taken, rather than drinking it.

The moment the door closed behind the attendant, Umi asked, "Why did you kiss me?"

"Wasn't I supposed to?" Clef asked, suddenly realising he must have gotten something wrong.

"On the *forehead*, like we practiced. Or my cheek even. Not on the the *lips*."

"But me kissing your forehead only seals my oath, whereas sharing a kiss seals both of our oaths at once?" Clef said, confused, only to see Umi looking back at him in equal confusion. Maybe that was yet another thing that was true in Cephire, but not here. But he was sure he'd seen a kiss on the lips as part of the wedding in the last drama they'd finished watching, hadn't he? "Isn't that right? I'm sorry."

"I guess that makes sense." Umi sighed, and her fingers tightened on her water bottle. "I just think I would have preferred my first real kiss to have happened in private, not in front of nearly everyone I know."

Clef swallowed. He knew Umi wasn't very experienced in romantic relationships, but he was a little surprised that she hadn't shared a kiss with someone else before now. How much was she missing out on because she was marrying him - what else was he unwittingly taking from her?

Even worse, there was a wicked part of his mind that wanted to 'make it up to her'. He bit back any impulsive offers for a redo, knowing full well that it would lead down a road they could regret, but the way Umi chewed on her lower lip certainly didn't help dispel the impulse to kiss her again.

Umi's eyebrows furrowed and her head snapped back up. "Why are you worrying about sealing an oath anyway? We did the legal bit last week."

"I take all my oaths seriously," Clef said. "Or did you forget why we're here?"

"But these vows aren't legally binding; they're just for show."

"Legally binding or not, they are still vows I am promising to uphold."

"Just warn me next time you change the plan." Umi's cheeks flushed an even brighter pink.

Clef raised an eyebrow. "What other sorts of changes might I be making?"

"I don't know!" Umi flailed her free hand. "But just tell me, okay!"

\*

Despite knowing the number of guests invited to the reception, Clef wasn't prepared for just how full the banquet hall was. The weight of all those stares was made even worse by the bright light that illuminated his and Umi's entrance. Even worse, Clef stumbled over his words as he gave his part of their speech welcoming their guests. But Umi spoke perfectly, practically glowing as she thanked everyone for celebrating with them.

They didn't have very long to sit down before they were being ushered to another table for a ceremonial cake cutting.

Umi took hold of the knife first, and Clef noticed something glint at the edge of her sleeve. Recognising the little jewelled cloud of the bracelet he'd given her made Clef's heart feel lighter again. He beamed at Umi as he put his hand over hers. They paused mid-cut for photographs before working together to place a small slice of cake on a plate.



The bite Clef fed Umi consisted of nothing but the strawberry from the top of the slice. If this ceremony was supposed to symbolise sharing everything from here on out, he wanted Umi to know he would try to protect her from unhappiness. Even the mundane kind such as having to eat something she disliked.

The bit of cake Umi fed him wasn't nearly as nice as the ones she baked, but it was perfectly respectable.

When they returned to their seats, Umi's parents took to the microphone and gave speeches full of congratulations and anecdotes of Umi's childhood. Umi's father emotionally said how happy he was that Umi had found someone who suited her so well, and Umi's mother shared the story of how Umi had barged into the house declaring that she was going to marry Clef.

"Is that how it happened?" Clef asked in a voice that was more laugh than whisper.

Umi let out a shy laugh. "Yeah."

To Clef's surprise, the next person to stand up was Ferio. He was joined at the microphone by Fuu.

"I have known Clef nearly my entire life. He was a good friend to my older sister, and he's still the closest thing I have to family left," Ferio started before pausing to let Fuu translate his words into Japanese. "When Clef announced he was moving to Tokyo, I have to admit that I was surprised. But at the same time, I knew that I shouldn't have been. Clef and Umi have always been inseparable, we always knew that one day they would finally end the distance between them."

Ferio shared a few stories that translated well for his Japanese audience - Fuu must have coached him. His words were filled with so much affection that Clef's heart ached. He hated that he had been forced to leave all his friends behind.

"I am so glad to see my friend so happy," Ferio said, turning to smile at Clef. "And I know that my sister would be overjoyed for you two."

Hot tears rolled down Clef's face. He had so much more happiness than Emeraude had ever been allowed.

Umi plucked the handkerchief out of Clef's jacket pocket and dabbed his eyes a few times before Clef took over. He had only just managed to compose himself by the time the master of ceremonies started calling up the tables one at a time to have their photos taken with him and Umi.

The last table was only just sitting back down when two of Umi's friends came up to the table to bustle Umi off for her costume change. It was Ferio who appeared at Clef's elbow, only a moment later.

"I've been sent to fetch you," Ferio said before leading him out of the room.

A hotel employee met them in the corridor and led them back up the wardrobe room, and Ferio joined Clef in the dressing room as he changed into his second suit.

"I've been meaning to ask," Ferio said, leaning against the wall. "Is Umi the reason for all of this?"

Clef shrugged off his jacket. "No. Umi's parents insisted on the extravagant wedding. We'd have been happy to just do the paperwork."

"Not the wedding. Your refusal to reaffirm your oath as Guru."

"I refused for the exact reason I said: I will not let another person be denied the freedom of their heart if I can help it. My personal feelings had no bearing whatsoever on my decision." Clef gave Ferio a sharp look, but his expression softened only a moment later as he sighed and admitted. "I didn't even realise how much I felt for her until I'd been here a while."

"You must be joking. At that dinner- When you said- You mean there was *nothing* between you two when you left?"

"There still isn't." Clef focused on not falling over as he changed out of the dark blue trousers and into the white ones.

"Have you even told her how you feel?"

Clef quickly buttoned the blue shirt and pulled the matching pre-tied necktie over his head and tightened it. "No. I refuse to chance ruining our friendship."

