

It took far more of Yuna's strength than she cared to admit just to float down the hallway. Her gaze remained fixed on the marble floor and, every so often, she bobbed closer to it before jerking back up.

"Apologies, Princess. Had I known you were going to use one of the sleep seeds, I'd have brought a heal seed with me."

Heavy, thudding footsteps punctuated her attendant's lisping claim. Yuna glanced right and saw a green, comically-oversized dinosaur foot stomp down beside her. She groaned and rubbed the wing-like edges of her head. As if it wasn't bad enough that she was going to show up to the opening assembly late, she was going to do so accompanied by a dracozolt. Something none of her classmates had ever seen and were sure to be put off by.

Just another thing working against me besides my dragon-typing, she thought.

"Why the long face?" The dracozolt poked his tiny, yellow head into Yuna's field of vision. "Are you nervous? It's perfectly normal to be nervous when starting any new endeavor. God knows how terrified I was of coming to work for your family."

"Y-Yeah. Nervous," Yuna mumbled, rubbing her hands together. "Baraz, do you think I'll be able to make any friends here?"

He paused mid-step. Baraz's beady eyes blinked rapidly. "Of course you will. Once people see how kindhearted you are, they'll surely come to view you as someone they can trust." He resumed walking. "Now, come. If we don't hurry, I fear they'll take away all the breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day, after all."

"Right." She found no relief from Baraz's words, but still floated after him. What was stopping Noctum from grabbing food for her to eat later, anyway?

"Gigigi!"

The slamming of a metal grate jolted Yuna to attention. Her ectoplasmic tail crinkled. Ahead of her, an air vent plate lay on the floor beside a stone column. And next to it was one of those tiny, gray sludge things with the hex-nut heads. What were they called again... meltin? It didn't matter, because the real problem— or, rather, problems emerged from the exposed air vent.

A greedent belly-flopped onto the floor, scattering dust across the pristine tiles. He quickly held his hands up to catch an equally-dusty nickit. "Gotcha, boss." Greedent lowered the small fox to the ground.

"Nyek nyek! What'd I tell ya, Rookie? The air vents would be our ticket into this hoity-toity place." Nickit turned and grinned at his apparent partner. "Now all we've gotta do is find us

something worth nicking! And then the whole kingdom will know of the terror that is the Crimson Zephyr!"

"Hey, you two! What do you think you're doing?" Baraz squawked, thumping his massive tail against the floor. Both crooks hopped up in surprise, then looked at one another.

"B-Boss... I thought you said everyone was gonna be in some kinda meeting," Rookie said, clutching his rotund belly.

"I did say that. But I guess we didn't account for a couple of butt-ugly janitors wandering around the place." The Crimson Zephyr swished his broom-like tail in Yuna's direction. "Buon giorno. If you two lugs know what's good for ya... you'll walk away and forget you ever saw us. Otherwise, you'll face the wrath of the one and only Nickit Carpaccio!"

"Uh, boss, is it really such a good idea to tell them your name? They can tell the police who you are, can't they?" Rookie pointed out. Nickit's eyes widened and he thwacked Rookie with his tail.

"Why didn't you pipe up earlier, nut-for-brains?" Carpaccio huffed, his tail releasing a shadowy plume.

Yuna flinched the moment she saw dark energy crackling around Carpaccio's tail. "Maybe we should listen to them. We're already running late."

"You would dare to threaten the Aeon Princess and one of her attendants? Have you no shame?" Baraz asked, ignoring Yuna's words.

"We just crawled through a filthy air vent," Carpaccio retorted, smirking. "A master thief ain't above anything... including cheap shots." And, with a flick of his tail, a seed shot in Baraz's direction. He spat up a ball of dragonfire, incinerating the seed before it could burst apart. "Now, Rookie!" Carpaccio called.

Rookie curled up into a ball and a metallic sheen overtook him. Carpaccio Tail Slapped him, sending him bowling toward Baraz. Yuna gasped. Without thinking, she shot toward Rookie with a burst of speed. But the large size difference resulted in her getting flattened and ending up sprawled out on the ground with the entire room spinning.

