

# MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

AKUMI AGITOGI

8





Akumi Agitogi

Illustration by  
Tsukiho Tsukioka

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AKUMI AGITOGI

Translation by David Musto

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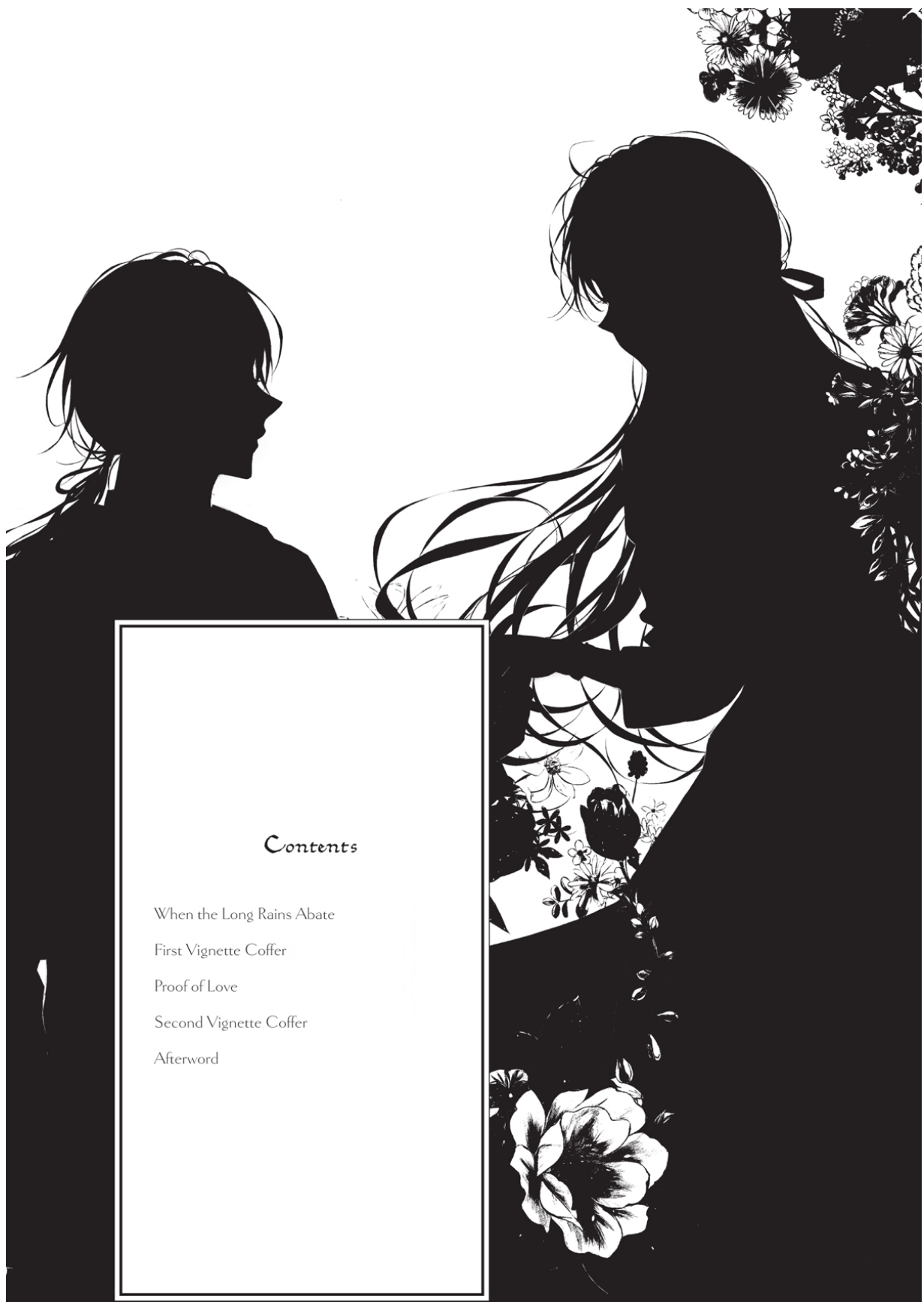
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When  
the  
Long  
Rains  
Abate

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“Dang, someone’s tired, huh? Just married, and you already look like death warmed over.”

These were the first words out of Zen Koumyouin’s mouth when he met with Kiyoka.

It was noon on a weekday, and a balmy spring atmosphere had settled over the lounge of the Imperial Hotel, the kind that put one to sleep.

There were only a handful of other people around since it was still early for guests to arrive.

This was the capital’s largest and most expensive luxury hotel, so naturally, it catered to a wealthy clientele. Well-dressed men and women of all ages, from both Japan and abroad, were scattered about the lounge enjoying their tea and coffee, or just having a pleasant chat.

Kiyoka took a seat on the edge of a foreign-made armchair and faced his former senior officer.

“...Just drop it, please,” he said curtly, giving a sigh.

Koumyouin repeatedly blinked his eyes.

“Whether it’s becoming the unit commander or getting hitched, you really never change, do you?”

“Should I take that as an insult?”

“C’mon now, don’t get mad.”

Kiyoka directed a look of exasperation at Koumyouin as the man guffawed.

The wedding ceremony to his long-betrothed fiancée Miyo had been held two days ago. The weather had been on their side, being right when the cherry blossom petals began to fall, and everyone he was acquainted with had said it was a wonderful wedding.

Kiyoka was relieved it had all somehow managed to come together; he’d been so busy on the day of the ceremony, to say nothing of the period leading up to it, that he’d almost missed his own wedding.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t been able to so much as catch his breath since.

There was a plateful of matters that needed his special attention; from those that pertained to his private life, such as making courtesy calls and thanking the ceremony guests, to those that pertained to work, such as investigating and dealing with the leg of the Earth Spider, which had nearly ruined his wedding day.

It was little wonder he looked tired. And in truth, Kiyoka felt a profound physical exhaustion.

However, he still questioned whether Koumyouin should be telling a newly married man he looked like “death warmed over.”

Koumyouin was as tactless as ever.

*Though...he's definitely gotten older.*

Kiyoka had known the man for quite a long time.

Koumyouin had been a member of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit ever since Kiyoka had first started collaborating with them.

In those days, he'd had the air of a rowdy young man, but any vestige of that was now long gone.

Although his rough features and toned physique hadn't changed, there were now tiny wrinkles etched around his keen, scarred eyes, and there were strands of white in his disheveled hair. His way of speaking and mannerisms were still plenty uncouth, but something was clearly different about him.

This was likely because he was getting up there in age himself, and...

“I've only been away for a few years, but it feels like the capital's changed a whole lot since I've been gone,” Koumyouin softly murmured, gazing out of the large lounge window.

“...It's expanding and growing every day.”

Buildings were being reconstructed in Western style left and right, paved roads and gas streetlights were becoming more and more commonplace, and the fashion of the people's outfits changed with dizzying regularity.

The change was striking, even in just a few years' time. Kiyoka could sympathize with what Koumyouin must have been feeling—that the capital had become a different world entirely after he'd been gone for only a short while.

“I know it's a little late to ask, but are you sure it was all right for you to come here today? It's just, you know, you must have a lot to do, right?” said Koumyouin.



“Yes, I don’t have much time to spare. But I have enough flexibility to take a half day off.”

“I get I may not be the best guy to say this, but...that deathly look on your face ain’t too convincing. Anyway, try to relax a little on this half day off of yours. Don’t you worry about me.”

“You know that’s an unreasonable ask...”

“Sorry, unreasonable stuff is all I ever ask for.”

Kiyoka sighed at Koumyouin, who leaned back in his chair with a smile.

“That’s not something to be proud about.”

“I ain’t proud or anything. It’s just how I am.”

“Fair enough,” Kiyoka replied brusquely, lacking the energy to protest any further.

A brief silence fell over them. On the low table in front of them, a cup filled with black coffee let off thin strips of steam, carrying the beverage’s signature aroma.

Perhaps it was because he was sitting with an old friend like Koumyouin, but Kiyoka started to feel slightly sentimental.

“If only he were here, too,” Koumyouin mumbled.

Kiyoka hadn’t been expecting to hear that. He slowly looked up. Koumyouin was gazing out the window with a vaguely lonesome expression on his face.

*For a second there, I could have sworn I’d blurted out my own feelings.*

Kiyoka had thought the same thing. If only he—Itsuto Godou—were there with them.

At times like this, Itsuto would always read the room, knowing whether to calm things down or liven them up. He was the sort of person who immediately jumped to mind when one thought about how to interact with others considerately.

There wasn’t anyone out there who had his gently squinting smile or drawling way of talking.

He had always worn a cheerful smile. He’d been a bright and caring man with a graceful and supple strength to him.

“Kiyoka, Gifts aren’t meant to be used to harm people. We’ve got ’em to protect people. Never forget that.”

That man had taught him a valuable lesson about being a Gift-user. Which was why—

“I wish he could have come to the ceremony.”

Kiyoka unconsciously expressed his true feelings. However, Koumyouin didn't laugh at him at all.

“Yeah. He would've been happier than anyone to hear about you getting married.”

“...”

Rather than voice his agreement or disagreement, Kiyoka simply looked at Koumyouin's hand, resting on the man's left knee.

His left leg was missing from the knee down. Koumyouin must have been wearing a prosthetic at the moment. That fateful day, he had been seriously wounded, and there had been no choice but to amputate it.

Even now, the memories of that day were fresh in Kiyoka's mind.

The day when Kiyoka lost someone precious to him, and he was pushed to find the resolve to completely change his life.

The weather outside was beautiful, and yet he could hear the sound of rain. The din of a downpour, loud and heavy, slamming into the thicket of trees.



If you asked him about his dreams for the future, he'd be hard-pressed for a response.

He liked to read books and research things he didn't know about. He was interested in history. He was also interested in literature. Along with old buildings and works of art. Ruins and gravesites. For as long as he could remember, he had been excited by studying the path humanity had walked.

However, he was at a loss as to whether he wanted to make any of those interests into a lifelong career.

This was what Kiyoka Kudou was like during his student days.

He had no clear idea of what he wanted to be or what he wanted to do. He wasn't certain about anything, really.

He just aimlessly continued to pursue knowledge, with the vague idea that he might become a researcher someday.

On the side, he would face off against Grotesqueries to fulfill his duty as a Gift-user. This was the sort of life he had been leading.

“All right, I’ll add this payment to the total and give it to you at the end of the month like usual. Thanks for your help with this incident.”

Kiyoka let out a sigh of relief in the tidy reception room of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. Though the space was rather plain, it still had a fair number of expensive furnishings.

In front of him, Commander Itsuto Godou pressed his confirmation stamp down on the documents.

“...Yessir. Thank you very much.”

“Appreciate the help today. You’re always so diligent, no matter what sort of request I have for you.”

“Just doing my job.”

Kiyoka gave a curt reply to Itsuto’s broad, bright smile.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had been established several decades ago to incorporate Gift-users—individuals who had made their living exterminating Grotesqueries since time immemorial—into the military’s fighting forces.

Like their forebears, the Gift-users of the military specialized in resolving incidents involving Grotesqueries. However, in the event of a national crisis, they would also be obliged to form a fighting force, using their Gifts on hostile forces to protect the populace and country. In that way, the Gift-users of the current age in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were quite different from the Gift-users of antiquity.

The current leader of the unit was the man sitting across from Kiyoka, Itsuto Godou. He was a superb Gift-user from the Godou family, a prestigious clan of Gift-users.

“Ha-ha-ha.” Itsuto laughed abruptly.

“...What is it?”

“I’m just thinking that you’ve really turned into a fine man, is all. You used to be a tiny little fella who could never get his Gift to work right, and now look at you.”

“That was a long time ago.”

Godou stared into the distance with a profound look in his eyes as he reminisced, coming off a bit like a sentimental old man.

Still, Kiyoka couldn't deny that Itsuto was something of an older brother or father figure to him.

They had known each other for over ten years.

Kiyoka's father, Tadakiyo Kudou, was a busy man as both a Gift-user and head of the Kudou family. Yet because of his weak constitution and demanding obligations, he'd never had much to do with his son Kiyoka or his daughter Hazuki.

As the heir of the Kudou Family, Kiyoka should have been learning how the head of the family conducted himself by watching his father.

Given his father's situation, however, that didn't happen very often.

With that in mind, from a young age Kiyoka had frequented the Godou household to receive guidance and coaching from Itsuto.

There, he learned not only the techniques and mindset he would need as a Gift-user, but also the knowledge required to lead other Gift-users.

Most of the things he couldn't gain through self-teaching, he had learned from Itsuto.

"...That reminds me, what is Yoshito up to? I know he's studying abroad," Kiyoka asked Godou, hoping to steer the conversation away from its awkward trajectory.

Kiyoka didn't have a particularly deep relationship with the man's son, Yoshito. He would occasionally spend time with him when going to and from the Godou estate.

"Ah," Itsuto replied dully, giving a strained smile. "That boy, well... I'm sure he's doing fine. He doesn't send a single word my way, but my wife gets a letter from him every now and then."

"...I see."

"He's rebelled against me at every damn turn, you see. He swore to me, 'I'm never gonna turn into a Gift-user like you,' and zipped right off to study abroad."

Kiyoka let his eyes wander, unsure how he was supposed to respond to all of this. At the same time, the look in Itsuto's eyes seemed to drift farther and farther into the distance.

"He went off on me about how the Gift-users in this country are behind the times and how he's gonna go learn about Gifts and arts in a country that's way more advanced than ours, but all of that had to be to spite me, huh? Ha-ha."

“I...”

Kiyoka almost replied in agreement before swallowing his words.

He recalled having the urge to do something to spite his parents before.

Kiyoka had almost no memories of spending time with his father, and his daily life was quite stifling, since his uptight mother always tried to force him to conform to her image of an ideal son.

Itsuto must have looked after his children more than Tadakiyo had Kiyoka. On top of that, while his wife certainly had some strange qualities, she was a loving and caring person.

Yoshito’s opposition to his parents surely had to come from a place of loneliness; but he also might have had his own vexations about the fact he was the second son, yet he still had to live up to the expectations people had for him as a Gift-user.

“I can tell from the look on your face that you have something to say.”

Itsuto had noticed Kiyoka lapsing into thought. But there was no way Kiyoka would tell the man just what had been on his mind now.

After all, Kiyoka himself had more complaints about his elders than he could count.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

After pausing briefly when Kiyoka evaded his question, Itsuto asked him another.

“Listen—”

*Not this again.* Exasperated, Kiyoka sidestepped Itsuto and interrupted him.

“If this is another invite to join the Unit, I’m not interested.”

“What? I haven’t said anything yet.”

“You always bring that up at times like these.”

“Well, you’ve got me there.”

Kiyoka let out a sigh and lightly touched the bag in which he carried his bamboo sword. He heard a tiny metallic *ring* from inside.

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, but I have no interest in becoming a military man.”

“Can you at least...tell me why?” Itsuto said with furrowed brows, like a parent reprimanding a naughty child. Kiyoka had long grown tired of this face and this question.

*He really doesn’t know when to give up. How many years will this go on?*

Kiyoka respected and relied on Itsuto, but the man's dogged persistence in this area really got on his nerves.

"I'm not cut out for the military."

"I don't know about that."

"Given how different my personality is from yours, I'd just sow disorder in the Unit if I joined."

He knew his own character better than anyone.