"You're willing to promise her love and fidelity in front of dozens of witnesses, but you can't tell her that you're actually in love with her?" Ferio stared at him with wide, incredulous eyes.

"I'd rather wait until she tells me that she feels the same." Clef walked out of the dressing room and away from the conversation before he'd even finished buttoning his jacket, only to come face to face with Umi in that midnight blue dress.

Clef swallowed hard. It was ridiculous how badly he wanted to run his fingers over the bare skin of her shoulders.

"Are you really sure you want to wait?" Ferio nudged him in the side with a laugh.

"Oh, shut up," Clef muttered, before stepping forward to meet Umi.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

I'm still on the mend and doing okay. Writing's coming slowly, but the final chapter of this part is starting to take shape.

Hope everyone's October is going as well as expected.

Umi's face burned hot as Clef's gaze drifted over her again. His attention was obvious enough her friends started giggling beside her.

"Do you two need some time alone?" Satomi poked Umi's shoulder with a grin.

Mako laughed "They'll have plenty of time alone tonight."

Trying very hard not to let herself think about how that look could translate into anything more, Umi stepped away from them and took Clef's arm. His gaze had been just as intense yesterday, yet last night there had been no discomfort in sharing a bed with him, it was just - normal.

But yesterday he hadn't kissed her.

Back in the banquet hall, they posed for photos with each table of guests. As they worked their way around the room, Clef's hand drifted from her back down to her waist. The heat of his touch was far more distracting than it should be, even through the fabric of her dress, but Umi found that she missed it when they returned to their table.

Mako was the next up to the microphone. She shared a few memories of growing up with Umi before laughingly explaining that she wasn't the least bit surprised by Umi's sudden engagement. "Umi was never interested in meeting new people or dating anyone, so it only made sense that she already had her sights set on a certain person." Mako smiled at them, and Umi blushed furiously at the implication that she'd turned down other offers because she was interested in Clef.

But there was no reasonable way to explain that she simply preferred her regular weekend visits to Cephire to discuss magic and books with Clef than trying to find a common interest with someone she'd just met. Certainly not the day of their wedding; no one would believe her.

The rest of the reception passed by in a blur. It felt like they'd barely sat down to eat some of their own meal before it was time for Umi to read the letter she'd written to her parents. Clef stood supportively beside her as she unfolded the paper with shaking fingers and began to read.

"I know it wasn't always easy raising me," Umi said, and described how she was headstrong and impulsive, and despite trying to live up to her parents' expectations, she never quite followed the path they expected. "You always said you wanted me to find a nice boyfriend, but when I came home and told you I wanted to marry Clef, I was afraid you'd tell me that I was being impulsive, that I was too young for marriage. That I would lose him."

Her eyes burned at the thought of them refusing - of Clef leaving for Autozam, where she would hardly ever be able to see him again.

The warm, comforting touch of Clef's free hand coming to rest on her back again was what finally broke her. Tears came streaming down her face at the thought of how easily she could have been separated from him. If her parents hadn't been able or willing to help with Clef's documents, welcome him home, help him learn their language.

The gentle brush of Clef's handkerchief on her cheeks only made her cry harder.

"But you not only said 'yes' but helped make all of this possible. Thank you for everything," she blubbered before taking the handkerchief from Clef to wipe her eyes properly.

Mama's eyes were red and Papa was sobbing again when Umi and Clef stepped forward to present them with the bouquet of flowers and thank you gift.

\*

When they returned to the suite, Umi immediately retreated to the bathroom to wash away the tears and spoiled make-up staining her face. It was going to take a lot of concealer to disguise the red puffiness of her eyes when she redid her makeup. She hadn't expected to get so emotional.

She glanced at the cosmetics scattered about the bathroom counter but left them alone. It wasn't as though Clef would care, and she'd rather not bother with it until she had to.

Clef gave her a reassuring smile when she trudged back into the sitting room, offering her a cup of tea.

"All that food and we barely got any of it. I thought Mama was exaggerating when she insisted we have a good breakfast." Umi flopped on to the sofa beside Clef. Her oversized sweater and leggings were far more comfortable than either of the now-retained rental dresses. "We should order room service."

"I already did," Clef said, waving a hand toward the menu. "I'm not entirely sure what I ordered, but it should hopefully be acceptable. I don't think I've ordered anything you hate, at least."

"Honestly, I'm so hungry, I don't care what you ordered, as long as it's edible."

"Everything I've had here has been delicious so far, I doubt that will change now. It'll be about a half hour's wait, but there's these in the meantime." Clef opened a packet of crisps and held it out to her. "Do you want to get ready before or after we eat?"

"After. I'd rather not worry about getting my dress dirty before the after-party." Umi took a small handful of crisps and picked up the list of optional excursions out of the open hotel information folder, eying the list of things and looking for more information on the workshop they'd been set up with. "If my parents have booked us in for two more nights, I wonder why they only picked one outing."

"I think they assume we might have other uses for our time," Clef said, looking over at the list. "Did you want to do something more?"

Umi wrinkled her nose and tried not to think of the box that had been carefully tucked into her bag. "After all the excitement today, I think I want to sleep until at least lunch-time tomorrow."

"I like that plan," Clef laughed. "Though, I wouldn't mind seeing more of this area at some point, if you wanted to go for a walk sometime after lunch."

"That could be nice." The conversation about what they wanted to do for the next few days flowed so naturally it washed away any worry that things might be different between them after today. Everything just felt so normal that Umi almost wondered if she'd just imagined the tension between them.

Maybe Clef had just been staring a bit because the fancy dresses were impressive! Didn't that make more sense than anything else?

Especially since this just felt like a normal weekend evening in Cephire, though Clef actually being able to make plans without work getting in the way made it a far more satisfying version of their normal evening. Their brief dinner was filled with easy laughter before an alarm went off on Umi's phone, and she sighed.