"Nyek nyek nyek! And here I thought bright 'mons went to this school," Carpaccio taunted, dark energy gathering around his mouth. Yuna looked up in horror and braced for more pain, only for a tan, brown, and yellow blur to strike a squealing Carpaccio. When she righted herself, she found Rookie lying on top of Carpaccio. Both twitched from lingering static electricity.

"B-Baraz?" Yuna looked at her attendant.

A large, beak-shaped lightning bolt dissipated around his tiny upper half. "Goodness me. It's... been a while since these old bones have had to resort to that attack." Baraz stretched out his arms. "Well now... even if you're going to be late, showing up with a couple of bandits in tow should win you a few favors, don't you think?"

Yuna's cheeks burned.

XxX

The oak doors creaked when Baraz threw them open with his tail. Yuna hoped the chatter of her peers would drown out the noise, but was horrified to find the dining hall dead silent. She floated next to Baraz, looking at the twelve columns of white, neatly-arranged glass tables containing a wide assortment of pokémon. Yuna never had so many sets of eyes on her before, not even at the functions her parents made her attend back home. At that moment, the chandelier hanging from the glass-domed ceiling became the most interesting thing in the room. She looked at the many crystal bulbs seated on tiny metal hooks, silently begging everyone to ignore her.

"Ah, hello there! Sorry to barge in on you all like this." Baraz chuckled. Carpaccio and Rookie sat tied up beside him, still conked out from the Bolt Beak collision.

That's when the whispers started. Though Yuna tried her best to filter them out, some of the comments slipped through her mental cracks.

"Eww! What in heaven's name is that thing?"

"Its upper and lower halves don't even match!"

"God, I heard dragons were ugly, but that makes me want to vomit!"

"We have to go to class with him?"

"He better just be hired help."

"Hey, I think that's the Aeon Princess next to him."

Yuna shrank back, hiding behind Baraz's tail. She wanted to climb back into bed and forget this all happened. Yuna was a joltik in a room full of tyrannitar and there were figurative feet ready to squish her. "I... I..." Her tail shriveled up. "Baraz, can we leave now?"

"What's all this commotion, then?"

Wingbeats drew a sharp "Eep!" from Yuna. She floated out from her hiding spot the moment a charizard landed in front of her and tucked in his blue-green wings. Yuna brought an arm up to

her mouth to stifle her gasp. Why are his scales orange? Shouldn't his scales be black like Noctum's?

"Ah, Chancellor Vortex, my sincere apologies." Baraz awkwardly bowed, which didn't help his lisp. Some chuckles rose up from students in the distance.

"You're seven minutes and thirty-two seconds late," a gardevoir declared, teleporting in next to Vortex and nudging up the glasses resting on her face. "The Chancellor made it very clear you were to arrive at eight sharp to be introduced to the student body. He is a very busy 'mon and cannot afford to idle about."

"Easy, Arianna." Vortex held the golden cane in his right hand up to Arianna's waist. The corvinknight figurine atop it sparkled under the chandelier's light. "Let's hear them out, first."

"Yuna here ran a bit late because she found these two scoundrels trying to break in through an air duct." Baraz gestured to the thieves beside him. "She recognized the disadvantageous match-up and called for help right away. As I was in the vicinity to check up on her, I leapt to her aid and, together, we gave these brutes the once-over." He jabbed the air with his tiny elbows.

Yuna gulped, knowing that was far from the truth. Arianna tugged at a sleeve on her red-and-white suit. Her expression hadn't wavered from the icy look she'd popped in with. Vortex, however, raised an amused brow. He adjusted his white cravat, tucked the cane under his elbow, and threw his head back in a hearty laugh while issuing applause.

"Marvelous! Splendid! Quite a way to make an entrance," he declared, drawing surprised gasps from the students. "I daresay you won't have any trouble settling in with that kind of ingenuity, Princess." Vortex winked at Yuna, whose cheeks immediately flushed. She had to resist the urge to hide behind Baraz's tail again.

Vortex turned to the crowd of students, the edges of his charcoal-gray suit jacket fluttering against his hips. "Now then... I'd like to take the opportunity to introduce all of you to the special new student I had mentioned earlier."