Kiyoka was not the type to be well-liked by others. He was neither adept at interpersonal relationships, nor did he particularly want them. While perhaps not impossible, he was certain he could not get along well in a pre-established group, especially the military, where cooperation and coordination were key.

"It's about time you realized that," Kiyoka told him, consciously trying to discourage Itsuto as payback for what he had said earlier.

"But if you did, I'd be able to feel a lot more at ease when Yoshito comes back and joins the unit..."

Nevertheless, Itsuto spoke once again as if trying to motivate a child to do something.

Their gazes locked, and the two of them stared at each other in silence. The same utterly intractable differences. They would never be able to resolve this problem.

"Lemme ask you, then."

Godou was the first one to break the apparent deadlock.

"Why are you so against joining the military? You're going to keep exterminating Grotesqueries as a Gift-user from here on out, right?"

"..."

"In that case, what's so different about doing it as part of the military? If you're serious about carrying out your obligation as a Gift-user, then any interpersonal problems you have are trivial things to worry about."

"Well..."

If Kiyoka was being honest, Itsuto had hit upon a sore spot of his.

Kiyoka had started working as a Gift-user when he was in middle school. It was entirely in rebellion against his parents and purely out of a desire to become independent as fast as possible.

He didn't know why, but if he graduated from college and simply accepted the invite into the military, he thought he'd start to feel like he was



undercutting the part of himself.

As if the vision of himself he had built up until now would be fundamentally destroyed.

*Why is it, then?*

He didn't resent fulfilling his duty as a Gift-user. Yet despite that, he disliked the idea of joining the military.

"Or is it that you have some sort of dream outside of working as a Gift-user?"

"A dream?"

"Yeah. If so, then I won't try to persuade you anymore. I'll send less work your way, too. Young guys like you should be pouring everything they've got into their dreams."

"..."

Kiyoka kept silent.

He had never once thought about his dreams before. Exterminating Grotesqueries and acting as the head of the Kudous to protect the family were duties imposed on him, and any other work was of secondary importance.

Although he was resistant to joining the military, he didn't actually have other aspirations, and it was at a point where he thought he may as well stay enrolled at college and continue with his studies. However, he felt that he couldn't really call that a "dream."

"Whatever the case may be, Kiyoka, you don't have much time until you graduate. This is the perfect opportunity to think about your future, wouldn't you say?"

"...I'll give it some thought. If you'll excuse me."

Nodding slightly at Itsuto's words, Kiyoka got up from the sofa and shouldered his sword-carrying bag. He then departed from the reception room without looking Itsuto in the eye.

*My dreams for the future.*

The notion still didn't really resonate with him. Sighing, he walked through the station hallway, the floor squeaking under his feet.

The sky was gloomy and overcast outside the window, the evening sun blocked by the clouds. It was as though the weather was expressing the confusion in Kiyoka's heart.

When he walked to the station entrance, he saw a few members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit coming back from their patrol.

Kiyoka merely thanked them for their service and had started to walk away when suddenly, one of the men called out to him.

“Oh, hey there, Kiyoka.”

“...Mr. Koumyouin.”

“Whoa, what’s with the long face?”

With his boorish air, Koumyouin took off his military cap as he approached. He must have been coming back from patrol as well.

“Is that...really how I look?”

“Oh yeah, it sure is. Where’d your usual cocky and composed look go?”

Personally, Kiyoka hadn’t intended to take what Itsuto had said to him too seriously. But if Koumyouin, who was far from observant, had noticed the change in him, then the talk about Kiyoka’s dreams of the future must have reverberated within him far more profoundly than he had thought.

“Did the commander have something to say to you?”

“Not really.”

“Your face tells a different story. We all know the commander—he wouldn’t say anything to really hurt you.”

“That’s true. I’m not particularly hurt.”

“Then something’s troubling you, huh? Don’t tell me you’re finally interested in joining the unit.”

Like Itsuto, Koumyouin had persistently tried to persuade Kiyoka to join. Kiyoka had curtly turned him down several times already, but the man showed no sign of giving up.

It really irritated Kiyoka how perceptive Koumyouin was at this moment, despite his usual thick-headedness.

“...That’s not it,” Kiyoka responded.

“Hold on, you usually you shoot me down without hesitation, but you paused for a second there, didn’t you? So, you’re reall—”

“If you’ll excuse me.”

Kiyoka forced the conversation to an early end and rushed out of the station.

A nebulous irritation welled up from deep inside his chest. He wondered what it was about. Was it because being asked about his dreams for the future made him feel like he was being treated like a child? Or perhaps it

was because he felt like he had been told he was boring for not having even one dream of his own.

Maybe it was all these things at once.

*It's too late to do something about it at this point. I can't think of anything.*

Right now, Kiyoka Kudou was a man over twenty years in the making. As far as he was concerned, it was irresponsible for Itsuto to burden him like this, rejecting who he was and telling him to rethink his future.

After all, it was Itsuto and Koumyouin themselves who'd developed Kiyoka as a Gift-user.

Overwhelmed by these feelings of helplessness, Kiyoka made his way home.

The evening sky had gone dark, and the low-hanging, charcoal-colored clouds began to cover the land in a thick, heavy darkness.

The Kudou estate was located in a residential area inside the capital, not too far from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station.

"I'm home."

"Welcome home, Young Master."

"Welcome home."

Yurie and several of the other servants greeted Kiyoka as he came through the door. Kiyoka entrusted the bag he carried to Yurie and immediately headed for his room on the second floor.

"Yurie... How are things going in the house?"

"The Master is resting in his room, and the Mistress is by his side. Miss Hazuki...is in her room, too." Yurie relayed this with the composure of a veteran housemaid, but she also appeared to be a bit forlorn.

"I see."

*When did things get this way? No, perhaps they have always been like this.*

The fate of Kiyoka and the fate of this house had been predestined from the very beginning, with no room for hope or any dreams of the future.

Kiyoka turned to Yurie.

"Please bring tonight's dinner up to my room... Until then, please don't call for me."

"As you wish."

After watching Yurie bow to him, he walked up the stairs and entered his room.

The silent interior hadn't changed much since he was young. There was a desk, a chair, a big bookshelf with double doors, and a bed.

*Agh, it's suffocating.*

Kiyoka lay down on the bed without changing clothes and exhaled, covering his eyes with a hand.

No matter where he went, the unbearable heaviness in his chest never abated.

He felt hopelessly out of breath, as if everywhere he found himself in was a hollow cave, or like he had run out of oxygen at the bottom of the sea, or like he was caught in a quagmire and was slowly sinking into the muck.

He felt he had lived his life entirely dictated by others, and now he was being told he needed dreams of his own.

Could something that unreasonable really be being asked of him?

Couldn't he simply live by following his mission with straightforwardness and loyalty?

It felt like his leaden body was being swallowed whole by the bed, merging with it. His head and chest felt heavy, and he couldn't even muster the energy to move a finger.

In the past, he was sure he'd thought about so much more. Everything around him had seemed far more exciting and far more radiant. But now, his thoughts only spun in aimless circles.



The warm rays of the sun beamed down.

In its glow was a beautifully kept flower bed, abloom with tiny flowers of red, white, yellow, and orange, with bees and butterflies flying through and above it.

Kiyoka stood next to the flower bed, atop a blindingly vivid lawn, his hands held in the air over his head.

Around his fingertips, the air was dimly oscillating to and fro. A heat haze. That single bit of space was fantastically hot compared to the atmosphere around it.

From the heat haze, gently rising and distorting the scenery, a tiny flame began to emerge.

The flame, unstable at first, extinguishing and igniting itself, at last began to burn with stability, gradually growing into a ball of fire that hovered in the air.

Once there, the temperature began to drop dramatically. The flame went out in an instant, and a biting chill started taking hold. The temperature dropped, and the air began to freeze, creating a white fog.

Kiyoka separated his raised hands slightly, maintaining the cold air with one hand and generating a fireball with the other, then slammed them together.

The flame and frost offset each other, and they instantly evaporated.

*"All right, I did it!"*

Having successfully used his Gift exactly as he envisioned it, Kiyoka let out a cry of excitement.

*"How was that, Teacher?!"*

*"Oh wow! Nice job."*

Itsuto Godou lightly clapped his hands.

When Kiyoka was around ten years old, he would frequent the Godou family manor. There, Itsuto would teach him how to use his Gift, and the sword, to fight Grotesqueries.

*"Wowww! That was awesome, big brother Kiyo!"*

Itsuto's young son Yoshito was in high spirits, imitating his father by clapping his chubby child's hands together with sparkles in his eyes.

*"You're doing amazing, Kiyoka. That must be because you have such a great teacher, eh?"*

*"Yessir! That might be part of it, but it could also be because I did so well while practicing on my own, too."*

Kiyoka had allowed his own elation to dictate his response to Itsuto, who was nodding triumphantly.

*"Well, someone's confident, isn't he? Oh yeah, you're gonna be a big deal. If you can handle your Gift that well, then you'll have no trouble using it in real combat, and your sword skills would put most adults to shame already."*

*"Really?!"*

*“Yup, really. Might be a bit soon, but I think you could work as a full-fledged Gift-user in just a few years from now. Probably.”*

*“Hooray!”*

Kiyoka artlessly followed his heart, clenching his hands in joy.

He never missed his daily training over at the Kudou estate, either, nor did he neglect his studies. His days were busy but fulfilling.

He was pleased that he was becoming more proficient with his Gift and with the sword, and Itsuto’s praise made him happier still, motivating him to work even harder.

*“All righty then, I guess sword practice is up next. Get your training sword.”*

*“Yessir!”*

At Godou’s instruction, Kiyoka picked up the wooden sword leaning up against the nearby wall. And at that moment, Yoshito let out a wail.

*“Awww! No way! Dad, you’re hogging big brother Kiyo! Play with me next instead!”*

Walking over with tight steps, Yoshito pulled on Kiyoka’s sleeve.

*“Er, Yoshito. Your dad and I aren’t playing...”*

*“You’re not gonna play with me...?”*

*“I’ll play with you, but it’s time for me to practice right now, so...”*

*“Unnnh.”*

Yoshito scrunched up his face, and large tears began to well up in his eyes. Kiyoka saw what was coming, but it was too late.

*“Waaaaah! Play with me, big brother Kiyo! I wanna play, too!”*

In the face of Yoshito’s bawling, Kiyoka went stock-still, confused about what he was supposed to do. Looking on from the side, he saw Itsuto clutching his stomach in laughter. Now was clearly no time to practice.

*“Um, Teacher? Please don’t just stand there laughing. Help me!”*

*“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Sorry, sorry. It was just too funny.”*

Unsure what was so amusing, Kiyoka stared at Itsuto, who had begun to cry in laughter, half from confusion and half exasperation.

Then they heard a woman’s voice call to them from nearby.

*“Boyyys! It’s time for a tea break!”*

It was Itsuto’s wife. Kiyoka could make her out from afar, wearing a dress, and next to her was Yoshito’s older brother.



*“Okay, how about we save the sword practice for after the break. Come on, you two.”*

Pulling the crying Yoshito by the hand, Itsuto patted Kiyoka on the head and ruffled his hair with a slightly rough, yet kind, touch.

Kiyoka’s cheeks grew hot.

The only time he could act like a kid his age was when he went over to the Godous’.

At their place, there was no one to force ideals, expectations, or duties on him, and no women to stare at him covetously, either.

*“Teacher, I want to hurry back to sword practice.”*

*“Someone’s raring to go, eh? But taking breaks is just as important as practicing, okay? Ha-ha-ha!”*

Hearing Itsuto’s big-hearted laughter made Kiyoka happy, and his lips naturally curled into a smile.

Once he graduated from elementary school, he would get a lot busier with schoolwork and would no longer be able to come to this house like he did now. But that was a few years off. Kiyoka silently swore to cherish this time while he could.

As Kiyoka opened his eyes and slowly raised himself up, he saw that it was already dark out.

He glanced at the clock and saw that an hour had passed by since he had gotten back from the Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. He must have dozed off after letting himself sink into bed.

A nostalgic fragment of a memory hung faintly in the back of his mind.

*“...Haah.”*

*Why have things ended up like this?*

Kiyoka flopped back down onto the bed once more. He hadn’t been overcome with drowsiness. The melancholy of reality had simply taken control of his body. That was how he felt.



The bell for the end of school rang out across the college campus.

A tranquil and leisurely afternoon. With his course over, Kiyoka gathered his belongings and left the lecture room, ignoring the other students noisily chatting away.

“Kudou.”

After taking just a few steps into the corridor, a voice stopped him from behind.

Turning, he saw the elderly professor who had just been standing at the podium of his class approach him with a wave.

“Good afternoon. Thank you for the lecture.”

“Of course.”

The professor stopped before Kiyoka, who fixed him with a suspicious stare.

Curious as to the cause, the professor turned his gentle eyes on Kiyoka and smiled.

“It’s still being graded, but I got a chance to read that essay I assigned you recently.”

“Oh...I see.”

“It was well written. Your research attended to the smallest details, and your examples were properly laid out, too... Your position was pretty good as well.”

“Thank you very much.”

Though he made sure to maintain a straight face, inwardly, Kiyoka felt genuine satisfaction at the praise.

He hadn’t put any extra effort into the paper that he had handed in the day prior, but the points that the professor had praised were areas Kiyoka was especially attentive toward.

Putting aside the pastimes of the rich, it was only the truly passionate about studying who usually stayed enrolled in school until college, so to have the professor go out of his way to praise his essay like this must have meant that he was especially brilliant among his peers.

The professor gave a strained, slightly troubled smile.

“All my students do a good job tackling the topic, but oftentimes, their perspectives will be surprisingly absurd, or they’ll get too impassioned and make leaps in logic. Your paper was well-grounded, but it still surprised me. Brilliantly done.”

“...You’re too kind.”

“It’s a bit early, but have you decided on the subject material for your graduation thesis?”

“Yes, generally speaking.”

“Your major was, history, if I recall correctly. Wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it is, but...?”

The professor was researching a field that was slightly removed from what Kiyoka was majoring in. He shouldn’t have had much to do with Kiyoka’s graduation thesis or his major.

“Oh, no, I just wanted to let you know that if there’s anything I can help you with when you write your paper, feel free to ask... One more thing.”

The professor paused for a moment before continuing.

“We’ve invited a renowned foreign researcher to come and give a lecture soon. If you’re interested, I thought you could join, too.”

“A lecture?”

“Yes. Since you’re researching this country’s history, it likely won’t serve as a direct reference for your own work, but I thought it might be stimulating for you or could provide a flash of inspiration.”

This sort of invitation was also proof that his performance at school was being recognized; the thought exhilarated him.

Learning had never been hard for him, though. Also, he would have been lying if he said he didn’t have any interest in research from abroad.

The question was whether it would be possible to shift around his personal schedule—his other classes, homework, and his Grotesquerie extermination work—to spare the time for the lecture.

Kiyoka instantly ran through his upcoming schedule in his head.

*It’s not impossible, but...it’ll be a bit tight.*

Also, it seemed like it would be a tremendous waste of an opportunity to flatly reject the professor’s offer.

“Thank you for the invitation. I’ll consider it.”

In the end, Kiyoka had replied to the professor without coming to an immediate conclusion. The professor nodded in satisfaction as Kiyoka lapsed into thought and excused himself.

*A lecture. Hmm...*

If he could swing it, he wanted to go.

