

Chapter 1 Part 3

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At a quick pace, Steano and I headed toward the academy building.

"We're going too slow!"

I nodded lightly at his voice. We ran through the streets with all our might despite being out of breath. Wiping the sweat off my face, I kept moving my feet single-mindedly and entered a familiar section of the streets. I could see the academy, and at the same time, I could hear a clear voice echoing all the way to where I am at.

"Hey, Aldia, Steano! You guys are late~."

When we reached the front of the academy gate, there were familiar faces waiting for us. I felt like everything had really been reset. It was nostalgic, but I also wanted to curse myself for being unable to keep them away from their mortal fate. Waiting for Steano, who was a little late, we approached our friends who were waiting for us.

"We've been waiting forever. We promised to meet up early yesterday, didn't we?"

"Yeah, sorry... something came up."

"Haa, Steano aside, Aldia, it's rare for you to be late."

I lowered my head at the complaint mixed with a sigh.

"Well, my bad."

"Seriously. Reflect on it."

Petra Farban, a classmate and model student who was always with us. She has beautiful bright blond hair and deep green eyes. With a strong posture, she never hesitated to speak her mind to anyone. It was unclear why she was with us, but looking back now, I can recognize that her presence was an essential part of our group.

"Sorry about that."

"Do you think an apology will make up for being late on such an important day? It's really unacceptable!"

She is pretty angry, especially with Steano.

Yeah, it was always like this... I feel nostalgic just having this exchange.

Steano shrank back. I was surprised by how significant her presence was, and at the same time, it made me feel nostalgic.

"Petra, it's always normal for these two to be a little absent-minded. Don't get so worked up."

"Haa..."

"On the contrary, wouldn't it be strange if Steano was being responsible?"

Hearty laughter was heard as we followed along.

The huge guy next to Petra is Ambros. He is also a classmate. He has short reddish-brown hair and strong brown eyes that seem to harbor a firm will.

Unconsciously, scenes from the previous life came to mind, and he was just as reliable as he looked.

He was a strong man, strong enough to become the Kingdom's Fortress Commander. Even when wearing heavy equipment, he was a monster in terms of endurance, capable of fighting for long periods of time.

"Ambros, nice assist!"

"Steano? What's up with you getting carried away even though you were late?"

"Ugh...! D-Don't glare at me like that. It ruins your beauty."

Steano tried to join in with Ambros, but when Petra glared at him again, he hunched his back like a small animal and hid behind me.

"Hey, Al. Petra is really scary... she can kill someone with just her eyes."

"That's your own fault... you know that, right?"

"No, but you're just as guilty for being late, right? Why do I have to be the only one Petra glares at?"

"It's about your attitude... at least show some remorse."

I think pinpointing her dislikes is Steano's weakness.

Even though it was before the graduation ceremony, there was an electrifying atmosphere that lacked tension. Amidst all that, a fluffy atmosphere came from the side.

"Seriously~ Petra, don't be so tense. Like Bros said, it's about Steano, so he probably just overslept. Forgive him."

That was Mia, showing her white teeth with a grin. She was poking Steano's back with her finger, shaking her distinctive blue hair.

"I did not oversleep."

"Heh~, it's definitely oversleeping. Steano has bed hair, you know?"

"What, really!?"

"It was a lie~."

Mia was having fun teasing Steano.

"Hey, Mia, let's talk seriously..."

"It's fine, isn't it? We should enjoy the graduation ceremony, right?"

Petra's unwavering courage in the face of Mia's words was genuinely impressive. I wonder how the world looks through her jewel-like azure eyes. It piqued my curiosity a bit.

In the past, I had only met Petra once on the battlefield. I remember feeling immense despair and sadness when I witnessed her death.

"Hey, Al, you think so too, right?"

"Me?"

"Yeah! It's better to have fun, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I think Mia is right."

She was from the Vulcan Empire. I had no idea what she would do after graduation, but I think there will probably be a future where we fight together in this life. She was a troublemaker from the beginning of her enrollment, but by the time graduation came around, she had top-class skills in close-quarters combat and archery. I feel conflicted because she is excellent, but that was probably why she was sent to the battlefield. However, I would not abandon Mia this time.

"...Mm? What's wrong, Al?"

Her blue eyes stared at me intently.

"Nothing."

"Oh, really? I thought you might have fallen for me, Al!"

Unpleasant memories resurface, but I should just put that aside for now because nothing tragic has happened yet. While smiling wryly at Mia's teasing, I avert my gaze from her.

"Petra-senpai, please don't scold Al-senpai. It's only been about a minute since the original meeting time."

This time my junior, Addy, spoke up in my defense.

When I first met him, I thought he had a cool personality, but I was shocked when I later learned he was just shy. He now speaks more confidently in this group.

However, Petra waves her golden hair and dismisses Addy's words.

"A minute late is still late. Addy becomes so sweet when it comes to Aldia... What? Do you like him or something?"

"N-No, it's not like that! I just respect him!"

"Well, if two guys do that, it's just creepy and disgusting."

"T-That's terrible, Petra-senpai!"

Addy turns away from Petra, looking embarrassed.

"Addy."

"Al-senpai..."

"Thank you for standing up for me."

I did not realize before how much Addy was attached to me. I had a junior who admired me. I felt that I should have paid more attention to him. Addy looks delighted and raises his voice toward Petra as if to provide further support.

"I mean, Al-senpai was definitely accompanying Steano-senpai, who overslept! Yes, that's definitely it!"

"Yeah, you're right."

"That's disrespectful to your senpai! And Petra, don't agree with him!"

Somehow, they were a compatible group. Just as Steano made a perfect retort, Petra's gaze shifted to the shade of a tree. She had been hearing the sound of rustling leaves and grass for a while now.

"...So, what about Tredia-chan, who's been hiding in the shade all this time?"

The girl, sneaking behind a big tree near the academy gate, flinched when Petra called out to her. When everyone's attention turned to her, she slowly shook her head from side to side.

"A-Are you... talking to me?"

Tredia is my junior, who is two years younger than me. She is a shy, introverted girl who prefers not to be in the spotlight. Even when she was with us and involved in activities, I have memories of her hiding behind someone's back or lurking in the shadows. Every time I saw her, it seemed like she was hiding from something.

"That's right. So, what do you think?"

"E-Er... um..."

"Being late is not good, right?"

"Um... I think it's... um... Steano-senpai's fault."

Tredia replied hesitantly with tears in her eyes.

I could not help but feel sorry for Tredia, who was fidgeting around and seeking help from those around her.

And as expected, Steano's handling is sloppy.

"Haa..."

When I sighed, Petra pursed her lips in response. Suddenly, all the gazes that were directed toward Tredia swiftly shifted toward me.

"Aldia? Do you have something to say?"

"It's nothing like that."

"If you have something to say, just say it."

I don't really have any complaints about Petra's words and actions. Having gone through so much suffering and having their life taken away, it was amazing to be able to see their familiar faces again in this situation. Petra's unchanging nostalgic attitude was what made me feel that the most.

"No, it's really nothing."

"_____?"

"It's just that I felt a bit sad thinking that we are graduating, that's all."

This sigh was not out of frustration with anyone. It was just something that came out involuntarily as the current situation in front of me moved me.

My lips curl into a smile, and I cannot help but feel happy. But that is just how much I am enjoying myself. I was genuinely overjoyed to meet with my friends again, whom I had wished to see one more time.

"Maybe it is. Graduation... is truly a bit sad."

"Yeah... that's right."

It was the last page of my youth that I had sent off. I believe it was probably a very beautiful memory.