Arianna locked eyes with Yuna. She nudged her glasses up and, next thing Yuna knew, an unseen force had dragged her up beside Chancellor Vortex. He motioned to her with his cane. "This is Princess Dreepy Yunavresca. She is here as an exchange student. Part of a goodwill gesture by the Aeon Kingdom to show their commitment to the peace treaty that's due to be signed.

"She'll be joining the third-year class, but I expect all of you treat her with respect and dignity. You are all Horizon Academy students, after all!" Vortex thrust both arms to the side, flinging tiny embers around him that popped like small fireworks. Yuna's tail shriveled. He was certainly more... animated than the charizard she was used to.

Murmurs rose up from the students once again. Yuna couldn't help but look around. A ponyta garbed in a scarlet robe looked at her intently. When her gaze crossed his, he turned with a huff, shielding his face with his pink, puffy mane. Whispers drew her attention to the Chancellor. Arianna was whispering something to him. Vortex nodded and the two promptly teleported to the other end of the dining hall.

Yuna floated upward and saw Vortex standing on a raised platform behind a lectern. Arianna stood at his side, looking straight down at the planner in her right arm. "There's one last matter to discuss and I'm sure it's something you third-years are salivating at the bit over." Vortex tapped the top of his snout. "I'm talking, of course, about the annual Crowne Cup!" He threw his arms upward, creating more embers. A banner then unfurled on the wall behind him, unveiling a crimson tapestry with a golden sword and shield woven into it. Yuna focused on the crown positioned on the sword's hilt. It was a nice design.

"Your official team assignments will be given out at the opening banquet," Vortex explained. "This year, however, we'll be holding a preliminary challenge." He pointed his cane at the student tables while they gasped and whispered to one another. Yuna frowned. There was already going to be some sort of test? She wasn't ready for anything like that.

"The meltan have distributed a list of approved supplies to each of your mailboxes. You'll have the rest of the day to head into town and get any items on the list... assuming you want to, of course." Vortex chuckled.

He leaned over so Arianna could whisper to him again. Vortex nodded. "Right then. That's it for now. I hope to see you all at this evening's banquet." He threw his head back and laughed while Arianna grabbed his shoulder. The two disappeared in a blue blink.

"Uh, does that mean breakfast is over?" Baraz frowned. "And what about these tw—"

"I've got 'em," a burly voice announced. Yuna squealed and turned around. A konkeldurr in a purple security uniform held the thieves up in one hand. He threw them over his shoulder and sauntered off, whistling a jaunty tune while his key ring jingled on his belt.

By the time Yuna collected herself, the dining hall had burst into a flurry of activity with students chattering excitedly. Yuna's ectoplasm rippled and it was a matter of seconds before she brought her arms up to her head. "Nngh. T-Too loud," she said. "Baraz... m-maybe we can go get something in town later when I go to get supplies?" Yuna looked around the room nervously. Again, several sets of eyes were on her. The ponyta from earlier looked right at her. His tiara twinkled under the sunlight.

... wait, why did he have a tiara?

"Princess?" Baraz waved an arm in front of her face. "You're looking a bit pale."

"I—" Yuna shook her head. "Sorry. Having trouble focusing with... with..."

Torn paper echoed from the hall behind Yuna. Her tail crinkled. She whirled around and her face went even paler when she found a toxicity balling up paper between her hands. She caught Yuna's eye and glared at her.

"What are you looking at, Tiny?" Toxicity held up her hand and dissolved the paper in a few globs of purple acid. "I'm just doing my part to keep the halls of our fine school clean. Got a problem with that?"

"N-No. Of course not!" Yuna squeaked, eyes drawn to Toxicity's leather jacket. She floated close to Baraz, who turned around.

"Oh, hello! Are you one of Princess Yuna's new classmates?" He stepped toward her and extended an arm. "I'm Dracozolt Baraz, one of her attendants."

"Dracowhatnow? Look, I don't really care." Toxicity turned away, shrugging. "Just tell Princess Tiny not to look at me funny. Otherwise, we're gonna have problems." She adjusted the coat's collar and walked off, shoving her hands into her pockets. Yuna stared at the obstagoon graffiti scrawled on the back of the coat in confusion.

"Um... I think we should head to town now," Yuna whispered, rubbing her arms together nervously.