He’d been staying on top of his coursework, and he also had some extra leeway in his research. As for his Gift-user work, as long as he picked

easier requests that could be resolved quickly, he ought to be able to wrap everything up without it bumping into the day of the lecture.

*“Or is it that you have some sort of dream outside of working as a Gift-user?”*

*“If so, then I won’t try to persuade you anymore. I’ll send less work your way, too. Young guys like you should be pouring everything they’ve got into their dreams.”*

Itsuto’s words from the previous day echoed in his mind.

*Could this be called a dream?*

As a matter of fact, the professor at the research lab he belonged to had also asked him whether he was interested in graduate school.

Though he felt the invitations to join the military were annoying, when he’d been recommended to continue on to graduate school, his heart had quivered.

*“Hey, Kudou.”*

As he walked alone through the hallway filled with the clamor of students getting out of class, thoughts of his future swirling in his head, a voice suddenly called out to him from behind.

*“Oh, Chida... How are you?”*

He turned around, and a bespectacled man of average build with narrow, beady eyes gave him a wave, coming over to him.

Chida was one year ahead of Kiyoka, and the two belonged to the same research laboratory. He always seemed worried about Kiyoka in some way or another and would often talk to him about this and that.

Kiyoka felt like he was getting stopped every few steps today.

*“Heya, wanna come out drinking with me tonight?”*

*“Again?”*

Yes, though it was good of Chida to look after him, he had an unfortunate tendency to invite Kiyoka out to partake in less-than-praiseworthy activities.

His idea of “going out drinking” often included the sort of nighttime entertainment that was unbecoming of a college student.

A great many parents of the students attending college were wealthy, and Chida’s family, who had gained their fortune in the shipbuilding industry, were no exception. Chida received a hefty amount of spending money, with plenty to spare outside of school.

Naturally, that was unacceptable behavior for a student who was supposed to be focusing on coursework.

Despite that, Chida wasn't the only student on campus to engage in such activities; in fact, the majority of Kiyoka's peers participated in them, though the extent to which they did so varied. Because of that, Kiyoka didn't reprimand Chida for it, and he would frequently join him when invited.

"Aw c'mon, what kind of response is that, you sheltered little prince?"

Chida grinned and smacked Kiyoka on the shoulder.

"No, that's not it."

It was far too late to have any qualms about accepting Chida's invitation. Kiyoka had already gone out drinking with him on many occasions by now.

He'd only answered as bluntly as he had because his mind had been elsewhere.

"So, are you coming or not?"

"...I'll go."

"That's what I'm talking about!"

Chida instantly broke into a broad smile, clapped his hands together, and energetically threw his arm over Kiyoka's shoulder.

Kiyoka understood very well that this wasn't a very proper form of leisure, and that it would have been better not to accept Chida's invitations if possible.

But he didn't want to go to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station, and he didn't want to go home, either.

*I can't believe how childish I'm being.*

It was the same reason he always had for accepting Chida's invitations: to forget about something that was bothering him. The undeniable truth was that he wanted to cut down the time he spent at the station and the time he spent in that house as much as possible.

The entertainment district at nighttime, unlike during the day, was filled with glitter, energy, and desire.

Ultimately, an early-middle aged professor with a love for dinner parties ended up joining them, along with several of Kiyoka's upperclassmen and peers, before they sallied out into town.

The light of the gas and electric lamps shimmered like a collection of countless stars, as if to erase the darkness.

The smell of food, stimulating empty stomachs, wafted in from somewhere, and loud, boisterous voices of elation from both men and women reverberated incessantly.

Lead by the professor, the group passed through the front shop curtain of a restaurant they frequented.

They were led to their usual tatami room on the second floor, and kimono-clad waitresses came into the room one after another, lining up dishes on the table.

“All right, let’s drink.”

The beautifully and colorfully dressed women poured sake into the cup in Kiyoka’s hand. The professor gave a shout, and Kiyoka and the others all raised their glasses with a “cheers!”

Kiyoka sat in the seat next to Chida, slightly removed from the seat of honor, drinking from his cup as he picked at the dinner party food.

Once the professor had some sake in him, he began hooting at the geisha’s dances and jabbering nonstop, his guffaws occasionally grating on Kiyoka’s ears.

*Still, this is better than going home.*

These types of establishments, he thought, provided a better distraction from his thoughts than the station, where he would be hounded to join the unit and asked about the future, and his home, where he felt nothing but suffocation.

“Do you have enough to drink?” asked a woman wearing snow white face powder and bright red lipstick as she approached, filling Kiyoka’s almost dry cup.

When he cast a sidelong glance at her, she looked at him with misty eyes.

“...Thanks.”

He gave a curt reply while looking away from her.

However, the woman wasn’t discouraged in the slightest, and enthusiastically tried to converse with Kiyoka, explaining what the different dishes were, and asking how Kiyoka liked the geisha’s dancing.

Kiyoka felt bad for her, but he hadn’t the slightest interest in geisha entertainment.



As he fended off her unending conversation, the woman appeared to sense his disinterest and quietly departed.

"It wouldn't kill you to keep her company for a little bit, you know," Chida said next to him, sounding exasperated.

"...Sorry."

"Oh yeah, that reminds me. How'd things go with that girl you were introduced to?"

Kiyoka couldn't help making a grimace of disgust.

The woman in question was one who Kiyoka had started socializing with recently. Chida's friend, another upperclassman, had introduced her to him.

She was eighteen years old and possessed refined features, and though her family wasn't wealthy, they were respectable enough, having made a living as traders for a long time.

Because she had been recommended to him, they had gone out together half-heartedly on two occasions, but he hadn't contacted her since.

"..."

"By that look of yours, I'm guessing it went poorly again, didn't it?"

Chida shrugged in exasperation, taking a casual sip of sake.

"First of all, you're way too stiff, you know that? You gotta be super considerate to the ladies. In exchange, you get comfort and peace of mind."

"Sure."

Kiyoka gave a perfunctory response.

*That said, though...*

Kiyoka, at least, had never derived any comfort or peace of mind from women before.

If he was nice to them, they would misunderstand things for some reason, and suddenly start to act overly familiar with him.

But Kiyoka wasn't exactly a social butterfly to begin with.

Consequently, he couldn't help but feel disgusted when someone tried to get close to him like that, and once he thought that, he would hesitate to approach women and show them any more consideration than necessary.

"Knowing how you operate, I'm sure you must've been real blunt with her, right? That ain't gonna win over any girls, lemme tell you."

"...Got it."

"Well, that's a tepid response. My point goes for that girl just now, too, y'know. She looked pretty hurt. Didn't you notice?"

Kiyoka followed Chida's gaze to the beautiful woman who had just been desperately trying to strike up a conversation with him.

"You're blessed with good looks, so it's a waste not to use 'em. Give any girl you want just a little bit of a smile, and you'd have her in the palm of your hands."

"I don't care. I'm not cut out for that."

"Huh, you got sulky all of a sudden"

"...That's not it."

Kiyoka wasn't suited for spending time together with other people. He understood that about himself based on the experiences he'd had until now.

That went for anyone he was with, be they women, his family members, or his friends and acquaintances.

"But you hang out with us normally all the time, right? I don't think you've done anything outrageous."

"That's just because I'm only ever here together with you and the others."

"I wonder," Chida said, exhaling from his nose and pouring more sake for himself. "You're the kid of a well-to-do family and all, so even you're gonna end up getting married eventually. How's that gonna work when you act like this? Do you think you can make things work with a young lady?"

"If it's something I'm forced to do, then the only option is to do it."

As he replied to Chida, this was the first time Kiyoka felt like he understood.

His inability to spend time with other people was why he was inclined to pursue being a researcher.

Once he started working, he would be guaranteed to form a deep bond with someone. He would meet with his colleagues on the job every day and be forced to collaborate with them.

Research, however, was the exception; it would let him deal with most things on his own. With both schoolwork and research, he could keep interactions with others to a bare minimum.

If he joined the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, things wouldn't work out that way, and the same went for marriage. Both situations could only be realized with the presence of another.

If someone said he was taking the easy road out, they might have been right.

However, was it really that bad to drift in the direction that would allow him to live an easier life?

He intended on fulfilling his duty as a Gift-user as long as his body was capable. Was that not enough?

“You really are missing out, I’m sure of it. C’mon, relax a little. Here, drink up.”

Kiyoka gazed down at the transparent surface of the sake in his cup. The man reflected in it wore a bored, uninterested expression.

“What’s there to complain about? You like studying, right? You’re gonna go on to grad school from here, marry a cutie, take over as head of your family...and live yourself a quiet and comfortable life.”

“...Well, hopefully that will be possible.”

After a short while, the food and drink began to run out, the attendees all became drunk, and the unique atmosphere of a dinner party dying down began to hang in the air.

As people sporadically prepared to head home, Kiyoka, not feeling particularly tipsy himself, supported Chida’s shoulder as he teetered and exited the restaurant.

The professor took care of the bill for the dinner party.

“I ain’t hammered!”

“Yes, yes, I get it. Then make sure to walk properly.”

Kiyoka soothed Chida in front of the restaurant as the man staggered and shouted nonsense.

The late-night entertainment district had taken on a slightly different air from when they had first arrived. There were less people walking the street, the darkness had grown thicker, and the bright lights spilling out from the buildings and street stalls hurt one’s eyes.

The crowd of people had thinned somewhat, and Kiyoka could feel the presence of wriggling Grotesqueries painfully flit across his skin.

Nevertheless, the supernatural entities there were all nearly insignificant riffraff. They wouldn’t cause any harm and didn’t require any action on his part.

“Kudouuu, you going home?”

“Yes, I’m going home... Are you okay, Chida? Can you get back on your own?”

Chida's house was in the opposite direction of Kiyoka's. He would have quite a distance to cover.

When Kiyoka asked, Chida assured him that he was fine in a worrying timbre and walked off while lightly waving.

"Later, Kudou. Let's drink again sometime."

"Okay. Be careful, Chida."

Watching as Chida melted into the darkness, Kiyoka began to walk in the opposite direction.

As he moved further away from the entertainment district, the illumination dwindled, and the unreliable light of the gas lamps, placed at infrequent intervals, made it harder to see up ahead.

The thicker the darkness grew, the denser the squirming presence of the Grotesqueries became.

Just then, Kiyoka felt something strange.

He came to a halt, and his hand reached for the sword bag he made a habit of carrying over his shoulder. He opened it up and grasped the hilt.

*This presence is...overwhelming.*

It was the aura of a mighty Grotesquerie, wholly incomparable to that of the small fry drifting about and strong enough to send a chill down his spine. No, even those words didn't do it justice.

Kiyoka felt as though an instinctual awe, an instinctual fear, was welling up from the pits of his entrails.

There wasn't a single person in the vicinity. The paved road had but one streetlight, and it was lined on either side by pitch-black storefronts, newly built in a Western style.

A single strand of cold sweat ran down his temple.

*Just where did it come from?*

A ghostly aura of this magnitude couldn't be conjured by your average Grotesquerie.

Furthermore, if it was releasing a ghostly aura so evil it had caused an instinctual reaction, then Kiyoka's earlier hope about it not posing a threat to humans was as good as smashed to pieces.

*It's very old*, Kiyoka estimated, focusing as the strong presence seemed to make the inside of his head numb.

Grotesqueries with auras this powerful were not products of the modern world.

There was no doubt this was a presence that had collected people's fears for centuries, then spent months and years increasing its power.

Kiyoka gulped loudly.

He took out his favorite sword from the bag on his back and lowered his center of gravity, adopting a stance that would let him unsheathe his blade at a moment's notice.

Kiyoka's favorite sword was a magical one he had obtained through a twist of fate. It also chose its wielder. For that reason, it could cut things that a normal blade could not.

The air suddenly stopped moving. The light of the gas lamps flickered and went out.

"There you are!"

Right as he shouted, Kiyoka swiftly drew his sword and slashed at the place where the ghostly aura was most concentrated.

He was surprised to hear the heavy clang of two metallic objects striking each other. He must have hit something quite hard, as he felt a tingling in his hands.

The bigger problem was that he hadn't been able to cut down the Grotesquerie in a single strike.

As his face twisted from the numbing tingle in his hands, he jumped backward and put space between him and his opponent.

*What exactly...am I up against? It's too dark for me to make out.*

There was no question that it was a Grotesquerie. However, he hadn't gotten a single glimpse of what it looked like or how it had defended against Kiyoka's slash.

In total darkness, a human like Kiyoka was at an overwhelming disadvantage.

The sense of something moving out in front of him, the movement of the wind—relying solely on these faint sensations, Kiyoka guarded against his opponent's attack with his sword.

Another intense vibration ran through his blade. There was a hefty weight behind each and every strike.

As their struggle went on, his eyes slowly acclimated to the darkness. With only the pale moonlight, he was able to get a grasp on his opponent's form.

*A person...a monk?*

The thing was wearing the stole of a Buddhist monk, black priest robes, and a bamboo hat. Its eyes peaked out from under the brim of its hat, occasionally shining with a slightly red hue. The hand it had used to block Kiyoka's sword strikes was shaped like the leg of an insect, covered in minute black hairs.

A pewter *khakkhara* staff lay on the ground nearby, broken in half. It must have taken Kiyoka's strike and broken in the process.

The creature had done a good job disguising itself as a human, but its eerie appearance was proof that it was a Grotesquerie.

*An insect Grotesquerie, and a very old one at that...*

His foe's insect limb was frighteningly hard. At some point, its other hand took the same shape as well, which it used to send one attack after the other at Kiyoka.

Though he managed to dodge and parry the blows, he was keenly aware that he was rapidly growing fatigued.

"Hnrk...!"

The source of his exhaustion was the thick, oppressive ghost aura that the Grotesquerie was exuding.

Gift-users like Kiyoka had some amount of resistance to it, so he was still able to keep himself conscious. However, if the average person came into contact with a monster like this, they would immediately go insane or even die, depending on the circumstances.

Such was the strength of the negative power contained within this Grotesquerie.

On top of that, the nimble, heavy attacks that it kept launching at Kiyoka were easily capable of ripping apart a human body. If just single one connected, he would be finished.

For the time being, Kiyoka put a large amount of distance between them, steadying his breath and adjusting his grip on his sword while his foe closed in.

*Get a grip. With this sword...I should be able to seriously wound it.*

A simple strike wouldn't do. He needed to focus harder and put more of his strength behind it.

The previously expressionless monk broke into an amused and repulsive smile as he continued heading for Kiyoka.

The Grotesquerie then shot out its limbs right in front of Kiyoka.

That very instant, he flashed his blade, slicing the Grotesquerie and sliding it through the air.

A scream echoed. Kiyoka winced at the murky shriek, completely inhuman and unbearable on the ears. Having lost one of its insectoid limbs, the Grotesquerie bent over and writhed in agony before his eyes.

Kiyoka immediately swung his sword up to deliver the finishing blow.

However, the Grotesquerie had grown cunning with age. It dodged Kiyoka's final stab by a hair's breadth, and all of a sudden, Kiyoka sensed several people approaching.

"Kiyoka!"

He didn't turn around to see who called him, never taking an eye off the Grotesquerie. Nevertheless, he surmised that he had missed his opportunity to finish it off.