"Time to change again."

"I think this is more parties in one day than I've attended in the last decade," Clef said, shaking his head. He didn't seem upset, just amused, as he collected his suit from the wardrobe and took it to change in the sitting room, leaving the bedroom and bathroom to Umi.

They were wearing their own clothes this time, which felt a lot more comfortable and a lot less like playing dress-up. Umi's final dress for the evening was a soft, pale blue with a full skirt that stopped just above the knee in the front and fell nearly to mid-calf in the back. The layer of lace over the bodice was reminiscent of the white wedding gown she'd worn earlier; though the sleeves on this one stopped at her elbows, and it fit without the need to adjust various ties and catches like the borrowed ones had.

Thankfully her hair didn't need much more than a few strategically placed pins to tidy it back up before she added the sparkly accessories she'd got to go with this dress. But when she turned to makeup, concealer only softened the redness around Umi's eyes. It was still very obvious that she'd been crying.

Many of her friends had been at the reception to see her burst into tears, so it wouldn't be unexpected. She still frowned into the mirror and had only just started applying her foundation when Clef called for her.

Umi hurried out to the sitting room, only to stumble to a halt in the doorway.

While Clef had looked good in both of his rented suits, the way the new dark blue trousers sat on his hips had her staring. There was definitely something to be said for a custom-tailored suit; she wanted to slide her arms around his waist and hold on to him.

"Oh, good." Clef turned around with an end of his tie in each hand. "Help, please? I've forgotten how to do this."

Heat flushed Umi's face as she dragged her eyes away from parts of his anatomy she shouldn't be staring at. She hurriedly crossed the room and took the tie, running her fingers over the silk. Clef hadn't done much damage with his failed attempts; the tie smoothed out nicely, and she looped it around his neck and tied it with forced concentration. She reached around his neck again to settle his shirt collar back over it, and fiddled with the knot a moment longer, making sure it was centred. Her hands lingered just long enough to remember she was nearly nose to nose with Clef.

Her head shot up, but Clef just smiled and said, "Thank you. That's much neater than my attempts."

Umi could hardly take her eyes off the curve of his lips, knowing that if she just tilted her head and leaned forward, she could kiss him.

That thought had her taking an involuntary step back, before quickly turning to escape back to the bathroom, mumbling something about needing to finish her make up.

The bathroom door was enough of a barrier to hide from Clef, but it did nothing to save Umi from her own thoughts. Especially when she reached her lipstick. The focus on her lips had her remembering the warm touch of Clef's lips on hers, and she couldn't help but wonder how he might have reacted if she'd given into the foolish impulse and kissed him a moment ago.

Would he have kissed her back?

\*

The first after-party that evening, with Umi's friends and classmates, was followed by an even smaller after-after-party with Umi's closest friends, minus a few exceptions. Hikaru and Fuu had taken Ferio and Presea out to see more of Tokyo, to avoid needing to explain why their guests could understand Japanese spoken by two people but no one else.

Both these gatherings were louder than the earlier ones, even with far fewer people - in fact, the fewer people present, the louder Clef thought it was getting. But Umi looked more comfortable now than she had with all the formality of the speeches and photos. He kept watching her as she moved from group to group, smiling and laughing with all her friends, the light catching the ring on her hand each time she gestured.

And every few minutes, she looked about the room until she found him, and grinned, and went back to her conversation.

It had him twisting the ring on his own finger, entirely too conscious of it, and not sure at all what he felt anymore.

Over the course of both parties, Umi's friends kept filling Clef's glass, and he ended up drinking more than he'd intended. Considering the number of questions they'd been asking, Clef wasn't entirely sure they hadn't been trying to loosen his tongue. Mostly it had loosened his grasp on Japanese, so any answers he gave were no use to them.

That didn't stop Clef feeling wary of his words when he and Umi finally made it back to their suite.

"Do you want the bathroom first?" Umi asked.

Clef vigorously nodded his head. The movement nearly knocked him off balance. "That's a good idea."

He rushed through the process of changing into nightclothes and brushing his teeth as quickly as he could without falling over, then collapsed into bed in the hope he'd fall asleep before he was tempted to say anything he might regret. Given his luck, it would probably come out in Japanese just when he didn't want it to, and there was no telling whether it would be a good thing or a bad one.

While he did start to drift off before Umi was finished in the bathroom, he didn't get to fall asleep before he was interrupted.

"Hey! That's my side," Umi said, shaking his shoulder.

Clef shrugged her hand away. "Says who?"

"*You*." Umi let out a frustrated huff. "You don't want me hitting you instead of my alarm again, remember?"

"No alarm, just sleep," Clef mumbled, snuggling deeper into the pillow and wrapping his arms firmly about it.

Umi shoved him on the shoulder. "I don't care if you're drunk. You can't go stealing my side of the bed."

"It doesn't have your name on it."

"The reservation's under Ryuuzaki." Umi tugged at the blankets. "That counts."

"I'm a Ryuuzaki too," Clef reminded her. He knew he was being ridiculous, but he did enjoy ruffling Umi's feathers as much as she did his, especially when it was something as low risk as which side of the bed he slept on.

Umi pulled a face at him before shoving him a little harder. "It was my name first."

Clef held his ground, clutching the pillow. "Well, I was here first."

"Don't be such a child."

"It takes one to know one."

"*Move.*" Her last shove managed to not only roll him over, but bring her into the bed with him. She toppled down on top of him with a startled laugh.

Clef stared up at Umi's flushed face, his gaze went from her bright eyes down to her lips. All he needed to do was tug her down to him and he could kiss her properly, how he did in far too many of his dreams.

Hissing in a sharp breath, Clef rolled away to the other side of the bed and buried his face in the pillow there. "Fine," he muttered, closing his eyes firmly. "You win."