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Thank God I don't have any neck muscles. I would've tweaked 'em for sure by now, Yuna glumly thought. She'd spent the whole morning looking at the school floor and now she couldn't take her eyes off the cobblestone streets of Horizon Gardens. Sure, she could brush this latest episode off as a product of all the gemstone-laded buildings reflecting sunlight. But in the back of her mind she could hear her father scolding her meek posture.

Fortunately for Yuna, crackling embers and squeaky wagon wheels kept her from receding too far into her own thoughts. The charizard walking beside her had a certain bounce to his step and his tail-flame was larger than usual. "Okay, Noctum, I know you want to say something. Go ahead." Yuna waved her right arm toward his black tail.

"With how that gardevoir described the town, I wasn't expecting there to be much here. But I was wrong." Eyes sparkling, Noctum held up the book pressed to his cream-colored chest. "Look! A dozen new stamps for my collection." He opened it and pointed to a stamp in the top-right corner of the page. "See the wooloo? Isn't it cute? I'll bet it's soft and snuggly... and won't shock me when I try to hug it like the mareep back home."

Yuna sighed. Do I really need to remind him that we walked through the town to get to the school from the rail station? Or that the mareep back home have Static? She had her mouth open, but shut it when she saw Noctum smiling at the newly-completed page in his stamp book.

"I'll have to be careful while we're here. Can't go blowing all my salary on stamps." Chuckling, Noctum closed the book and put it back into his satchel. "By the way, something wrong, Princess? You've been awfully quiet until now."

"Uh..." Yuna squeezed her arms together. "It's been a confusing day. I've only met one other student... briefly. But there's going to be this big banquet in a few hours. I'm not sure what to do." She clasped the pendant around her neck nervously. There was also the looming threat of the introductory Crowne Cup test Chancellor Vortex had mentioned. Even with no idea what it was, it still terrified Yuna. Because if it involved any battling...

"You have to put your best foot forward." Noctum stomped his right foot down on the path. "Figuratively speaking, of course."

"Meaning?" Yuna tilted her head.

"Well, you are the Aeon Princess, but you can't expect that to impress your classmates," Noctum replied. "They're nobility, too. So, you might have to try and strike up a friendly conversation."

Easier said than done. Yuna fidgeted with her pendant. "You're personable. How about a suggestion?"

"That's easy. Smile!" Noctum puffed out his chest. "People like warmth and friendliness. Nothing conveys that like a smile. Watch." He turned to his right, grinning, and waved at a passing ice darumaka. "Hello! Lovely weather we're having, isn't it?"

The darumaka froze mid-step. Her eyes fixed on Noctum's toothy maw. "Ahh! Don't eat me, mister! I don't taste good!" She turned tail and ran off before Noctum could even retort. Yuna floated over and pet Noctum's back while his tail flame dimmed.

It flared right back up, however. "Okay, new idea!" Noctum clapped his hands together. "That bookshop we were in had this book called Fire & Fighting: 151 Fun, Simple Ice-Breakers. Let's go buy it... and you can take it with you to the banquet." He set the handle of the wagon down. "Actually, I'll get it since I'm faster. Wait right here."

"Hang on, Noctum, I—"

Noctum zoomed away and Yuna threw an arm up over her face. "Never mind," she whispered, brushing dust off her pendant. Yuna couldn't knock his enthusiasm. She just wished it could rub

off on her. Yuna floated over to the wagon Noctum was pulling. She lay on a tarp covering the box of supplies she'd purchased.

I've never even used some of these things before. Wands, gravelrocks, iron thorns... Yuna fiddled with the tarp. The items' names were apt enough just based on what she'd seen in the store. Yet she couldn't help but worry how she'd manage to hold onto them with her nubby arms. Surely, these things were built for pokémon with fingers? Something that would continue to be a problem for her until she could reach her final evolution.

"Wish I knew how to do that," she mumbled, tracing a circle through the tarp fabric. "At least I won't have to listen to Mother saying 'Respect your body and it'll respect you back,' whenever I ask about evolution."

"Help! Somebody help me!"

"I'm trying to help you, but you are letting your sins drag you away!"