*This looks like the best I can do.*

Right after dodging Kiyoka's attack, the Grotesquerie had started to retreat. He didn't sense any more attacks coming at him, either, perhaps because the creature had lost one of its arms. Even if he attempted to close the distance between him and his foe, it would likely get away before he could catch up to it.

As these thoughts swirled through his head, the Grotesquerie in monk's garb left, vanishing into the darkness and leaving only the red glow of its eyes behind.

"Kiyoka, where did it go?!"

Itsuto came running over holding a bright lamp to illuminate the area, his combat boots echoing loudly. He wore a frantic look, and he seemed uncharacteristically panicked.

"It escaped."

Hearing Kiyoka's plain statement of the facts, Itsuto groaned with frustration.

"Couldn't finish it off, huh..."

Kiyoka finally returned his cherished sword back to its sheath, placed it back in the bag, and slung that over his shoulder. Next, he turned to Itsuto.

There was something off about the man's behavior and way of speaking. Itsuto seemed to be on the absolute brink. Though the escaped creature was definitely no ordinary Grotesquerie, it was unusual for him to be quite so ill at ease.

Why had he rushed out all this way in the first place? Kiyoka hadn't contacted the station, and with no one around nearby, it was hard to believe someone had reported the situation.

"...Why are you here, Mr. Godou?"

"Well, we've been beefing up the nighttime patrols lately. I just got word from one of the guys on patrol that he felt an unusual ghostly aura."

Even if that was the case, the commander wouldn't have needed to come out himself.

"Mr. Godou, do you know what exactly that thing was?"

When Kiyoka posed this question, Itsuto gave him a pained look, avoiding Kiyoka's eyes and answering incoherently.

"I never imagined that thing would still be out there, trying to harm people... It's hard to believe. Or more like, I don't *want* to believe it."

"What...?"

"Will we really be able to handle it? Can we even fight it and win?"

Godou's words didn't seem to be directed at Kiyoka; instead, he seemed to be asking this of himself.

"Mr. Godou."

Kiyoka calmly called out to Itsuto one more time. Then at last, he laid his eyes on Kiyoka.

"That thing's..."

Godou's voice cut out, with his lips opening and closing twice without producing any sound. Trying to say it, but hesitating—Kiyoka could catch glimpses of the man's emotions in his demeanor.

"...Is this foe really that difficult to talk about?"

"That's not it. It's not that it's difficult, but—I want you to listen without losing your cool."

"I won't."

"That thing you ran into...was the Earth Spider."

Kiyoka was stunned speechless.

The Earth Spider. This Grotesquerie was all too infamous. It was a Grotesquerie on a level above all others, one that had consumed countless people, still spoken of in legend to this day.

Kiyoka's breath caught in his throat when he heard the name of that almost mythical being.

A name that seemed almost unreal.



“Something’s clearly been off in the capital lately. There’s been too few Grotesqueries. This led us to hypothesize that a real big one had shown up to scare the smaller Grotesqueries and send them running. We’ve also received several eyewitness accounts of the creature as well.”

According to Itsuto, signs of the Earth Spider’s presence had started showing up just a few days ago. Right after this happened, in an uncanny turn of events, they received a report that someone had seen a Grotesquerie shaped like a large spider. The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit went on high-alert, realizing that a terrible and dangerous Grotesquerie was on the loose.

In light of the situation, they strengthened their patrols to immediately address any strange happenings that cropped up.

This had all happened during the time Kiyoka had spent away from the station.

“This evening was the first time that thing caused actual harm. It ate someone.”

“That can’t be...”

“It’s true. I never would have thought there were still Grotesqueries in this day and age bold enough to show themselves, much less attack and eat people on top of that.”

Itsuto put a hand to his temple, as if enduring a headache.

“The victim was a young man. He worked as a cook at a restaurant by day, and it’s believed he was attacked in the evening while he was on his way home from work. Based on the information we’ve received, the unusual circumstances when today’s incident was discovered, eyewitness testimony, and the ghostly aura left behind at the scene, we’ve determined that the Grotesquerie behind all this...is indeed the Earth Spider.”

Was it really the Earth Spider? Kiyoka thought back over his fight just now.

His foe had possessed an insect-like leg, the ability to completely shapeshift into a human monk, and the physical strength to overpower him.

*Ah, right.*

There were tales that featured the Earth Spider tricking and eating people. Sometimes a beautiful woman, other times a monk—it would take the form of a trustworthy individual, deceive its victim, lure them into lowering their guard, and devour them.

“Regardless, we’re going to be heading out to confront the Earth Spider. It’s far more dangerous than anything we’ve faced until now.”

“Mr. Godou?”

Itsuto turned around, as if to say the conversation was over. For some reason, Kiyoka felt as though he was being strongly rejected.

“You’re going home.”

“Starting tomorrow, I can join—”

“You don’t need to help. Stay put and focus on guarding your life.”

“Huh?”

The Earth Spider was a powerful foe.

Kiyoka wasn’t trying to be conceited, but there was no question that the more powerful fighters there were to help, the better.

He’d taken it as a given that Itsuto would accept his offer, but the man had flat out rejected him instead. It didn’t make sense.

Itsuto turned around and cast a sidelong glance at Kiyoka, a gesture that came across as utterly frigid in light of the man’s normal demeanor.

“I told you. Take the time to rethink your future. Until you come up with an answer, you don’t need to get involved in this case. Once you find your resolve, I’ll request your aid again.”

His usual drawling speech and kindhearted affect was nowhere to be found. All that was left were the mannerisms of a soldier leading his squad to fight Grotesqueries.

It wasn’t necessarily Kiyoka’s first time seeing this side of Itsuto.

However, it was the first time that Kiyoka had been on the receiving end of it. Godou had always interacted with Kiyoka like a father, an older brother, or a good-natured superior.

“Why...?”

Kiyoka had to get this off his chest before he departed.

“Why? I’ve had the resolve to do this for a long time! If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have any Grotesquerie extermination requests at all. How many years do you think I’ve been fighting against the—”

“None of that crap matters.”

Itsuto emphatically dismissed Kiyoka’s words.

“You’re not a soldier. I can’t force you to participate in a mission this dangerous... It’s time to choose. You’re at a crossroads for what’s to come.

Who you've been up until now doesn't matter. What's important is who you're going to be from here on out."

"But—"

"I'm not hearing any more objections. Go home already. You're getting in the way of my work."

Godou said no more than that, not even turning back around.

Kiyoka had plenty of complaints to make. They sat in the base of his throat, ready to spring from his lips. But now that Itsuto had left to go back to his subordinates and told Kiyoka that he was being a nuisance, Kiyoka's only choice was to back down.

*I don't get it. Why?*

Suddenly, he felt like he was being left behind.

At that moment, the members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were busily coming and going from the area, seizing the Earth Spider's severed leg and ardently investigating to see if anything else had been left behind.

Just a few days ago, Kiyoka would have been counted among them and fighting at their side.

Now, however, he felt a vast gulf between them. He was assailed by an intense feeling of isolation, as if he'd been suddenly partitioned off in a completely different world from them.

The fact they viewed him as an outsider, as unneeded, had been thrust in his face.

*How did it end up like this...?*

Anger, confusion, sadness, and loneliness at Itsuto's unreasonable treatment of him—all these sentiments swirled around in his chest, and he couldn't bear to stay there any longer.

Kiyoka quietly turned around and began heading home. He didn't have the courage to say good-bye to Itsuto.

The next day, still unable to accept the events of the previous night, Kiyoka visited the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station during his free time between classes.

His steps felt far heavier than he could have ever imagined, and he found himself close to turning back around several times.

He trusted Itsuto. And it was for that very reason that Kiyoka felt like he would break if he was met with the man's cold gaze and fierce rejection again.

Nevertheless, he still spurred himself toward the station.

Since everyone there knew him, Kiyoka went straight into the station itself and sought a meeting with Godou. However...

"The commander ain't here," Koumyouin said boorishly.

"...Where is he?"

"You hear about the strengthened patrols?"

"I have," Kiyoka said, nodding at Koumyouin's question.

"Oh yeah, you ran into the Earth Spider last night. Well, the commander's going out into the streets himself all day because of that thing. He's even sending me—his aide—in shifts, too."

"When do you think he will be back?"

"Not for another two hours, probably. Ain't been that long since he left."

Kiyoka felt a strange mix of relief and disappointment. If he had to choose one, the sense of relief may have been the stronger of the two.

Koumyouin stared hard as Kiyoka wrestled with his emotions.

"So? Whaddaya want with him?"

"Oh, well..."

To Kiyoka's surprise, his urge to complain to Itsuto withered away completely.

Koumyouin let out a deep, uncharacteristic sigh in response to Kiyoka's evasive answer.

"Truth is, the commander ordered me to send you packing if you came 'round asking to get involved in the Earth Spider stuff."

"What?"

Kiyoka never expected Itsuto to get Koumyouin involved, too. The bewilderment in his heart grew stronger.

Wasn't it enough that he was exterminating Grotesqueries? Didn't that mean he was fulfilling his duty? Yet despite that, Itsuto was saying that he wouldn't request Kiyoka's aid until he thought through his future.

It was contradictory; he couldn't understand what Itsuto was trying to convey.

Koumyouin gave Kiyoka a slightly apologetic look as the latter went silent with shock.

“There’s ain’t much I can do for you, really. Me, I think it’d be better to have you join in. You’re valuable, and you add almost *too much* extra fighting power. But even strength on your level may still not be enough this time.”

“...I see.”

“Things would be more secure with you around, and from the perspective of a Gift-user or a soldier, you should obviously come along to help protect the people. But it’s not like I don’t get the commander’s side of things.”

Koumyouin looked out the window. His gaze was directed at several of the unit’s younger members, who were energetically training under the cloudy sky.

“Yeah, you may have plenty of experience taking out Grotesqueries, but you’re still wet behind the ears. If I had to guess what the commander’s thinking...I’d bet he doesn’t want you getting wrapped up in all this. Feels the same way about all them, too.”

Koumyouin returned his eyes from the unit members back to Kiyoka.

“If you young guys fought the Earth Spider and got wiped out, then who’d be around in the future?”

“...So the commander told me that I don’t have the resolve because I’m still young and inexperienced, is that it?”

“Who knows. I ain’t the commander, so how could I answer that?”

Kiyoka slumped dejectedly when Koumyouin threw his question back at him.

As far as Kiyoka was concerned, the soldier’s explanation was far too convenient. It was nice, the idea that Itsuto had taken Kiyoka off the mission because Kiyoka was so young, and he wanted to protect him. Far too kind.

Kiyoka felt that Itsuto’s true feelings lay somewhere else.

If not, it would be strange for Itsuto to have rejected Kiyoka so definitively. If he was trying to play the villain on purpose, Kiyoka would have largely guessed as much. He had known the man for long enough.

No, this was different.

Kiyoka felt that Itsuto had rejected him with a pure, strong, and single-minded will. It was enough to make Kiyoka wonder if he’d done something to anger or offend Itsuto in some way.

Kiyoka could tell that he'd gone pale. His complexion must have truly been awful, as Koumyouin looked at him with pity.

"Well, listen, I mean... You don't gotta get so gloomy about it. Don't think he took you off the mission 'cause he's mad at you or anything... C'mon, you know how much the commander likes you 'n all, right?"

Koumyouin's atypical, faltering words of comfort failed to affect Kiyoka.

Pestering Koumyouin about Itsuto's true intentions any further wasn't going to give him any definitive answers.

Still, he was beginning to lose heart. He didn't have the energy left to wait for Godou to return and question him again.

"...I'll head back to campus."

"You do that. Once school's done, you should head straight home and relax a bit. Ain't nothing to lose your cool over. When we really need your strength, we'll be sure to call."

Kiyoka turned on his heel, twisting his lips in a slightly self-deprecating smile.

"Sure to call"—Kiyoka would have liked it to play out that way, but from what he could tell of Itsuto right now, he had a hunch that wouldn't be happening.

*Maybe I really will just give up on hunting down Grotesqueries altogether.*

What was wrong with becoming a normal college student, pursuing the path of a researcher, and casting aside his identity as a Gift-user?

If that was how Itsuto wanted things to be...if he was saying he didn't need Kiyoka anymore...

Childish and sulky thoughts came into his mind one after another, and they seemed all too appealing to Kiyoka at that moment.



In the blink of an eye, a whole week had elapsed since Kiyoka's removal from active duty.

In that time, he never once stopped by the station, distancing himself from Grotesquerie extermination and diligently spending his time on schoolwork.

He heard through the grapevine that the Earth Spider had now attacked the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit members directly, killing some and seriously wounding a few of them, and despite it all, Itsuto still hadn't reached out to him.

*...This is nothing. I just went and let myself get a big head.*

As Kiyoka listened to the voice of the professor, he stared vacantly at the wall in front of him.

It turned out that the world had kept on turning without Kiyoka devoting himself to his Gift-user duties, and so far, no one had come to ask for him to lend them his power.

He realized, to his embarrassment, he had grown conceited over being indispensable to the other Gift-users.

Kiyoka had worried slightly that his father would scold him or lecture him about distancing himself from his duties as a Gift-user, but his fears were unfounded. Time simply went by as usual, without him really seeing the man.

Kiyoka earnestly attended his classes, wrestled with his assignments, and concentrated on the materials for his graduation thesis.

At night, he would go out drinking with his seniors and professors, sharing opinions and occasionally getting teased for his awkwardness around women.

These tranquil days went by in a flash, and Kiyoka began to fool himself into thinking that he had been just a normal college student all along.

"There will be a lecture the day after tomorrow, so I encourage anyone interested to attend..."

Hearing the professor speak from the podium brought Kiyoka back to the present.

*Right, the lecture...*

The talk his professor had invited him to attend days prior was that weekend, the day after tomorrow.

Now that Kiyoka was no longer concerned with Gift-users or Grotesqueries and had far more free time than he expected, he could easily attend.

*Chida said he was going to be there, too.*

Kiyoka recalled that he had also mentioned going out drinking that night after the lecture was over.

That might not be bad, either.

Putting his pen down, he stared hard at the palm of his hand.

The skin there had grown hard and thick from training with swords from a young age, but because he hadn't practiced this whole week, it appeared to be softening. Instead, he had been writing far more than usual, and the skin of his right fingers had reddened from them chafing against his pen.

Mind you, it wasn't that he no longer cared about how the Earth Spider case was going.

He'd simply tried to live as a normal college student for a week and had learned that this sort of lifestyle was another possibility for him. Contrary to his expectations, it even suited him.

At first, he had distanced himself from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit because he was angry with Itsuto for taking him off Grotesquerie extermination duty, but now he didn't think it would be too bad to continue living like an ordinary person. That was what he'd come to realize.

After he finished his classes for the day, he showed up at the research lab he belonged to right as Chida was tackling an assignment.

There weren't any other students around. They all seemed to be elsewhere.

The research lab was packed with stacks of books, making it difficult to maneuver through. After struggling through the lab, he at last sat down in the chair across from Chida.

"Hello, Chida."

"Oh, Kudou. Heya."

"How's your assignment going?"

Kiyoka had asked as a bit of small talk, but Chida's face clearly soured.

"Asking out of spite, eh? Just barely managing. If I don't turn this in and get good marks, I'm not going to be able to graduate."

"Sounds tough."

"Listen, you...don't talk like this isn't your problem."

Even Kiyoka made sure not to quip back that this was all because Chida was always out having fun. No one would have known that better than the man himself.