## Chapter 4

Clef's agonised scream shocked Umi out of a deep sleep. She grabbed the hotel phone and brandished it as she slammed on the light, ready to face whatever unknown assailant was hurting him.

But the only other person in the room was Clef, who blinked up at her with bleary, tear-filled eyes from the other side of the bed. He was breathing hard, his eyes not quite focused.

A nightmare?

Setting the phone back down with a clack, Umi crawled across the bed and wrapped her arms around Clef. "It's okay. I'm here. I have you."

Clef shuddered and clung tightly to her, his breath coming in jagged sobs. Umi held him close, running her fingers through his hair and over his back, trying to reassure him. It made her chest ache to see him like this. Clef had always been there for her when she'd had horrific nightmares, so it was only right that she was there for him.

Only, she didn't truly know that this had been just a nightmare.

"Cephiro..." was all Clef kept repeating, and despite wanting to assure him that it was nothing but a horrible dream, Umi worried that maybe it wasn't. Maybe it had been a terrible idea to marry Clef. What if his vows had severed his connection to Cephiro or - even worse - had caused something to happen to Cephiro?

"What about Cephiro?" Umi asked.

Clef just shook his head and held on tighter, his tears soaking through the shoulder of Umi's pyjamas. He wasn't getting any calmer, shaking violently against her, unable to draw a full breath.

Hands trembling, Umi pushed away just far enough to reach the nightstand on her side of the bed and fumbled for her phone. She wrapped herself back around Clef as soon as it was in her hand, flicking through her contacts one-handed. While Umi couldn't easily use her connection to check on the other world, she knew who could.

Hikaru answered the call almost immediately, sleepily mumbling, "What's wrong?"

"Is Cephiro okay?"

There was a long pause, in which Umi's heart thumped uncomfortably fast as Hikaru yawned, but also presumably took the time to check. "Of course. Why?"

"And Clef's connection?"

"Same as always, so far as I can tell," Hikaru answered, confusion and concern creeping into her voice. "What's happened?"

Umi let out a sigh of relief and rubbed Clef's back. "Cephiro's okay," she assured him, and he looked up at her with red swollen eyes. "Do you want to talk to Hikaru?"

He nodded. Taking the phone, Clef sat up a little straighter, but didn't move away, and was still leaning firmly into Umi's side as he greeted Hikaru in Japanese then slid immediately into Cephiran, the strange syllables rolling off his tongue so fast that Umi could hardly tell where each word started.

Umi tried not to let herself be irritated by the fact he hadn't told her about the translation spell fading, but a part of her couldn't stop wondering what other secrets he might be keeping from her - what else he was trying to protect her from.

They'd wound up in the very middle of the bed, and Umi grew more aware with each moment that she had somehow wedged herself in the gap between the pillows. The headboard was decorative, but not very comfortable, but she didn't want to disturb Clef by moving enough to pull a pillow over - not when he was starting to breathe a little easier, voice catching less as the conversation she couldn't understand went on.

It was probably only a few minutes after the call had started when Clef ended it and rested his head against Umi's shoulder once more. "I'm sorry," he said, voice barely more than a whisper, and then shook himself and pulled away. "Sorry, Umi."

"Hey. It's okay," Umi told him. "You can stay." She settled more comfortably, wedging a pillow behind herself.

"You didn't want to share your side of the bed."

"No, I said you couldn't *steal* it. Nothing about sharing." Umi bumped her shoulder against his. "Anyway, we're not even on my side really, and I promised to console you, so it's my job as your wife to hug you when you have a nightmare."

Clef paused a moment longer, then leaned back into her side and sighed. "I'm sorry. I probably drank too much."

"Maybe?" He had been a bit tipsy, but Umi wasn't convinced that was the reason. "Are you sure you're not having nightmares because you made a vow that goes against your oath as Guru?"

"It shouldn't be wrong to make a promise to someone. It shouldn't matter, not after Hikaru's changes to the rules." Clef rubbed his hands over his face.

"But nightmares aren't logical," Umi argued, poking him on the arm. "Especially when you're afraid you might be mistaken."

"I don't want to be."

"I don't think you are. Anyway, Hikaru says Cephiro's fine, so you don't need to worry about that." Umi leaned back against the headboard and tried to think of something she could do

that was actually helpful, not just constantly repeating that everything was fine. What did Clef do for her when she had a nightmare? "Do you want tea?"

Clef shook his head. "Not now. You should sleep, Umi. I'm sorry, I'm fine."

"It's fine," Umi said, thinking hard. Tea was what he did for her when she hid from her bed in his office, too afraid of dreaming to go back to sleep, but what did he do for himself? He had to have mentioned something in all these years... "Do you want a bath?"

All it took was a single sound of agreement for Umi to bound off the bed and into the bathroom. As she turned on the water, Umi saw the little dish she'd been too tired to investigate the night before. Snatching it up she went back out to Clef.

"They have some bath fizzy things if you'd like something to scent the water," she told him, holding out the bowl like a trophy. One of the labels caught her eye and she snickered. "This one's tea-scented, if you want to feel like you're bathing in a vat of tea."

"Is that what those are?" Clef asked.

"There's also peach blossom and citrus, but I have no idea what 'Magic Forest' is supposed to smell like." Umi sifted through the bowl. All of them were labelled in English with practically no Japanese, so it was no wonder he hadn't been able to figure them out. "This one's lavender. That's good for relaxation."

"I wonder what that tea one is like..."

"You can do the honours. Just take the plastic off and throw the whole thing in the water." Umi pressed the packet into his hand before scurrying away to put a few fresh towels closer to the bath. "Let me know when you're getting out and I can put the kettle on."

"You don't have to wait. You should sleep."

"It's no trouble," Umi insisted and turned back to smile at him. "We're sleeping until lunchtime anyway, right? A bit of a break's no problem."