Yuna's head shot up. The shouts — one nasally and one deep, guttural, and distorted — came from behind the bakery next to Yuna. The shouts had made the furrrou and stoutland across the street from Yuna stop. "Hello! Um, how do we call the police?" Yuna asked. "I think someone's in trouble." She gestured toward the bakery.

"If it's coming from the shop, then let the staff handle it," Stoutland said. He walked off with his furrrou partner following him. Yuna again turned back to the store and squealed when she heard a loud slam.

"You smell of ether. But Natus' love can absolve you of such sin!"

An orbeetle flew out in front of Yuna's wagon, panic strewn across his face. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Leave me alone," he shouted. "Help! Police!" Before he had the chance to float away, three energy balls struck the back of his head. He skipped along the ground like a playground ball. His bag fell several feet away from him. Hand-written notes lay strewn about the middle of the path.

Yuna's reflex was to try and dive under the tarp, but it wouldn't budge. Heavy, thudding footsteps made her torso wither. Oh, Noctum, where are you? We've got a big problem! She gasped when a large, four-legged beast in a big stone mask and black, shredded robes lumbered out from beside the bakery. Broken chains clattered around its ankles with each step it took.

"This isn't helping you. You're only piling on more sins to weigh down your soul," the beast hissed. "You work for the school. You are a slave to the ether! And I, Xeromus, must guide those awash in its sin to Natus' eternal love."



A crude sign of rusted metal clanged against Xeromus' robed chest. In unown, it read, "Repent! The Darkest Day is nigh!"

"I... I only started working at the school last month." The orbeetle looked despondently at his notes. He glanced at his bag, then raised his hands up. "If it's money you want, I don't have much. Truly! I've only received one pay check and my savings are tied up in loan repayments!" The spots on his head turned pink. His bag quivered as a pink glow surrounded it.

Xeromus caught sight of this. He slammed a foreleg on the ground. That was enough to get the orbeetle to cancel his telekinesis and resume screaming for help. "Cease your prattling. I am your help. You see... but you are blind! Even a lowly omen like me can tell."

At last, Yuna had gotten the tarp open. Though she wanted to hide — God, Xeromus was huge — she wound up grabbing hold of a seed with tiny star-shaped patterns on it. She silently hovered up. Xeromus raised a glowing foreleg to strike at Orbeetle. Yuna hurled the seed forward. It hit the top of Xeromus' helmet and shattered. His leg slammed down to Orbeetle's right. Xermous staggered about, growling.

He looked away from Orbeetle and shouted, "Yes, yes I'm doing what you asked. What you want. It takes time... it takes time..."

Okay, so that confused him. Yuna tried to signal to Orbeetle to run, but he was still fixated on Xeromus. Fear had paralyzed him as it almost did to Yuna. She decided now was as good a time as any to make her presence known. "H-Hey! Leave him alone, you big oaf!"

"Alone? No, he is not alone. There are too many sinners," Xeromus snarled. He looked around, blinking his beady, yellow eyes rapidly. It shocked Yuna that Xeromus wouldn't face her. Did confusion mess with his senses that much?

"How is he sinning, huh? You're the one attacking him for no reason." Yuna floated up, a determined look on her face. "And that's going to get your behind thrown in jail."

"Jail? I am no villain. I'm a worthless nobody." Xeromus smacked a foreleg on the ground. "But even someone worthless can serve a purpose." Loud snorts rang out across the street. "And you... you smell of Natus, whoever you are! Are you enlightened? Has His love blanketed you as it has me?"

Are you sure that's not your own musk you're smelling? Yuna thought, reeling from Xeromus' nauseating stench. She had to keep him talking, though. Surely someone saw this and was calling the police. "You're a nobody, huh?"

"As worthless and expendable as the garbage in your sewers." Xeromus chuckled. His sign clanked against the base of his helmet.

"What kind of person calls themselves garbage?" Yuna narrowed her eyes at him.

"This kind!" Xeromus jerked his head left, then right. His helmet and chains rattled. "You are drinking the champagne of lying aristocrats! Dark and light aren't binary. Worth and purpose are not black and white. They form a gray street of many directions!" Xeromus doubled over in a coughing fit. Yuna looked to Orbeetle, who had finally collected his wits and floated away into a nearby greenery. The timing was perfect, too, as Xeromus had stopped swaying about. He locked eyes with Yuna and stomped toward her.