Chida zealously partook in nearly twice as many nighttime escapades than the drinking trips and dinner parties Kiyoka joined in on.



While this had given him a wide network of acquaintances, it had negative consequences for his coursework.

“Oh yeah. Kudou, are you planning on going to the lecture the day after tomorrow, too?”

“...Yes, I was.”

After faltering slightly, Kiyoka nodded.

In truth, he was still unsure. There wouldn't be any problem with him participating, yet he had this hazy, unfounded feeling that if he chose to do this, there would be no turning back.

However, this was where he found his resolve.

Itsuto had told Kiyoka to think over his dreams. What this meant, in other words, was that he didn't care if Kiyoka aspired to become a researcher and forego his duties as a Gift-user.

In which case, he didn't need to hesitate. He could simply proceed with what he wanted.

By this point, he had chosen to become defiant.

“That's a relief. If I didn't know a single other person there, I'd probably feel suffocated.”

“...Why's that?”

“Well, my professors told me they would add points to my grades if I participated. So obviously I'm going to join in, right? I mean, I'm not really interested in the topic.”

Kiyoka shrugged, disappointed that Chida had essentially chosen to participate out of laziness.

Yet somehow, it was impossible to hate him. That was why the instructors had given him the second chance to recover.

After their conversation, Kiyoka chatted a bit with some students who'd shown up to the lab later, then he checked out the materials he was after and left the research lab. He walked all the way off campus.

A calm, uneventful day.

Even after the sun set and the capital descended into darkness, the surroundings looked the same as ever, enough to make one forget that a powerful, evil Grotesquerie was attacking people. People were coming and going, automobiles were running, and the city hummed with incessant noise.

Be they Grotesqueries or Gift-users, these denizens of the supernatural world steered clear of the spotlight. As long as ordinary people didn't try to get involved in that world, they could live out their lives without ever coming across it, ignorant of its existence.

The wind blew loudly.

Kiyoka stopped to tuck his windswept hair behind his ear before he started walking again.

Right now, he didn't have his sword bag on his back. Instead, he was carrying a bag that contained several books to use for his research. It was much heavier than his trusted sword.

*If I can really stay this way, that might be the best option.*

In what was a rarity for him lately, Kiyoka headed straight home.

Chida would invite Kiyoka out for a night on the town day in and day out, but given his current frame of mind, Kiyoka had no desire to go out into town. Instead, he planned on using his time to do reading for his research.

When Kiyoka returned to the Kudou estate, he found someone waiting to greet him.

"I'm ho—"

"Welcome back."

Kiyoka lifted his head at the low, hoarse voice.

"...Father."

There stood Tadakiyo, Kiyoka's father, wearing a thickly padded coat over his casual kimono despite it only being fall. His complexion looked as pallid as ever, and he arched his back as though he had fever chills as he smiled at his son.

Kiyoka just barely managed to avoid demanding to know what on earth his father could possibly want with him.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, forcing down his displeasure as Tadakiyo coughed loudly.

However, Tadakiyo's smile never wavered, even after getting his coughing under control, as though Kiyoka's feelings toward him didn't even register.

"*Cough*, phone call... From Itsuto."

Saying nothing more, his father turned on his heel and left. Kiyoka fixed his eyes on him as he departed.

*There isn't anything else?*

It seemed the man was indifferent to his children through and through.

He'd probably only greeted Kiyoka at the door because he had been in the middle of talking with Itsuto on the phone. That way, he could pass Kiyoka off to Itsuto straight away.

Wrestling with these depressing, uncertain feelings, Kiyoka picked up the phone.

To be honest, Kiyoka wasn't very pleased at the prospect of talking with Itsuto right now. If anything, it made him terribly depressed.

"...Hello?"

*"Ah, Kiyoka? Great, glad you can talk for a bit. It's Itsuto."*

He heard Itsuto's usual gentle, good-natured voice on the other end of the line, completely unlike the harsh, cold tone he'd employed a week ago.

*Why?*

Kiyoka couldn't hide his confusion. It was as if the events of last week had never even happened. All while Kiyoka had suffered all week, unable to get it out of his mind.

Kiyoka's voice trembled with his disconsolate aggravation.

"...After everything you said, why are you calling me now?"

*"I was just curious how you were doing is all."*

"Thanks to you, my days have been quite enjoyable. My research at school is engaging, too."

*"The nightlife isn't too bad, either, right?"*

Itsuto's joking question induced a hatred in Kiyoka unlike anything he had felt before. Although he was stricken with the urge to immediately hang up, he tightened his grip on the receiver.

"What're you trying to say? I'm spending my time like this because you took me off the Earth Spider mission."

There weren't many chains of command for Gift-users, but there were a few, all with the emperor sitting at the top. The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was simply one among them, but getting commissioned by them wasn't the only way to take on work as a Gift-user.

That meant Kiyoka didn't need work from Itsuto to remain active in the field.

But Kiyoka had been mentored by Itsuto since he was little.

On top of feeling like he needed to repay the debt he owed to Itsuto, Kiyoka also decided to exclusively collaborate with the unit because he didn't want to run into his father, who had no military affiliation, while on a Grotesquerie extermination mission.

Despite knowing all this, Itsuto had still sidelined Kiyoka.

After Kiyoka had given his venom-laced rebuttal, the other end of the phone line went silent for a moment.

*"Say, Kiyoka."*

Finally, he heard his name drift out of the receiver, a vague stiffness in Itsuto's voice.

*"..."*

*"Did you actually think things through? About what you want to do from here on out?"*

*"...I did. I spent this whole week thinking about it, just like you told me."*

His every word was filled with sincerity.

*"Did you find your answer, then?"*

*"..."*

For the briefest of instants, Kiyoka descended into a pit of indecision.

He had thought it over. Thought about what Itsuto had told him until it gave him a headache. About his resolve as someone who faced off against Grotesqueries, and his resolve as a student. He had ruminated on both.

He still hadn't reached a final decision, though.

Itsuto seemed to read all this in Kiyoka's silence.

*"If you haven't come up with an answer, then keep thinking until you do. You need to decide once and for all how you're going to live, and choose which of your two paths to take."*

*"Enough already! Why are you making me choose like this? Why only me?"*

There were plenty of people who maintained ordinary jobs while fulfilling their duties as Gift-users. In fact, Kiyoka had always tried to be flawless as both a Gift-user and a student until now.

Kiyoka didn't understand why Itsuto was so adamantly trying to force him to choose a path now, of all times.

*"I mean, because it's you, Kiyoka."*

Even after all that, Itsuto wouldn't tell him anything definitive. His behavior seemed to be telling Kiyoka to come up with an answer himself.

*“We’re going out to take out the Earth Spider tomorrow. Me and Koumyouin, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, and several others are going to attack its nest. It’s bound to be a fierce battle, and it’ll probably last a few days, too,”* Itsuto continued in a flat tone. *“Just in case, I want to ask you—”*

“...Ask me what?”

*“Will you come, too?”*

Kiyoka still couldn’t decide between the two choices laid out in front of him. However, the answer to Itsuto’s question was simple.

“I’m not going.”

*Like you’d bring me along even if I said yes—he* added mentally, before hanging up the phone.

At this point, he didn’t care if he was acting immature or not. He was so annoyed that it didn’t bother him at all.

A week earlier, and he probably wouldn’t have hesitated to say he would go. Now, however, he didn’t feel that way whatsoever.

Though he felt the slightest bit of regret for saying he wouldn’t go, the annoyance he felt was stronger.

For the first time, Kiyoka had weighed his role against his private affairs and prioritized the latter.

Two days later. Unfortunately, it had been overcast since morning.

The charcoal clouds were heavy and thick, bursting with water as they hung in the autumn sky, ready to open up at any moment. It was the season of fall rains, filled with gloomy, cloudy days and downpours.

Kiyoka filled his usual bag with the books and writing utensils he needed, grabbed an umbrella, and left for school.

The sword bag with his favorite blade remained, as it had for the past week, propped up against the wall in his room.

“Heya, Kudou. Morning.”

“Good morning, Chida. You’re early.”

Right after he’d arrived on campus, Kiyoka bumped into Chida.

Because he was so occupied with nighttime escapades, Chida’s mornings usually started much later. Perhaps he’d made sure to show up at campus

early because his grades were on the line.

“I had to today. It’s in the auditorium, right?”

“Yes.”

“All right, we should hurry and snag a good seat.”

Kiyoka headed into the elegant and refined Western-style auditorium with Chida.

There were only a few people inside the auditorium lined with rows of chairs.

Kiyoka sat next to Chida and waited until the talk began. Meanwhile, the number of attendees increased little by little until it was starting time.

In the end, only a small number of students ended up coming to the talk. Despite that, the topic was very interesting to Kiyoka, as his professor had told him, and it stimulated his own desire to do research.

The foreign lecturer’s talk, delivered through a translator, was difficult to follow in several places, but this made Kiyoka eager to work them out on his own later.

Chida, meanwhile, seemed to have slept through the entire thing.

“Phew, it’s over, finally.”

Once the lecturer had finished his talk and stepped down from the podium, the applause subsided and Chida stretched himself out with a yawn.

“Kudou, tell me what it was about later.”

“...You weren’t even listening?”

Kiyoka looked at Chida with disgust.

“I made an effort, but sleep won out.”

Sighing in exasperation, Kiyoka gathered his belongings at his feet and stood up.

The issue of Chida’s attitude aside, Kiyoka found the talk satisfying, and he was glad he’d participated in it.

The next time he came across the professor who had invited him, he would have to express his gratitude.

Kiyoka felt very pleased as he started to walk off. Chida hurried to follow him.

“Hey, what’re you doing after this? We don’t have classes today, so do you want to go out and have some fun?”

“No thanks.”

It was not yet noon. After hearing such a fantastic lecture, Kiyoka wanted to channel his enthusiasm while it was still fresh and read a book on his field of study. It would be too much of a waste for him to go out to have a good time and let this mood of his pass.

But Chida refused to back down.

“C’mon, don’t be like that. You can hang out with me for a little while, right?”

“Like I just said—”

At that moment, Kiyoka suddenly felt a quivering sensation that he was very familiar with.

*Why do I feel arts being used? Is it a familiar?*

Ignoring Chida and looking around the vicinity carefully, Kiyoka quickly spotted what was causing the sensation.

A single familiar made from a scrap of white paper was nimbly gliding toward Kiyoka. No one else had the ability to see it.

He casually raised his hand into the air, and the familiar headed straight for him, landing in his fist.

“What’s up?”

Chida raised a suspicious eyebrow at Kiyoka, who had cut off mid-sentence.

“It’s nothing. Sorry, you’ll have to excuse me.”

“Huh? Hey!” Chida called out to Kiyoka in confusion after being turned down so abruptly, but Kiyoka ignored him and left the scene with hastened steps.

The familiar was shaped like the ones that the members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit—Koumyouin, specifically—liked to use.

Hiding in the shadow of a building where no one else would see him, he spread out the paper familiar, which was folded like origami.

*Need backup.*

This was all that was written inside. However, the handwriting spoke volumes.

Not only were the letters blurred and difficult to parse, having likely been rained on, but they were also the color of rust.

This wasn’t ink—it was blood. Probably human blood.

The bloody message was unsteady and shaky, so the sender must have been in a precarious situation, without any time to write neatly.

*This familiar is from Koumyouin...!*

His handwriting was messy to begin with. However, this familiar was far too unusual.

*"We're going to take out the Earth Spider tomorrow. Me and Koumyouin, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, and several others are going to attack its nest. It's bound to be a fierce battle, and it'll probably last a few days, too."*

It was all too clear that he had gotten into an extremely dangerous predicament after leaving the day before to exterminate the Earth Spider.

That didn't just go for Koumyouin. It had to be true for Godou and the other unit members, too.

"What should I...? No."

His hesitation lasted only a few seconds. Kiyoka immediately ran off.

Using his exceptional physical abilities as a Gift-user, he dashed through the capital, heading back home. When Kiyoka threw open the entryway door, his breathing ragged, the nearby servants looked on in wide-eyed shock.

"Is Father home?"

One of the servants nodded, dumbfounded at Kiyoka's question. "Y-yes. He's in his room..."

"Thanks."

With a gruffly given word of gratitude, Kiyoka continued up the stairs and knocked on the door to Tadakiyo's room.

"It's Kiyoka. I'm coming in."

"Go ahead."

Inside, Tadakiyo stared at Kiyoka as he sat upright in bed, his eyes impossible to read.

"What's wrong?"

"Let me ask you straight: Where is the Earth Spider's nest?" Kiyoka asked without a moment's delay, getting out his question in a single breath, but Tadakiyo simply looked back at him calmly. He didn't seem to understand Kiyoka's panic in the slightest.

"You know, don't you? It's urgent, please tell me."

"..."



“Tell me. Please.”

Kiyoka bent steeply at the waist and bowed his head to Tadakiyo, who remained silent.

Under normal circumstances, he would have never lowered himself and begged to the man he so detested.

But now that he'd seen that alarming familiar, the discontent that smoldered in his chest for his father and Itsuto had vanished.

He had to go. This impulse alone occupied Kiyoka's thoughts and propelled his body forward.

“I thought you weren't getting involved with the Earth Spider?”

A quiet question from his father. While he couldn't afford to spend time on this back-and-forth, he didn't have any other choice but to put up with it, since he didn't know where the Earth Spider was.

Just then, he realized he could have avoided his father by taking his question to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station; but now it was too late. It would be faster to get the information from his father at this point than to change course and run off to the station.

“The situation's changed. I received a request for support, so I'm heading there myself.”

“Hmm, so you've made up your mind, then?”

“...Yes. That's why I'm heading to where they're fighting the Earth Spider.”

The truth was he didn't know for sure if he had made up his mind. However, Kiyoka agreed with Tadakiyo out of impatience.

Kiyoka didn't exactly know what Tadakiyo thought of this. Yet, about half a minute later, he was rushing off to the location his father had told him, snatching his favorite sword from his room and flying out of the house.

*Please let me make it in time!*

His heart pounded from the terrible foreboding in his mind.

The Earth Spider was powerful. Itsuto and Koumyouin certainly wouldn't have underestimated it. Kiyoka was sure they had done their due diligence and confronted it with resolve and strategy.

Yet they had fallen into dire straits, enough so that they were requesting aid from Kiyoka and not any of the other members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

What exactly did that mean?

It meant that they had been forced into situation so horrifying that only someone with Kiyoka's power could handle it.

The Earth Spider's nest, Kiyoka had learned from Tadakiyo, was in the mountains on the outskirts of the capital.

It wasn't a distance he could cover by running on foot. Somehow suppressing his unease, Kiyoka transferred from the streetcar to the train and hurried on his way, taking the most direct route to get there the soonest.

He doubted he would arrive at his destination while it was still light out.

Based on how his encounter with the Earth Spider had played out the other day, Kiyoka surmised he would be at an overwhelming disadvantage if he had to fight in unfamiliar mountains at night.

He glanced sidelong at the scenery rolling by outside the train window.

The speed of the train felt terribly slower than usual; he wanted to shout that it needed to go faster, and faster still. But no matter how panicked Kiyoka got, the train never accelerated.

A series of ominous conjectures and memories ran through his head.

The cold sweat wouldn't stop. As impatience eddied in his heart and dark clouds—perhaps a portent of what was to come—swirled overhead, Kiyoka's thoughts ground to a halt.

