

Birthright

The prince's guard

Von Gary

Prolog: Prologue

"General Hanai!"

The armored man turned to watch a servant run towards him, come to a stop and struggle to deliver his message, gasping for air.

"... Excuse me, sir... but the 5th prince wishes for you to join him... in the conference room... at once."

"Did something happen?"

"N...No, sir. Not that I know of. He just told me to come get you immediately."

"I see." His worry nipped in the bud, Hanai allowed himself to relax again and glanced toward the door the servant had come through.

So the prince had already heard about his arrival back at the capital. Not that it surprised him - the prince always seemed to be formidably aware of his surroundings - but he couldn't deny the excitement that sped up his heart at the thought of meeting him again. If the prince called for him the moment he had reached the castle, the general allowed himself to believe, he had to have missed him as well.

"Thank you, I will go see him right away."

Hanai nodded to dismiss the servant who scurried away with impressive speed, then started to head towards the conference room in the west wing. He wondered if he had acted as nervous as the servant, back when *he* had first started working at the castle.

A past memory brought a soft smile to his lips.

'You need a job, right? So how about you start working for me?'

Hanai would never forget the way those amber eyes had stared at him - *into him* - after their owner had asked him that question a long time ago. He had witnessed the same hypnotizing look many times ever since. Never had it failed to make Hanai feel as though it could stop time itself.

'Working for you? What kind of work could a kid like you have to offer?'

A loud, cheerful laugh echoed in the general's memory as he headed up the stairs and down a hallway, the walls festooned with old paintings of the dynasty. A teenager's

portrait caught his attention.

On it the 5th prince looked just a little younger than back when they had first met and he had guffawed at his question. He had the same spiky, black hair. The same freckled nose. The same happy yet unreadable eyes.

'You still haven't figured it out? I didn't expect you to be that slow! I'm—'

The prince stopped his impatient pacing up and down the conference room when the door opened to reveal the general, and an expression of utter joy replaced the frown on his face. Hanai's heart leapt in response.

The moment he had closed the door behind him, arms found their way around his neck and pulled him down into a kiss - eager, impatient and kind, like the prince himself.

It left the general no choice but to melt into it.

"You've been gone for too long!" came the reproach as soon as their embrace had loosened, and judging, amber eyes looked up at Hanai.

The prince was unable to hide the happiness that shone in his eyes though, and so the general smiled regardless.

"I missed you too, Yuu."

The prince sighed and stole another kiss before he released Hanai and moved toward the conference table, where all kinds of notes and papers lay spread.

"Father went to Lorenzia to check on Wataru and left me in charge but the farmers have been complaining about bad crops because of the new reservoir dam, the merchants want new roads, and the lords and ladies keep asking for a party...!"

"Prince Wataru? Is your brother alright?"

"Yeah, I think the visit's mostly for diplomatic reasons anyway."

"Sounds like a lot has been going on while I was away..."

"That's why I keep telling you to stay, you know?" Once again a pouting glance was sent the general's way who had joined the prince at the table.

"I'm just following your father's orders."

"I'll talk to him again when he gets back. You're a great general, but I need you here too!"

The words brought a light blush to Hanai's cheeks and he cleared his throat to distract from it.

"Well, I *am* here now, so let me help you. The farmers' problems first..." Hanai leant over the table to inspect the documents, his mind already at work.

Time passed. A hand slipped into his to intertwine their fingers while he and the prince discussed the issues. A thumb gently ran over the back of the royal's hand as the general offered a solution. A kiss was exchanged when the lovers allowed themselves to take a break. Two hearts beat excitedly in the conference room while the rest of the kingdom went about its regular afternoon business.

"I'm Yuuichirou Tajima! The 5th prince and son of the king of Glora. Nice to meet you!"