"You walk a straight path because that is what the ether tells you to do," Xeromus growled. The color drained from Yuna's face. She dove back into the supply crate to look for another one of those seeds. "But Natus' fumes cling to your body. You have the power to break free... to pick your own actions! Rise against these ether-users or you will become like the rest of them... and your 'choices' won't matter at— ngarrgh!"

The temperature spiked around Yuna. She poked her head up from the crate and found Noctum backing away from Xeromus. Smoke billowed out from his nostrils. "Don't you dare lay a grubby claw on her!" he snarled.

"Fool! I'm trying to save her, but the ether has blinded you to that," Xeromus spat. Red, blue, and yellow energy balls surrounded him. He launched them at Noctum. Yuna recognized the Tri-Attack and darted out from the box straight into the attack's line. The energy balls fizzled out against her head.

"What?" Xeromus froze in place. "You weren't supposed to jump in like that." He threw his head back and laughed. "So, you are resisting the ether. But clinging to these ether-users will erode your will. Your purpose!" Xeromus held his head high. "Stand aside. I must see to it that this 'mon is—"

Xeromus tensed up, then hopped to his right. Ice Shards whizzed past him. He growled and shook his helmeted head. "It seems we'll have to resume this discussion at a later date." Xeromus' sign glowed with silver energy. A rainbow beam surrounded him and whisked him off into the sky seconds before more Ice Shards came flying in. Yuna squealed and flopped to the ground. Noctum's eyes widened, but he kept his wits and shot three fireballs to melt them away.

"You folks okay?" an abomasnow security officer asked, stomping over to their location. "Got a call from the greenery about a commotion. What was that thing?" He scratched his head.

Yuna picked herself up off the ground, breathing heavily as she processed what had just happened. "I... I have no idea. That thing was nuts. Spoke in nothing but riddles." She clutched the sides of her head and shivered.

Noctum put a hand on Yuna's back. "Princess, you shouldn't have put yourself at risk like that." He frowned. "But I shouldn't have left you alone. I'm terribly sorry."

"It's fine, Noctum." Yuna waved him off. "Neither of us could've expected something like that." They looked silently at one another, until the faint buzzing of wings drew their attention left. Orbeetle floated over to them, clutching his bag and beaming.

"Oh, goodness me. Thank you so much, m'dear." Orbeetle bowed his bulbous head in Yuna's direction repeatedly. "I was heading back to the school when that horrid beast ambushed me out of nowhere. He took one look at some of my research notes and flew into a rage." He shrank back from Yuna, shivering. "I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't stepped in."

"It was nothing," Yuna said, though she was still in shock that she did step in against Xeromus. She wanted to change the subject quickly. "So, you're a teacher at the school, then?"

"Yes." He adjusted his grip on his bag. "Where are my manners? Professor Orbeetle Cid." He extended a hand to Yuna. "I'm, err, new to Horizon Academy. I teach history."

Yuna took his hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you. I'm—"

"This is Princess Dreepy Yunavresca of the Aeon Kingdom," Noctum butted in, presenting her with an extended left wing.

"Ah, of course. Forgive me, I've never seen a dragon up close before." Cid bowed his head once again. "A pleasure, Your Majesty. And a shame we couldn't meet under better circumstances."

"It's really not a big deal," Yuna whispered, cheeks burning. She wanted to snap at Noctum, but knew he meant well.

"Actually, I think you're in my period three history class, so we'll be working together this year," Cid explained, smiling.

"Oh, really? Guess I can look forward to that, then." Yuna returned the smile, relieved she'd at least know someone going into the start of classes. Even if the circumstances behind their meeting were a bit... odd.

"Hate to break up this little pow-wow... but I've gotta get you all back to the academy," Abomasnow said, attaching a strange crystal to a Velcro strap on his vest. "Just finished reporting this incident and Chancellor Vortex says he needs you three in his office right away." He faced Yuna. "Said something about your parents wanting to speak with you."

Yuna gulped. As if this day couldn't get any worse.