His five senses were working just fine, yet his brain refused to do anything more than process his immediate sensory experiences.

When he finally arrived at the station to closest the mountain, the sun was already low in the sky.

The instant the door opened, Kiyoka quite literally flew off the train, sprinting at full speed and leaving the station.

A light rain was falling from clouds so thick they almost blotted out the sunlight entirely.

*How much time has passed since that familiar came to me? How long have they...?*

He ran along the muddy road, kicking up murky water. He ran and ran. Even as he nearly tripped over himself, even as he ran out of breath. Even as he was soaked by the rain.

If Itsuto and the others were already in dire straits when they'd sent the familiar, then how had they managed to endure for the past several hours...? Had they actually been able to hold out at all?

Kiyoka had tried the best he could to remain levelheaded, but his mind only filled with terrible premonitions.

That was why it had shut down.

As he ran over the country road, level but unpaved, he came across several low mountains.

Although he'd gotten here sooner than expected thanks to his mad dash, it was difficult to determine which of the mountains the Earth Spider was nesting in from the information he had been given.

*Concentrate.*

Kiyoka closed his eyes, sharpening his senses. A hideous sensation, like a foul odor, assailed him, pointing him in the right direction.

*Over there.*

Due to his long run, Kiyoka's legs were leaden, and his throat and lungs ached with every breath he took. Yet still he kept moving.

The mountain was untamed, and there was no path for him to follow.

Eventually, he just barely managed to find where Itsuto's group seemed to have passed through, a space where the tree branches and brush had been cut down just enough to accommodate the width of a single person.

The mountain terrain, muddied from the rain, was slippery and difficult to tread. He would lose everything if he slipped down the mountain, so he ascended with caution, but it ate away at his time.

On top of that, he also needed to push aside the ferns, bamboo grass, and thickets of vines, so he progressed forward at a snail's pace.

The sound of the rain hitting the tree leaves picked up, turning into a clamor.

Sunset was approaching, and with the weather being as bad as it was, his surroundings darkened surprisingly quickly.

The silver lining was that it was still early autumn, so the days weren't quite as short as they could be. Even so, he had no time to spare.

Though Kiyoka could have, in theory, created a flame to light the way with his Gift, the rain posed an issue. Maintaining the flame in this weather would sap his energy. He had already disregarded his physical stamina to get this far, so at the very least, he wanted to preserve the energy he would need to fight with his Gift.

With every step he took, a ghostly aura seemed to be freezing his body and soul, growing thicker and thicker.

He began to tremble, but whether this was from the cold of the rain, his nervous anticipation for the fight to come, or from fear, he couldn't say.

While he knew he should go faster, his instincts were screaming at him to do otherwise. They were begging him not to go any farther.

*I don't have any time to feel scared.*

He wasn't about to stop now. Forcing his instincts to yield to his will, Kiyoka continued to advance.

All of a sudden, he was assailed by a suffocating aura.

All he could see in front of him were trees and brush, but he knew that something bad was ahead. His intuition as a Gift-user would not steer him wrong.

*Ba-dump, ba-dump.* His heartbeat pounded in his ears.

*Keep going, push through. Don't look. Don't look.*

Contradictory impulses fought against each other inside Kiyoka, blanching his thoughts.

The inside of his mouth went dry. His sense of smell disappeared. His hearing disappeared. So intensely did Kiyoka narrow his focus on the path ahead that he lost awareness of his hands, his feet, and even his own breathing.

Until at last, the scene ahead opened up before him.

"Huh?"

A dimwitted gasp escaped his lips.

He had witnessed many gruesome sights up to this point. Tragic situations and atrocious events. But even so...nothing, *nothing* could have helped him make sense of this moment.

When his hearing returned, he picked up the din of the rain and the sound of something being eaten. The inimitable stench of blood hit his nostrils, mixed with the petrichor of the damp earth. And then his eyes fell on something.

Something caught on a tree branch, like a worn-out rag amid the faded mountain forest.

Something scattered and mixed in with the dark brown color of the soil.

Something run through by the forelimbs of a massive, jet-black spider.

An enormous amount of blood dribbled down. Its crimson hue the only vibrant sight in the curtain of rain.

"M-Mr. Godou...?"

There came a valorous cry. By some supernatural power, the forelimb jerked in the wrong direction, dislodging the thing it had stabbed and letting it tumble like a doll.

That “thing” was a person. Someone that Kiyoka knew very well.

“Mr. Godou!”

Kiyoka practically flew to him. He went to lift the man up, only to stop the moment he reached out for him.

There was a gaping hole in Itsuto’s stomach. He wheezed in short gasps. The wound was so large that it seemed to Kiyoka like Itsuto would fall apart if someone touched him.

“M-Mr. Godou.”

His words didn’t come out right.

If only he’d inherited a healing Gift instead—that was the only thought that came to Kiyoka’s still-frozen mind.

His lips and mouth dyed bright red from all the choked-up blood, Itsuto looked at Kiyoka and gave a crooked, ambiguous smile.

“Kiyoka. Koumyouin, must’ve...sent you...”

Itsuto’s eyes moved. When Kiyoka turned to where the man was looking, he saw Koumyouin leaning against a tree, perfectly motionless.

He was seriously wounded. One of his legs was close to being torn off, and there was a bloody gash in his side. Kiyoka couldn’t tell if the man was still breathing or if his wounds were fatal.

Kiyoka heard a short groan, and he turned back to Itsuto in a panic.

“Mr. Godou! Mr. Godou, I can’t... I don’t know what I...”

Kiyoka was overwhelmed. He didn’t have the slightest idea what to do. Even if his mind was in working order, he still wouldn’t know how to help this man who was so very important to him.

No, it wasn’t that Kiyoka didn’t know.

It was that Itsuto was already too far gone to be saved.

Kiyoka simply didn’t want to accept it.

“It’s all my fault.”

“Why...? Don’t say that.”

Kiyoka immediately put up a barrier behind him. It was an almost unconscious act. Letting out a grating shriek, the massive spider slammed into the shield and was propelled back. While all this happened, Kiyoka never once turned from Itsuto.

He stared down unblinking at his mentor.

He took the man's hand in his. It felt heavier than ever before, and it was so slick with rain, it felt like it could slip out of his at any moment.

"I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Kiyoka..."

"..."

"I'm the one...who told you to choose...b-but this...this wasn't..."

"That's not important right now."

"I'm sorry...Kiyoka. For everything... All of it."

"Mr. Godou...!"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for saddling you with this."

As Itsuto voiced his apologies like a broken record, tears rolled from his eyes, mixing with the rain.

The light in his eyes gradually faded, changing them to hollow glass beads. The warmth in the hand Kiyoka held tight drained, and it grew hard and cold.

Kiyoka was unable to move from where he sat, his eyes wide with shock.

Itsuto was dead.

Scattered all over the area were the corpses of several unit members that Godou and Koumyouin had brought with them. The conspicuously low number of bodies must have meant the Earth Spider had devoured the rest to recover its stamina.

Kiyoka had known all of them. Had talked with them. Had sparred against them with bamboo training swords and had even faced off against Grotesqueries by their side.

Every one of them had been transformed into silent masses of flesh, all too easily.

Why had things turned out this way? Where had he gone wrong? What could he have done to avoid this tragedy?

After that, things became hazy.

He remembered up to the point where he struggled to unsheathe his favorite sword with his cold, numb hand. From there, fragmented sounds and sights would come and go from his mind. He knew for certain that the Earth Spider had been weakened from the wounds it had sustained fighting Itsuto and the others.

The members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had given their lives to dull its movements and drain its power.

Consequently, Kiyoka was able to lay waste to the weakened Earth Spider on his own, driving it down below a rocky cliff, then stabbing its massive body multiple times, stacking seal after seal on top of it, as if sewing the thing.

He had intended on killing it completely and eradicating it for good.

But that didn't end up happening. No matter how many times he feverishly stabbed his sword—a magical sword, at that—into the Earth Spider, it wouldn't die. The creature continued to twitch with life, and its ghostly aura didn't abate in the slightest. Even cleaving its abdomen in two and decapitating it wasn't enough.

With no other choice, Kiyoka used his magical sword as an intermediary to create a rigid seal to contain the Grotesquerie and its ghostly aura.

This was Kiyoka's first act of revenge. Putting down an ancient Grotesquerie all by himself was a magnificent feat in itself, but even as the Earth Spider stopped moving, Kiyoka felt no sense of accomplishment. He had gained nothing.

He had lost everything.

The fat raindrops beat hard against the trees. Pouring, pouring, as if to erase it all.

Kiyoka's memories became clear again around the time of Itsuto's funeral.

He wasn't sure how he had gotten back to the capital or what he had done in the aftermath.

The next thing he knew, he was at Itsuto's funeral with Yoshito grabbing him by the collar.

"Screw you! You got a lotta nerve showing up here, murderer!"

"..."

"You don't have anything to say for yourself, asshole?! Get out of my goddamn face!"

Yoshito raised his fist and hurled it at Kiyoka, who resigned himself to taking it. Since Kiyoka put up no resistance, he went flying back, slamming into a wall.

There was some amount of impact. However, Kiyoka couldn't really feel anything in particular.

*Yoshito is absolutely right.*

Kiyoka had nothing to say for himself.

Over the countless times he thought back to that day, he would always picture a different outcome, a different future. He wouldn't cry. He didn't have the right.

His thoughts were wholly consumed with one question: What could he have done to save everyone?

What if he had chosen to join the military first thing after Itsuto asked him about his future...?

When Itsuto had invited him to join the mission to eliminate the Earth Spider, what if Kiyoka had been honest with himself and agreed to go?

What if, instead of being so infatuated with his pointless studies, he had immediately reconsidered and chased after them?

If Kiyoka had been a part of the fighting force, perhaps there wouldn't have been any casualties to begin with, and they might have been able to defeat the Earth Spider. Maybe he would have gotten there in time to save Itsuto.

Maybe. Perhaps.

Each time he thought back on these points of divergence, which he could never return to, he would relive his regrets.

If only he could go back to that time; if only he could turn back the clock or bring back the dead.

He could do nothing but entertain vain thoughts such as these.

"I'm sorry."

Yoshito's face turned bright red at Kiyoka's apology. Tears welled in the boy's eyes.

Kiyoka kept quiet as he watched Yoshito prepare to hit him once again.

Even if Yoshito didn't stop hitting him, even if he outright tried to kill him, Kiyoka didn't think he had any right to complain, but the other guests tried desperately to stop the boy.

"Screw you! Screw you! Why are you still alive when Dad is... When Dad is...!"

Yoshito's tearful shout reverberated across the area.

"Murderer. I'll kill you." The attendees paled at the frightful words disrupting the silence.



*“That boy, well... I’m sure he’s doing fine. He doesn’t send a single word my way, but my wife gets a letter from him every now and then.”*

*“He went off on me about how the Gift-users in this country are behind the times and how he’s gonna go learn about Gifts and arts in a country that’s way more advanced than ours, but all of that had to be to spite me, huh? Ha-ha.”*

Itsuto had told that to Kiyoka with a bitter smile, but...

*Mr. Godou, you were truly loved... Not that it wasn’t obvious.*

Of course a man of integrity and character like him would be adored.

Though Yoshito may have been in a rebellious phase, in the end, he loved his father. That was all the more reason for him to denounce Kiyoka for being unable to save Itsuto.

Because it was none other than Kiyoka who was responsible for his father’s death.

Kiyoka’s naïveté, his hesitation, and his immaturity had cost everyone the life of a man who was irreplaceable. An all too heavy crime. Even sacrificing his own life wouldn’t be enough.

There was no way to atone.

*“I’ll kill you! I swear I’ll kill you!”*

Yoshito shook off the people restraining him and came right up to Kiyoka. Kiyoka closed his eyes, prepared to accept anything thrown at him, when at that moment...

*“Can you leave it at that?”*

Everyone turned their eyes toward that calm voice. Yoshito also stopped moving and slowly turned in that same direction.

It was Koumyouin.

His military coat was draped over his shoulders, and he was being pushed in a wheelchair by a man in a white coat who was most likely a doctor.

Everything beneath his hospital gown was wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, and he looked like he was in pain.

*“Yoshito, can you just drop it there for me? Please. If you’re still not satisfied...then kill me.”*

Yoshito glared silently at Koumyouin, who pleaded with a look of agony on his face and a tense sweat on his brow.

*“I wasn’t able to protect the commander, either. I was his adjutant, I still ended up being the only one to make it out. I’m the one who failed to save*

the commander, so if anything, my crimes are far more severe. Am I wrong?"

"..."

"So, please."

Koumyouin's wounds were severe.

Only a few days had passed since the battle, and there was no way he had recovered. Regardless of how many healing arts may have been used on him, and no matter what cutting-edge medical treatments he may have undergone, he should have been strictly confined to bed rest. Kiyoka wouldn't be surprised if simply getting out of bed and into the wheelchair had brought Koumyouin pain intense enough to knock him unconscious.

"Please... Please."

Koumyouin pitched forward with his head lowered, rolling out of the wheelchair to prostrate himself on the floor before Yoshito. The motion must have opened up one of his wounds, as fresh blood soaked through his bandages and dripped to the floor.

Even Yoshito seemed affected by the sight as he slowly lowered his balled fist.

"...Don't think I've forgiven you, Kiyoka Kudou. I'll make sure you suffer the same pain that Dad did."

Yoshito glared at him, eyes filled with intense hatred, before departing with his back quivering.

Kiyoka finally lifted up his head when Koumyouin, having been picked up off the floor, was wheeled over to him.

"Kiyoka."

"...Mr. Koumyouin."

"What the hell is with that look?"

"I mean...I could say the same for you."

Kiyoka just barely managed to give his usual sort of reply.

Ever since the battle, Kiyoka's facial muscles had stopped moving entirely, and while he had never been very talkative to begin with, he was now barely able to get any words out.

His guilt toward Itsuto, Koumyouin, the Godous, and the other unit members who were left behind had won out, and it had taken everything left in him to apologize to Yoshito.

"It ain't your fault."

“No. It was my fault, I should’ve...gone with you from the start. I should’ve agreed to fight the Earth Spider right away.”

“That just wasn’t gonna happen.”

“No... There must have been a way.”

He gritted his teeth and balled his hands into fists.

Itsuto had asked Kiyoka unambiguously to come along with them and take out the Earth Spider.

But Kiyoka had pouted like an immature child and stubbornly refused the invitation. Because of that, they all got hurt and lost their lives. If only Kiyoka had been there, then perhaps they would have been able to kill the Earth Spider without so many casualties.

If this wasn’t his fault, then whose was it?

“But the commander’s the one who pushed you away in the first place. He’s the one who told you to focus on your dreams instead of the role you’re meant to fill.”

“Dreams!” Kiyoka shouted, almost cutting off Koumyouin as the man tried to reason with him. “Letting myself get distracted by that saccharine nonsense is how everything ended up like this!”

“...Kiyoka.”

There was a sorrowful tremor in Koumyouin’s eyes as he looked at Kiyoka.

“The day before we went to that mountain, I talked with the commander. I asked him why he took you off the mission.”

“...”