\*

Clef woke up the next morning with an awful headache and Umi's knees pressed into his back. The memory of falling asleep with Umi's arms around him felt more like a dream than reality. Yet, when he carefully rolled over to face her, he found that not only was Umi right beside him, but her pillow was shoved so close it had slid over the edge of his.

She was sleeping so soundly that even the strand of hair caught in her mouth didn't seem to disturb her, but when Clef reached out to brush the hair from her face, Umi grumbled and rolled over with the most adorably grumpy face. He couldn't help but smile at her.

Carefully climbing out of bed, Clef dragged on some fresh clothes and left the bedroom as quietly as possible.

He put the kettle on and then opened one of the bottles of water, taking a long drink as he regretted every beer he'd had the night before. Across the room, his phone's message alert light was flashing. He needed tea before he was willing to face the brightness of the screen.

A few minutes later, armed with a very strong cup of tea, Clef sat down on the sofa with his phone to find Hikaru had not only sent him several photos of the castle gardens looking completely whole, if a little damp, but also two videos.

The first video started with Hikaru saying "Cephro's fine." She turned the camera toward the window to show the view. Rain pelted against the windowpane, but Clef was relieved to see the trees swaying in the wind looked healthy. "It's been grey and rainy the past few days, but there hasn't been any flooding or anything." Her face came back onto the screen and she smiled warmly. "You don't need to worry. Just enjoy your time with Umi."

He thought the second video would be more of the same, but was surprised to see Lantis on the screen, not Hikaru.

"When I asked to send you and Umi a note of congratulations, Hikaru handed me her mobile phone rather than paper. It's funny how these things are so similar and yet so different from Autozam's technology," Lantis said with a small laugh.

Clef nodded in agreement, even knowing that Lantis couldn't see him. He only found Earth technology easier to use because he didn't accidentally short-circuit or explode half of it when he touched it.

"I'm sorry I couldn't attend your celebration. Hikaru's been trying to make up for that by showing me the dozens and dozens of pictures she took." Lantis leaned back in his chair. "I'm happy to see that you are both doing well. Especially you, Clef. You made the right decision about where to spend your exile. I know it's difficult, cutting yourself off from everything you know."

Lantis paused with a sigh, and Clef's heart ached for him. It must have been worse to actively make the decision to leave Cephro, especially when he knew what was about to happen. And, even now, Lantis was struggling to earn back the trust he'd lost by leaving, while a part of his heart was now left behind in Autozam.

"When things have calmed down here," Lantis continued "And you and Umi are settled in your new place, of course. Perhaps I could come visit?"

Clef's eyes burned as the video ended. Oh, how much he missed his friends.

He sent a message to Hikaru:

Of course, Lantis can come. Everyone can come after we are in Kyoto.

\*

Clef was well past his second cup of tea and was nearly finished with his third when Umi groggily opened the door.

"What happened to sleeping until lunchtime?" she asked, shuffling out of the bedroom and stopping next to the sofa. "Are you okay?"

"My head just hurts," Clef said. He didn't want to admit that he'd rewatched Lantis's message repeatedly until he'd actually cried; though the tears must have shown on his face. He held up his mug. "This is helping."

Umi disappeared back into the bedroom and returned a moment later with a box Clef recognised very well.

"Isn't that for menstrual pain?" he asked.

"It's for any kind of pain." Umi handed him one of the large rice crackers from the minibar. "Here. You shouldn't take it on an empty stomach."

Clef stared at the cracker and grimaced. Despite managing to drink several cups of tea and most of a bottle of water, his stomach still didn't feel settled enough for food. He didn't even realise Umi had left the room again until she was standing in front of him with a different box and a new bottle of water.

"Maybe you want these first," she said, holding them out to him. "They're for your stomach."

"Thank you." Clef was so grateful he could have kissed her.

Umi sat down beside him. "Thank Mama. She's the one who insisted I bring that."

Once he'd taken a dose of the stomach medicine, he stared down at the water bottle in his hands, saying, "Is it okay if we stay in today? I know we spoke about shopping, but-"

"Neither one of us planned for a hangover," Umi said, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

"Hangover?" Clef repeated the word. "Is that the word for this?"

"If by 'this' you mean my friends getting you so drunk last night you feel awful today, then, yes, that's the word for it."

"Hangover," Clef rolled the word over his tongue again and sighed. "I'll probably forget that tomorrow."

"Hopefully you won't need to use it for a while." Umi patted him on the shoulder again. "I'm going to order something for us to eat. You can have the bed to yourself if you want to have a nap after lunch."

\*

Umi was pleased to see a more usual colour come back into Clef's face with a little miso soup and rice, but she kept finding herself distracted staring at Clef's ring every time he lifted one of the bowls. It wasn't unusual for Clef to wear a ring - there were several that he regularly wore in Cephro - but it was new for him to be wearing one that matched the one on her own hand.

"We've been married a week. Why does a ring make it feel more real?" Umi asked, twisting her ring around on her finger.

"A ceremony makes anything more real. Especially when you get a physical thing to carry with you." Clef held up his hand with a pensive look at his ring. "Being married to you is definitely not what I thought I would do, but it's definitely proved more pleasant than Autozam."

"You're about to be stuck in a tiny apartment with me for the next four years. Autozam might sound like a better choice in a couple of months."

"I doubt that."

Something about the fondness in his smile made Umi feel warm, her heart beating faster.

"Anyway," she said. "I'm sorry I haven't shown you more of Japan before dragging you to Kyoto." Everything had been a little chaotic the last few months preparing for their cross country move.

"You'll have holidays," Clef said with a laugh. "And didn't your parents want to send us on a trip?"

Umi's face flushed hot at the memory. "A *honeymoon* trip. It's supposed to be *romantic*. They'll book us into some fancy hotel suite with only one bed."

"Oh no. How awful," Clef said, his lips curling into an amused grin.

"Oh, shut up." Umi rolled her eyes at him, but she knew he was right. They had already stayed in a series of small hotel rooms together while they looked at apartments, but all of those had two beds rather than the one they were currently sharing.

Clef leaned back in his seat and took a long drink of his tea. "It would make them happy."

Umi sighed and sank back in her chair. Yesterday, her parents had been so pleased, convinced she was marrying her true love, despite all her protests. They'd already given Clef and her this wedding, the apartment, and there were even talks of buying the two of them a house when they returned to Tokyo after graduation. At least those were mostly practical - even the wedding, as little as she liked to admit it, helped establish their relationship and would help keep anyone from questioning it. Taking them up on the offer of a honeymoon just seemed like a step too far - one gift too many to accept for what was nothing more than a marriage of convenience.

"It will just add to their disappointment when we break up." Those words made her chest ache. She knew when she proposed this that she only got to keep Clef until the Council was willing to welcome him back.

Then Clef said "Breaking up is not necessary. We didn't agree on an end date."

Umi stared at him. "But what about when you go back to Cephire?"

"If I go home to Cephiro, it will be because the Council accepts that it's okay for the Guru to have people they care for, a family of their own." He set his cup carefully back on the table and looked over at Umi with an expression that made her breath catch.

Umi went absolutely still. She waited, not sure what she was even expecting, but after an awkwardly long silence, Clef just sighed and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Whenever that happens," Clef said, and Umi felt silly for even thinking - what? That he might be about to confess feelings for her?.

Of course, he wasn't referring to her as someone he cared for in a romantic sense. In marrying him, she'd brought him into her family; besides a few nieces he'd mentioned once or twice, she and her parents were probably his only family now. Was it any wonder he'd want to accept a gift from two people who'd been kind enough to take him in when it would blatantly please them to give one?

"You're my husband for however long you want to be," Umi said, relaxing back into her chair again. "So, where do you want to go for our honeymoon?"

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

I've had less than five hours of sleep and words don't make sense anymore after how much editing and rewriting this chapter has had this weekend. But I hope the reading experience is enjoyable!

No matter how old he got, Clef knew he would never lose his awe of glassblowers. There was something truly amazing about the way an artisan could take a molten lump of glass and turn it into something beautifully unique. Unfortunately, in Cephira many glass-making processes had been streamlined with magic, creating neat and uniform products. Very few people still made such things individually by hand. From what he knew of Tokyo, this was also the sort of thing often done by machine to the same effect.

The perfect identical glass creations were still lovely, and very economical - any breakages could be easily replaced, for one thing. But it was also a little disheartening for things to not have the little quirks that gave them character.

Though they didn't need *quite* as much character as Umi's second attempt to follow the glassmaker's instructions. Yet again, she'd blown too hard and a thin bubble burst out of the side of the ball, leaving the glass far too misshapen to make one of the glass bell wind-chimes.

"Let's have another try," the glassmaker said, taking the glass pipe from her and starting the process again.

Clef fought back a laugh as a new ball of near-molten glass was attached to the end of the pipe, and Umi pulled a face at him. But her third attempt went well enough after that. With the glassmaker's firm coaxing, Umi managed to make a nearly even bubble of glass, and then it was Clef's turn.

Listening closely to the glassmaker's instruction to blow slowly and evenly - and having learned a lot from watching Umi's mistakes, as well as a few distant memories of watching similar techniques in his childhood, Clef's first attempt came out correctly and was set down to cool beside Umi's.

"Show off," Umi muttered.

"Patience is the key," Clef said with a grin. "But we both know you have none."

Umi elbowed him in the side, the corners of her lips twitching upwards. "Oh, shut up."



But she proved his assessment largely correct again when they sat down to paint designs in their wind-chimes. While Clef took his time studying the various painting guides they'd been given, Umi launched straight into painting. The broad strokes and colour looked vaguely familiar, but Clef wasn't entirely sure what she was trying to recreate. It reminded him a little of one of those flying vehicles.

"Is that an airplane?" he asked.

"It's Fyula!" Umi said, looking offended. She pursed her lips and studied it. "Well, it's supposed to be."

"You want to paint Fyula?"

"I thought it might be nice to have a bit of Cephro in our new place," Umi said. Her cheeks went bright red. "But I'm not very good at art."

Clef swallowed the rush of fondness, taking a moment before saying, "You've spent your time becoming proficient at other things."

Umi tilted the glass to see what the painting looked like from the outside and laughed. "Maybe it does look a little more like an airplane than a fish."

Looking over the guide of how to paint little goldfish, Umi let out a sigh and wiped off everything she'd painted so far before starting over with a bit more care in her strokes.

Clef still hadn't started.

After much deliberation, he painted little pink blossoms in the top of his, with a few little goldfish at the bottom. He finished it with a careful wash of blue over the goldfish, so when you looked at it from the outside, they were swimming in water. It was a reminder of the garden where they'd taken the first wedding photos - and how captivating Umi had looked. Even if nothing came of his feelings for her, he'd at least have a reminder of how much she meant to him.

Hopefully, Umi wouldn't ask about his choices, because he wasn't sure how to explain it. But they were both common enough motifs that several other people here for the workshop had similar designs sat drying.

Umi's second attempt was a lot more successful. His fish companion was far more recognisable this time, even if Fyula looked more like a long-bodied goldfish than a flying fish. She'd filled in the rest of the space with clouds and finished it off with a sweep of the same brush and mix of blues Clef had used for his.

"Is that better?" Umi asked, holding it up for his inspection.

"It's perfect," Clef said, smiling broadly.

\*

Umi wondered just how long it would take for her to stop being surprised at how utterly *normal* it felt to walk hand in hand with Clef. More, to do it through the streets of Tokyo.

Holding Clef's hand just felt right as they rambled about, leading each other in and out of shops. Umi tried not to think too hard about it - especially when the absent brush of Clef's thumb across her skin made her heart race.