“The commander still didn’t give a straight answer. However...” The pallid Koumyouin gently closed his eyes. “You’re powerful. The strongest Gift-user of the current age. You have that much power in you. And that was why...he wanted you to recognize for yourself the duty and responsibility that comes with so much power. The commander didn’t want you to just follow the course laid out to you from birth, but for you to find the resolve to choose your future for yourself.”

*Ah, that was it.* Kiyoka had realized it all.

A tranquil life as an ordinary young man, or a life of constant battle as a Gift-user. With both options before him, Kiyoka should have immediately chosen the latter. That was the truth of it.

Itsuto had lost his life because Kiyoka hadn't been able to do that—because Kiyoka had been indecisive. Kiyoka hadn't been able to live up to Itsuto's expectations.

*I got carried away with the chance to experience my own dreams, something idealistic and pure like that.*

To steadfastly choose his role as a Gift-user even when something as alluring as a dream—fleeting, beautiful, and radiant like the first evening star—was dangled in front of his eyes. He needed to have that resolve.

Itsuto had waited for Kiyoka to abandon his dreams and opt to walk down the path of bloodshed.

Kiyoka couldn't help but ridicule himself.

Unable to realize something so simple while trampling all over the man's expectations, he must have looked quite foolish to Itsuto,

He could excuse himself by saying he was immature. However, that immaturity had made him lose something irreplaceable.

"I...I was fool. Entirely unable to realize Mr. Godou's intentions."

Powerful? Stronger than anyone? If he neglected to use that power when it mattered most, then none of it meant anything.

He'd been wrong to have thought his mind was made up.

If he was powerful, then he could never afford to be half-hearted. Fulfilling both roles at once? How entitled of him. What could he even hope to accomplish by merely wielding the strength he held on the side in his spare time? He couldn't claim that he had made up his mind.

"It's too late," he said. "Realizing it all now means nothing."

"Kiyoka?"

Koumyouin's voice faltered with unease. Kiyoka paid no mind to him and turned on his heel.

He wouldn't accomplish anything by just standing here, dumbfounded, lamenting his failure and loss. As long as he lingered, there was no guarantee he wouldn't end up being too late in some other way once more. From this point forward, he would never throw himself into battle while wasting his time on something else. Never again would he forgive himself.

"I'm leaving... I won't waver again."

Kiyoka had tried to smile a bit at Koumyouin to give him peace of mind. However, Koumyouin closed his eyes and twisted his face, as if he had just laid eyes on a monster.

Never again would he make the same mistake. He was no longer a boy, no longer a mentee, but a man. One who wouldn't hesitate. Wouldn't vacillate.

As someone with power, he would place himself in battle. Any other path presented to him was just a distraction.

Kiyoka left the funeral hall without looking back.

The terrible stretch of autumn weather, as if nothing but a dream, had given way to a bright blue sky. Even if he gazed up at it, however, he would feel nothing but regret in his chest, not the slightest bit of reprieve.

The moaning of the rain on the day of Itsuto's death still echoed in Kiyoka's ears.

*That's fine.*

It would ensure he would never forget how he felt at this moment: unbearably angry and disappointed at his old self.



The rains of the past rapidly faded into the distance.

He was pulled back into the present by the steamy aroma floating up from his coffee cup.

Across from Kiyoka, Koumyouin, too, looked as though he had left his soul somewhere in the past.

"Never mind actually, I take back what I said," Koumyouin suddenly murmured.

"Take back what?"

As far as Kiyoka was concerned, Koumyouin had plenty of indelicate or inconsiderate comments he needed to take back. Which one was he referring to exactly?

He blinked in genuine confusion, and Koumyouin scratched his cheek awkwardly.

"When I said you never really change."

"Oh, that one."

"...Don't make it sound like there was a buncha options to choose from."

"Well, there were."

Stone-faced, Kiyoka brought his coffee cup to his lips.

The coffee that slipped down his throat was slightly tepid yet still delicious and aromatic. *They must have used good beans and brewed it meticulously.*

He would have liked to replicate it himself, but he wondered what Miyo would say to him if he began to get obsessive about coffee at home after leaving the military.

“You’ve changed. I didn’t really think that when you became commander, but now that you’re hitched? Yeah, you’ve changed all right.”

“...I’m still the same as I’ve always been.”

“Nah, you’re different. You don’t get the sorta face you wore back at Commander Godou’s funeral, do you?”

Kiyoka had no way of verifying what his own face looked like. When he remained silent, pretending not to know what Koumyouin meant, the man continued.

“Up until I saw you the other day, you always had this tense, strained look on your face. Like a string or thread wound up tight enough to snap at any moment... Part of that’s my fault, huh? I’ve wanted to apologize to you for a while.”

Kiyoka had an idea of what Koumyouin was trying to say.

Obviously, he had matured since that day. While not perfect, he could imagine and understand what Koumyouin had been feeling back then...and what Yoshito had been, too.

“You remember what I said to you when we met at the funeral?”

“...”

“I probably wasn’t wrong. But it wasn’t right of me to say, neither. Anyway, that wasn’t what I should’ve said to you back then.”

Given Koumyouin’s lack of sensitivity, Kiyoka wondered how much worry, reflection, and regret it had taken for the man to eventually arrive at this conclusion. Just imagining this gave him a pretty good idea.

Of course he remembered what Koumyouin had said to him. It would be hard for him to forget.

He’d said that Itsuto had thrust two choices in front of Kiyoka—his dreams or his duty as a Gift-user—to make him come to grips with the heavy responsibility he bore.

“Now I get it, too. The commander wanted to question if you truly had resolve. No doubt ’bout that. It’s just, I bet that even if you chose a path

outside of using your Gift, he would have planned on supporting you, too.”

“...”

“The commander wasn’t just asking if you had the resolve; he probably wanted to give you the last chance to choose a different life for yourself. You were really important to him, and all.”

Kiyoka quietly returned his cup to its saucer. There was a light clinking sound.

“And ’cause I didn’t fully think it through, just laid everything out to you before I could really get to the answers, you blamed yourself way more than you should have.”

“...You may be right.”

Letting out a sigh, Kiyoka looked straight back at Koumyouin.

As ever, the man’s kindhearted way of thinking was totally at odds with his features. Leading the way to a hopeful conclusion was his forte.

“Both you and I were too immature. Hopelessly so.”

“Sure were.”

“Once time passed, my emotions cooled, and my positions changed... Only then did some things finally become clear.”

Like Koumyouin, Kiyoka had ascertained Itsuto’s true intentions for a while. He’d understood only after becoming the unit commander, gaining many subordinates of his own, and fighting alongside them.

Kiyoka now knew that Itsuto had been primarily testing his resolve. However, there had to be a part of Itsuto that wanted Kiyoka to have a dream of his own, too. He must have believed it would be alright for Kiyoka to have a path of escape, away from the heavy responsibilities he had shouldered from a young age.

To Kiyoka, Itsuto had been a consistently kindhearted mentor; a guide, a father, and an older brother.

“Y’know, Kiyoka, thing is...”

“Yes?”

“When I heard you were planning to leave the military, lemme tell ya, that came as a shocker to me.”

“I can see that. Even I didn’t think that the day would come where I could make a choice like this.”

*Then, why?* Koumyouin’s eyes were filled with this question.

Kiyoka gave a strained smile.

Of course Koumyouin would be confused. From the day Kiyoka had chosen to join the military, he'd avoided all other pursuits entirely, to the point of writing his notice of withdrawal from school. Naturally, his parents hadn't permitted him to drop out altogether, but Kiyoka had been serious about it.

He only did the bare minimum for the lectures, coursework, and research he had once worked so hard at, and instead spent all his time exterminating Grotesqueries.

Kiyoka had isolated himself to the point where everything else became a nuisance to him, and he continued confronting Grotesqueries until he graduated, whereupon he immediately joined the military.

His professors, upperclassman, and other classmates had seemed to lament the change in Kiyoka, and Chida, who'd spent a fair amount of time with him, had pressed him to know what had changed, but Kiyoka couldn't possibly answer him. Before long, everyone had distanced themselves from him.

Although he'd never had trouble being alone to begin with, from that day forward, his descent into solitude accelerated even faster.

This was likely why he'd grown so stubborn about fulfilling his Gift-user role and treating all the marriage prospects that came his way so coldly.

Before he knew it, he'd developed the habit of going into relationships with people expecting rejection.

Being a military man was, to Kiyoka, a sort of symbol for who he had been ever since that day. Not something trivial that he could cast aside on a whim.

However.

"If Mr. Godou saw me after I got engaged, he probably would've shoved the same two choices in my face again."

As if to tell him to choose one or the other, and not be half-hearted about all of it. Kiyoka was sure that Itsuto would surely have tried to guide him again like that.

"And if I chose my duty as a Gift-user this time...he probably would have punched me."

Itsuto had also cherished his family.

The woman who had become Kiyoka's wife was a bit different from the average wife of a distinguished family, who stayed at home and took on all



the domestic responsibilities. While she was a perfect fit for the Kudous, Kiyoka needed to give everything he had to protect her, or she could get wrapped up in someone's trouble at a moment's notice.

Nevertheless, he could no longer imagine himself without her by his side.

That meant he needed to look out for her, even if he left the military and cast aside the choice he'd made that day, along with everything that had become part of his identity up until now.

Koumyouin laughed, a wry smile coming to his face.

"Ha-ha-ha. Oh yeah, that'd be a justifiable reason to hit you all right. No doubt about it. This time, there's no question you're making the right decision."

The spring sun streamed through the window and onto the table, giving off a soft light. The two men were enveloped in radiant warmth.

The sound of rain that had remained so long inside Kiyoka's mind had gone utterly silent.

By the time Kiyoka got home, the sun had completely set.

He and Koumyouin had talked into the afternoon, then parted ways before dusk set in. Kiyoka had gone back to the station for work, and it had gotten late in the blink of an eye.

While he certainly was a bit displeased that he was forced to work this much just after getting married, if the Earth Spider had revived and was attacking people again, he couldn't afford to be careless.

*This'll probably be my last job as a military man.*

This time, he would defeat the Earth Spider for good and retire without the slightest misgiving whatsoever. Now was the time to exert himself to make that happen.

Kiyoka stopped his car on the grounds of the house, getting out and walking toward the entryway.

As he did, Miyo came out to greet him, wrapped in a delicately colored kimono with a pattern of tiny flowers, a slight smile on her face.

She came up to him with short, tottering steps. *Adorable.*

"I'm home."

"Welcome home, Kiyoka."

Their eyes met, and they both smiled.

*Mr. Godou, I'll do it right his time.*

He thought of his dear, deceased friend. If Itsuto was watching over Kiyoka somewhere, then Kiyoka was certain that at that moment, he would be cheerfully smiling just as he had in the past.

The long rains had abated, fall had come and gone, and with winter past...now spring had come.

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## *My Sister-in-Law Is Too Cute*

*Oh goodness, she's just so cute.*

That thought came to Hazuki Kudou's mind whenever she saw her future sister-in-law, Miyo.

"Hello, Miyo."

"G-good day, Hazuki."

One sunny late summer's day near the Obon Festival. With the harsh rays of the sun scorching down on the world, Hazuki had arrived in an automobile, like always, to visit the house of her younger brother Kiyoka.

Miyo was standing at the door, her overly skinny arms overflowing with many different packages.

*...Gifts of some kind?*

The packages included boxes that were wrapped in paper with designs of many colors, paper bags from famous shops, baskets decorated with ribbons, and so much more.

At first glance, it was clear to see they were gifts for someone, and there were even more in addition to the ones in Miyo's hands, piled up in a mountain that dominated the entryway.

Hazuki didn't know the circumstances at play, but it appeared that Miyo and Yurie were in the midst of diligently bringing them all inside.

"Wow, look at all those gifts. I'll help out."

"Thank you very much. I appreciate it..."

Miyo looked happy as she softened her slightly sweaty face.

Hazuki joined in, and with the three of them at work, they quickly moved the daunting pile of gifts into the parlor in a few trips.

However, now the parlor was overtaken by them all.

While the packages may have been exciting to look at with their array of colors and shapes, they left no room for anyone to maneuver through, and

when Hazuki considered the amount of cleanup that would come with unwrapping them, they seemed a bother.

Such an incredible number of gifts. As she was carrying them, Hazuki wondered why they were there.

“There is a *lot* of them... These must be get-well presents for Kiyoka, right?” Hazuki asked as she cooled herself with a folding fan, letting out an exhausted sigh, to which Miyo nodded with a wince.

“Yes, that’s right. It’s been one after another these past few days.”

“It really has been nonstop.”

Yurie nodded her head next to Miyo.

“A real bother, isn’t it?”

Just a week ago, Kiyoka had fallen during a mission at the Burial Grounds, losing consciousness for several days before waking up.

Being in an unconscious state—in other words, being in a long sleep—may not have sounded like something to worry much about. However, it meant one would be unable to eat, drink, or move.

Even Kiyoka, a man with the sturdy body of a Gift-user and exceptional stamina, hadn’t been able to get through it unscathed.

While unconscious, Kiyoka had rapidly lost bodily strength and had built up a lot of fatigue, and from this, the doctor determined he would have been in grave danger had he awoken just a bit later. Naturally, he had been given strict orders to rest and recuperate.

As such, he was still bedbound, not yet fully recovered.

*Well, there’s not much anybody could have done about that.*

An accident while out on a mission was an unavoidable risk. No one was to blame. However...

How exactly had news of his condition gotten out there in the first place? She found it unacceptable how these people who claimed to be close with Kiyoka had started sending him get-well gifts in droves after hearing some half-true gossip about him taking time off work because of an injury.

“There are letters and cards with the presents, too. I asked Kiyoka about it and started sorting them by how important they are, but...I simply can’t keep up.”

Miyo slumped, seemingly at a terrible loss.

Who wouldn’t have been? Even someone who wasn’t as unaccustomed to social decorum as Miyo would have had an impossible time trying to sort

such large number of gifts.

*Honestly, I can't believe they would put Miyo through so much trouble.*

Hazuki's irritation grew at the people ostentatiously sending all these get-well gifts. She couldn't overlook this situation.

"I'll help out, too. I know which families we have associations with, and I have a general idea of who my brother has connections with through work as well."

"Ms. Hazuki...! Thank you very much. That would be such a big help."

With teary eyes, Miyo bowed over and over her again to express her thanks, looking deeply moved by the offer. It almost seemed like she was overdoing it.

But it did make Hazuki happy to see her sister-in-law had turned to her for help.

"Well then, let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Yes."

Together with Miyo and Yurie, Hazuki set about unboxing the enormous pile of gifts.

As they stripped the wrapping off one present after another, they all realized something. While the outside packaging for the get-well gifts themselves were multitudinous, the contents themselves were surprisingly similar.

"Honestly, more snacks? Who would make a sick man eat all this?" Hazuki murmured in annoyance, and Miyo also stopped her hands for a moment and spoke up, bewildered.

"More fruits here, as well... No one could ever eat this much."

"There are plenty of bouquets, too. What are we supposed to do with them?" Yurie added, and the three women heaved a collective sigh.

Cookies and chocolates. Sweet buns and sweet bean jellies.

The treats were all either rare, imported goods or products from famous shops, but there were just too many for them to be happy about. As the exact same items cropped up again and again, they got sick of it all.

There were also gifts of apples, peaches, and other fruits.

While these were welcome treats in moderation, there were far too many here for anyone to consume.

The same was true for the flowers. There was a limit to how many bouquets they could decorate the house with. The place would be a flower

shop if they set them all up.