"What about this one?" Umi asked, pointing to yet another teapot.

This teapot was a good size and a pretty turquoise colour. But given they'd looked at several dozen in the past hour and Clef hadn't found any of them acceptable, she didn't expect this to be 'the one' either.

Clef looked it over and sighed. "I don't know..."

"What exactly *are* you looking for?" Umi asked. "Because I'm starting to think we might need to get it made for you."

"I just want something small enough we can use it every day for just the two of us, but big enough we could make enough tea for at least two, if not three guests." Clef picked up the pot and looked inside. "This would be good for company, but I think it's too big for every day."

"But you do drink a lot of tea," Umi said.

"Not as much as I used to." Clef sighed again, setting down the teapot.

"So you want a teapot that can only make a couple of cups of tea, but that can also make at least five cups of tea? I'm not surprised it's taking a while."

"This would be so much easier if I didn't like all the smaller ones more."

There had been one particular little teapot several shops back that Clef had held for a long time before reluctantly declaring it wouldn't work. "You still want that owl one, don't you?" Umi asked.

"It would barely hold two cups of tea," Clef argued.

"Most of the time that's going to be fine, so we'll just get two. One for us and one for company," Umi said, taking his hand and leaning him back toward the door. "The teapot for company could even be a fancy tea set with matching cups and saucers."

"And where are you planning to store all of this in our little apartment?"

"They aren't that big! We'll figure it out; I'm sure there will be enough shelf space for two teapots," Umi said with a laugh. "Let's go get your owl."

\*

By the time they returned to the hotel, they'd acquired not only their wind-chimes and an owl-shaped teapot, but also rice bowls, several plates, and two matching sets of chopsticks.

Clef knew it was silly to be collecting more household goods before their move - especially when this world didn't have a way of making belongings smaller and lighter for transport - but he'd been enjoying the experience of shopping for their home together too much to suggest they return early.

He took the shopping bags through to set them with their suitcases. "We should probably order something to eat."

"Let's try one of the hotel restaurants instead," Umi said as he came back into the main room, taking his hand and leading him back out the door before he had a chance to respond.

Clef couldn't help but smile. If it weren't for Umi's impulsive nature, he'd be in Autozam right now, miserable and lonely, rather than having a lovely afternoon shopping and the promise of a lovely dinner with Umi ahead of him.

As they stepped into the corridor, Umi's phone let out a familiar chime.

"Oh! This one looks nice," Umi said, and Clef knew exactly who the message was from.

At some point during his nap yesterday afternoon, Umi had let her parents know that she and Clef had agreed to go somewhere with a beach for their honeymoon trip. Since then, Umi's mother had been doing some research and sending them suggestions.

"What do you think?" Umi asked, handing over her phone for Clef to look at yet another resort website.

Despite all the locations looking lovely, all the pictures were starting to look the same, and it wasn't just his lack of reading comprehension that made deciphering the activity options difficult. Umi had attempted to explain a few last night, but he still had no idea what half of them meant, just that a lot seemed to be sports activities he really wasn't interested in trying.

"I'm happy to stay wherever you like," Clef said, handing the phone back.

"But it's a trip for both of us!" Umi insisted, with a sigh. "You just keep saying they all look nice! Don't you like any of them more?"

"Any of them will be new for me." Clef shrugged. "How can I tell which I like more? I've never stayed by a Japanese beach, nor done any of these activities, nor eaten many of these foods. It's all interesting."

The face Umi pulled at him said she wouldn't let him get away without some input into the decision making process. That was probably fair; it had been his idea to accept the offer of the trip, after all, when Umi hadn't wanted to.

"What about a place that's good for that snorkel-thing?" Clef suggested. The picture of seeing underwater in the wild, instead of an aquarium, had looked fun.

"See, you do have opinions."

"I can look again when we get home? I need a larger screen - my eyes aren't young, you know."

Smiling, Umi linked their arms. "Old man," she murmured, happily. "Come on, let's introduce you to teppanyaki so you can have an opinion about that."

\*

As dinner came to an end, Umi tried to come up with a reason why they should stay out. All afternoon, the absent brush of Clef's fingers on her skin kept her thoughts lingering on his touch. Sat in the booth in the restaurant, their arms still kept brushing - she kept flushing every time their chef came in to see to their food on the private hot plate set into their table. The meal took more than an hour, each course being cooked and served individually in front of them, the two of them mostly alone with only a little noise from the rest of the room making it into the cosy booth.

Their conversation continued easily enough - Clef was still talking about things they'd seen that they might want to pick up for the apartment once they were in Kyoto, and the merits of kitchen utensils were at least mundane.

But they were still so close, and no matter how much she tried to put the idea out of her head, Umi was tempted to give in to her curiosity - to ask him to touch her more - *elsewhere*. The last thing she wanted to do was spend the next few hours alone in the suite with just Clef and nothing else to do but try not to think about what it would be like to take their clothes off and see what happened.

Unfortunately, when she suggested a walk in the hotel garden, Clef shook his head.

"I'm sorry, I'm so tired now. We walked a lot today."

Umi quietly followed Clef to the elevator. Her reluctance must have shown because Clef's hand paused over the button.

"You don't have to come back with me," Clef told her. "You can go for a walk, if you want to. I just want a bath, a cup of tea, and to sleep; you don't have to come to bed with me. I doubt I'll be very interesting."

"It's fine," Umi said, her cheeks going hot. "We have to pack everything to go home tomorrow anyway."

Clef disappeared through the bedroom and into the bathroom as soon as they reached their suite, shutting the door behind him. Back in the sitting room, Umi dropped onto the sofa, staring at the door and chewing on her bottom lip. Hopefully, living in close quarters would quickly remove the fascination of sharing space with Clef, and the impulse to proposition him would go away.

A short while later, the bathroom door unlocked with a clack and Clef reappeared. Faced with a relaxed and damp Clef, Umi decided it would be best to stop reading any romance novels for now. Murder mysteries would probably be less... *inspiring*.

Well, unless they stopped getting along so easily, then they probably wouldn't be a good idea either, she thought and had to look away before Clef saw her laugh and asked why.

"I'm finished. The bathroom is all yours," Clef said, rubbing a towel over his hair.

Umi bounced to her feet and retreated to the bathroom, putting two shut doors between herself and Clef's adorably flushed skin. She decided to try to take advantage of the privacy of the bathroom and attempt to take the edge off - maybe that would help her calm down.

Unfortunately, touching herself just strengthened the desire for Clef's hands instead of hers. She shuddered through an unsatisfying release that left her sensitised and wound up more than she had been before.

Sinking into the hot water with a frustrated sigh, Umi closed her eyes. Would it really hurt anything to just ask if Clef would be interested in doing anything?

Didn't the way Clef kept looking at her mean he had *some* sort of interest in her?

He'd always said that sex wasn't really that big a deal - he'd had sex in the past, he hadn't been that bothered about it, so he hadn't missed it the years he spent in a younger form. That much she knew for certain, thanks to a number of rambling late-night conversations. So she didn't think he would be offended by the question - and this was Clef. If he didn't want to sleep with her, he would just say so.

Even if he was too tired to be interested right now, he might agree to think about it, and then she could stop being so flustered about asking him at least?

Honesty was usually best, after all.

But the idea of just coming out and saying something - she didn't want to just blurt out 'will you sleep with me?' from nowhere; however, she had no idea how to lead up to that kind of thing. Sexy clothing, maybe?

Once out of the bath, Umi wrapped a towel about herself and rummaged through her bag looking for anything appropriate to wear, finding nothing. She'd only packed comfortable pyjamas, not cute ones. She double-checked the bag Mama had packed, but there was nothing better in there.

Not that she should have expected much, since she didn't really own anything she'd consider 'sexy'.

But did it even matter? If Clef said yes, she probably wouldn't be wearing it long anyway, and if he said no, she'd be comfortable to go to sleep.

Umi was putting everything back in the bag when she caught sight of the blue gift bag tucked behind it. Mako had thrust it into her hands after the last party, with a grin and a comment about it being 'a little something for your honeymoon'. Umi hadn't opened it, but knowing Mako, she reached for it now.

That 'something' turned out to be a soft pink nightgown with more lace than fabric around the bodice. Underneath that was matching skimpy underwear and a note of congratulations from several of her childhood friends. Umi laughed as she imagined all of them giggling as they bought this.

She was still wearing nothing but a towel when Clef knocked on the bedroom door.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Just a moment!" Umi quickly dressed in the nightgown before digging out the box of condoms and shoving it into her bedside drawer for easy access, in case. Slipping back into the bathroom to put her towel away, she glanced at herself in the mirror. The nightgown wasn't really too short, and it covered everything important - she had a couple of summer dresses that probably showed about as much skin, and she didn't bother adding another layer to those if she was in Cephiro.

Those dresses just weren't... all lace and silky material.

She bit her lip and called, "You can come in."

Clef's steps faltered as they met at the bathroom door, his gaze skating over her body before he swallowed and said, "That's new."

A hot flush spread across Umi's face. "It was a gift."

With a quick nod, Clef slipped past her into the bathroom to get rid of his towel.

Umi sat down on side of the bed to wait for him. What should she say? Would it be weird to just ask 'will you have sex with me?', or was that too straightforward? But surely being straightforward would be the best way to avoid confusion.

If he did turn her down, Umi was pretty sure she could get over any embarrassment before they moved into their apartment. If anything, she could blame asking tonight on the excitement of the wedding, and the fact that Clef had kissed her.

Though that would have made more sense if she'd asked on their wedding night, not several days later.

Umi rubbed her hands over her face, nerves overtaking excitement. What was she even doing?

When he came back, Clef focused on his feet as he walked around the bed, a bright red flush across his cheeks. As he climbed under the covers, Umi took a deep breath to steel her courage before she turned to look at him.

"Clef?"

With a hum of acknowledgement, Clef rolled over to face her, and the words died on Umi's tongue.

Clef had said he was tired, but he looked utterly exhausted.

Everything she'd been thinking of saying fled, replaced by the urge to wrap him in the blankets and sit guard so no one could disturb his rest. The wave of protectiveness came with the memory of just how terrified he'd looked the other night, breaking down in her arms.

If the wedding had given him nightmares, sex would almost certainly unsettle him even more. It would be selfish of her to do something that would make him more anxious just to sate her curiosity.

"What is it?" Clef asked when she stayed quiet a little too long

"I can change, if you'd rather," she said, quickly. "This is - just surprisingly comfortable?" It was true. Whatever it was made of, even the lace was soft against her skin. "I was a bit hot last night." Which was also true, though it had nothing to do with her clothing choices, but if he was uncomfortable-

"It's fine," Clef said, and he smiled at her crookedly. "It looks good on you. I don't mind it."

"If you're sure..." Umi waited until he nodded, then slipped under the covers and switched off her light. "Good night."

"Sleep well." Clef turned away from her, pulling the covers up over his shoulders.

In a few months, when they were more settled - and Clef was less stressed, less concerned his distant from Cephire could cause anyone harm - Umi would chance asking. If she was even still curious by then.

Maybe on their honeymoon trip; she could wait until the summer.

## End Notes

To be continued in the next fic, Close Quarters.

I'm going to be focusing on some non-fanfiction writing for November, so there might not be new fanfiction from me until nearer the end of December or even January.

I'm currently contemplating a Presea POV one-shot, but we'll see what happens when I pick this back up.

I hope all of you are well! ♥

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