“Thank goodness some people just sent get-well letters.”

Miyo and Yurie both nodded at Hazuki’s comment.

“Oh, this one looks practical, though.”

Hazuki then noticed that the present she had opened while they were talking contained a hand towel.

It was rather fashionable, decorated with a flower and ripple pattern. More importantly, the gift wouldn’t pose any issues, as it wouldn’t spoil or take up too much space, even if they received many more of them.

Hazuki was so fed up with all the food items that the towel seemed exceptionally thoughtful in comparison.

She checked to see who it was from.

“...Ah, it’s from the Ookaitos. I’m not surprised; perhaps military men are accustomed to sending get-well wishes.”

A bitter taste spread in her mouth as she read out the name of the family.

Her ex-husband’s gift instilled Hazuki with slightly complicated feelings. While the wounds of her heart had already healed, she still couldn’t forget the unpleasant things that had happened in that house.

Even so, she almost felt proud that Ookaito had been so considerate.

Unaware of the circumstances, Miyo blinked her eyes and cocked her head.

“Mister Ookaito... He’s Mr. Kudou’s boss, isn’t he?”

“Yup, that’s him.”

“They have a very important relationship, then... Now that I think about it, a lot of his military acquaintances just sent get-well letters.”

Now that Miyo had pointed it out, Hazuki realized she was right. Hazuki was impressed that Miyo had picked up on this subtle detail while giving her own thoughts on the matter.

“They must know that sending items like this is a bother for the recipient. Most soldiers have probably been hospitalized from injuries before or have a close work colleague who experienced the same thing.”

“That makes sense...”

Hazuki and company chitchatted away, opening present after present all the while.

They separated the foodstuffs, flowers, and other gifts to ensure they knew who the senders were.



Despite the sheer volume of gifts, they gradually chipped away at the unwrapping until the end was almost in sight.

Along the way, Miyo's hands came to an abrupt, unnatural stop.

Finding this curious, Hazuki glanced what she held in her hands, but it wasn't anything especially unusual. Just a box covered in half-torn wrapping paper.

"What's wrong, Miyo?"

"..."

Hazuki looked at Miyo, who was silent and stiff.

When Hazuki looked closer at the partially opened package, she saw there was a small card with a brief message attached to it.

There must have been something quite serious written on it.

While Hazuki was sure no one would send outright disparaging remarks to someone who was infirm, it was possible that one or two cards contained strong words. Or perhaps the penmanship was too idiosyncratic for Miyo to read.

Hazuki timidly peered down at the card, feeling a bit tense.

"This is from..."

The sender of the card was one Yuriko Yagi.

*Yagi... The Yagis? Hmmm. Oh, they're the ones who've been on a bit of an upswing since their business has taken off. So then, their daughter would be...*

Hazuki searched her memories, and an image of the person gradually came to mind.

"I—I know this woman," Miyo mumbled. "...She's very, very pretty, isn't she?"

"She really is."

"I've heard...people have even given her a nickname. The Fragrant Lily."

Hazuki remembered hearing the same thing.

Yuriko was one or two years younger than Miyo. Thanks to her considerably attractive features and highly social personality, there were a great many anecdotes about suitors trying to court her.

She was rather famous in high society, which explained why the stories about her had reached even Miyo's ears.

However.

"Were our families ever more than friendly with each other?"

Nothing came to mind for Hazuki. The Yagi family weren't Gift-users, nor were they connected to the military. There shouldn't have been anything linking them and the Kudous. In which case, that meant...

"If it was sent under Ms. Yuriko's name, then that would have to mean that she and Kiyoka must be personally acquainted in some—"

Now she'd done it. Hazuki quickly shut her lips. A careless slip of the tongue.

"..."

"Wh-what did the card say, then?"

Hazuki stared at the contents of the card that Miyo, who had fallen silent, held in her hand. Then she froze just as Miyo had.

*Mister Kiyoka Kudou. The dance we shared together at a prior party felt like a waking dream. It is sure to be a lifelong memory of mine. When you have fully recovered, I hope you will invite me to dance again. Yuriko Yagi.*

Hazuki read the card once more, dumbfounded, before putting her head in her hands. *What in the world was Yuriko doing sending this?!* Hazuki barely managed to hold back her urge to shout.

*...Yuriko's engaged, right?! Just what are the Yagis teaching her over there?!*

A lack of common sense couldn't explain something this flagrant. She couldn't believe a betrothed woman would be sending this to someone with a fiancée of his own.

She mentally reproached the head of the Yagi family, fuzzy though her recollection of him was, for a little while until—

Hazuki abruptly realized.

This was very bad news. Since Miyo was unacquainted with social decorum, she hadn't built up an immunity to these sorts of situations. Hazuki had to explain things to her somehow.

"M-Miyo, um, so—"

"I understand. Kiyoka is a wonderful man, so it makes sense women aren't going to leave him alone."

"Miyo—"

"The relationship between the Kudous and Yagis must be maintained. I would never complain about this at all."

"L-listen, dear, the thing is..."

Miyo rose to her feet and headed into the kitchen, the gift from Yuriko still in her hands.

Though Miyo had hidden the look on her face to prevent Hazuki from seeing it, she was acting out of character. Perhaps she was brooding quite heavily over the card.

“Hey, Yurie. Maybe we should go check to see how she’s doing...”

“I-indeed. I’ve never seen Miss Miyo like that, either.”

Hazuki and Yurie, eyebrows furrowed with concern, nodded to each other and tiptoed toward the kitchen.

Quietly peeking from the kitchen entrance to avoid making any sound, they saw Miyo cooking something like normal. There didn’t appear to be anything out of the ordinary, which put them at ease for a moment.

But what on earth about their previous conversation had prompted Miyo to suddenly start cooking?

The two women held their breath as they tried to get a better look to prevent Miyo from discovering them.

*She’s simmering something in a pot? That’s what it looks like, at least...*

The box containing the catalyst to it all—Yuriko’s get-well gift—was already empty. That meant Miyo must have been simmering its contents.

“...Miss Hazuki, do you smell that?”

“It’s a very unique scent...”

Hazuki and Yurie glanced at each other with strange looks on their faces.



Kiyoka woke up covered by his blanket.

At this point, his body must have largely recovered. However, the doctor had insisted that as long as Kiyoka was fainting during the day, he hadn’t truly recovered, so he’d been getting a lot of rest as ordered.

*I’ve definitely gotten rusty by now...*

Kiyoka sat up, moping. Just then, he heard a voice from outside his room.

“Are you awake, Kiyoka?”

“Yeah.”

“May I come in?”

“Go ahead.”

“Pardon me,” Miyo said, opening the sliding door and entering. She was holding a serving tray, and she had a mysterious look on her face that made her emotions impossible to read.

“Um, it may be a bit early, but lunch is around the corner, so would you like some of this?”

“Oh sure, I’ll have some.”

The pot must have contained rice porridge.

He had begun to long for proper, hearty food to get his strength back, but he simply had to put up with things for now.

Miyo kneeled down to place the tray beside his pillow and raised the lid of the pot. Kiyoka couldn’t stop from cocking his head.

“...Does something about this smell strange to you?”

“You think so?”

“Oh, no, it might just be my imagination, but...”

It resembled a perfectly normal bowl of steaming hot, pure white, rice porridge. There wasn’t anything particularly off about it; in fact, with its glistening sheen, it looked delicious.

However, there was something extraordinarily off about the smell that wafted into Kiyoka’s nostrils from the rising steam.

*Poison... Obviously that’s not what it is, but...*

It reminded him of the breakfast when he had only just met Miyo.

Had that very misunderstanding actually become reality only a few months later? No, no, at this point, she couldn’t possibly be poisoning him. He knew very well that Miyo wasn’t the type of girl to do something like that.

Kiyoka thought in circles, at a loss to what this off smell could be, but he finally gave up and picked up the spoon.

No matter how Miyo had prepared the food, eating it would pose no problem as long as she had used edible ingredients.

“I-I’ll get started, then...”

“Go ahead.”

The moment he scooped up the porridge and placed the spoon in his mouth...

Kiyoka cupped his hand over his lips and fell back in agony.

It was awful. Absolutely horrid.

On first bite, his impression was simply that it was a bit more bitter than usual, but after that, a strange fishiness and medicinal herb scent passed through his nose.

The source of the smell appeared to be a white vegetable that was mixed in with the porridge, and every time Kiyoka bit one, he was assaulted by a powerful stench.

And then there was the texture of the vegetable, which was like hardened soil. He could only describe it as extremely unpleasant.

“K-Kiyoka, are you all right?”

“W-water...”

“Here.”

Drinking the water in the glass in one gulp, Kiyoka expelled all the air inside his lungs, before finally settling down.

“Um, was the flavor...not to your liking?”

When Miyo asked Kiyoka this, a thought occurred to him.

*Honestly, it was dreadful...but is it really okay for me to say that here now? Miyo is a skilled cook, and this is bound to have an effect on her self-confidence down the line. If I tell her it's disgusting, it'll end up hurting her again.*

If anything, it was incorrect for him to even complain about the flavor when she had made it out of concern for Kiyoka's constitution.

Reaching his conclusion, Kiyoka gulped and mustered all the strength he could to smooth things over.

“E-er, no, I wouldn't say that... I-it certainly tastes like it'll be good for my body.”

“Do you think you'll be able to eat it?”

“Y-yeah, I can eat it. I'll eat it.”

Kiyoka's lips twitched, and with a slightly trembling hand, he took the spoon and ate another bite of the porridge.

*D-disgusting...! But I have to finish it all because of what I said.*

Ever so slowly, he drank water to thin the taste of each bite he took and continued moving his spoon to his mouth. When he gulped down his fourth bite, Miyo revealed the outrageous truth to him.

“Oh, I'm so glad. I included one of the food items that was sent to you as a get-well gift.”

“...A get-well gift? From who?”

“A woman by the name of Yuriko Yagi.”

*Yuriko Yagi, Yuriko Yagi...*

The woman did not immediately spring to mind. After over a minute of deep thought, he finally arrived at a face.

*Oh, her...*

He remembered her as an extraordinarily beautiful woman.

However, she was also the type of woman Kiyoka had difficulty dealing with, and he'd only responded to her persistent invitations to dance together once, without having any further interaction beyond that.

“...What was this food item called?”

“Apparently, it's an ingredient that has been used for a long time in foreign countries. It's even used in Chinese medicine. As for the name...it was too difficult for me to read, but its appearance was similar to ginger root.”

*Don't just throw in some ingredient you don't even know the name of!* As this scream echoed inside his mind, a foreboding feeling came over Kiyoka.

“Apparently it's supposed to energize you as soon as you eat it. Her note said it will ‘boost your vigor.’”

*“Hrack!”*

“M-Mr. Kudou?”

*Unbelievable.*

Well, sure, perhaps this vegetable would have given a weakened person an energy boost. But if Kiyoka was to hazard a guess, that mostly likely wasn't this ingredient's primary use...

He felt the urge to lambast Yuriko Yagi straight to her face for having sent him such an outrageous item.

A cold sweat beading on him, Kiyoka put down the spoon and moved the pot and tray very far away.

He must have eaten plenty by now. He was still technically sick. It wouldn't be strange for him to leave some food on his plate. Not at all.

“...Sorry, but I'm full.”

“O-oh, I see...”

Guilt welled up in him as he looked at Miyo's face.

Kiyoka understood. She hadn't made this porridge to be mean. She was always giving everything she had for him. Even this time, she'd acted on nothing but good intentions.

He did everything he could to choose his words graciously, so as to not hurt Miyo's feelings.

"...Also, you should only use medicinal ingredients after consulting a specialist on how much to use at once. It could cause a much stronger effect than expected."

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay, you don't need to apologize. It made me happy that you were so considerate."

Upon seeing Miyo's tiny nod, Kiyoka at last untensed his shoulders. The situation had made him more exhausted than any battle against Grotesqueries.

Regardless, he swore that as soon as he got better, he would have to air his grievances with the Yagis.



Watching the whole scene from the hallway with Yurie, Hazuki tried desperately to contain her laughter.

*Th-that was too funny!*

Naturally, it was inexcusable for Yuriko Yagi to send such a strange item, and this wasn't a problem that should be dismissed with a chuckle. And she did feel sorry for Kiyoka.

"That was quite the spectacle, wasn't it...? Hee-hee."

Seeing Miyo unperturbed and Kiyoka hopelessly flustered—the complete opposite of the norm—was quite entertaining and amusing.

On that point alone, perhaps Hazuki should be giving high praise to the Fragrant Lily.

*But still...*

Though Hazuki had almost never thought of her younger brother as being cute, when he was with Miyo, he would seem quite endearing every now and then.

Since he'd been burdened with so many responsibilities from a young age, he had never behaved much like a child at home, and his reserved nature only became more prominent as he matured.

But now, this obstinate and unsociable sourpuss had grown so very expressive and had become so desperate to be considerate to his fiancée. In

that regard...

*Miyo really is outstanding.*

At that moment, another thing clicked for Hazuki.

Miyo's reaction when she'd looked at Yuriko Yagi's card.

It had been as if all her emotions had vanished; she'd neither been despondent nor confused.

This surely suggested Miyo was stifling her emotions. In other words, it was evidence that she'd had a reaction that was intense enough to warrant suppressing.

Miyo probably wasn't aware of this. Unfortunately, she still hadn't matured enough to be able to pick up and on such subtleties.

However... Hazuki did get the feeling that Miyo and Kiyoka would get closer sooner rather than later.

She smiled, holding back an urge to shout, "*My sister-in-law is just too cute!*"



## *Sweet, Sour*

White, towering thunderheads hung in the deep blue sky on a hot and humid summer afternoon.

Outside the house, the cicadas were energetically crying in the sweltering heat.

“It’s so hot...”

Although it was slightly more tolerable indoors, where the rays of the sun could not penetrate, the heat seemed to cling to one’s body.

In her room, Miyo gazed at a textbook while cooling herself with a fan patterned after a morning glory and sighing in annoyance at the hot air that was sapping her strength.

Clearly, this summer was going to be hotter than usual.

*I hope Kiyoka is okay.*

Yesterday, he had been on night patrol, and he’d gotten home from his shift long after breakfast time.

Miyo thought he would rest until noon and have lunch from there, but instead, he holed himself up in his study and began handling some paperwork relating to the family.

She began to grow worried he wasn’t resting properly in this intense heat.

“Oh, I know!”

Remembering something, Miyo clapped her hands together.

It was just now two o’clock. The perfect timing.

Joyfully heading to the kitchen, she gazed into the tub filled with water she’d left in the sink.

“...Oh, good, they’re still cold.”

Floating in the icy water was a deep-bottomed vessel, and inside that were several glossy pieces of threadlike, translucent food.

It was *tokoroten*, jelly made from seaweed, that Yurie had bought for them.

Despite not being scheduled to work at the house that day, she had still come out all this way to bring it to them, explaining that she'd passed by a *tokoroten* hawker and couldn't help herself.

The *tokoroten*, cooled in plenty of cold water, was the perfect snack for a hot afternoon, and it looked delicious.

*If I remember correctly, Yurie said...*

Miyo, not having eaten *tokoroten* very often, recalled what Yurie had instructed while she quickly prepared the dish, then headed to Kiyoka's study.

"Kiyoka, may I come in?"

"Go ahead."

When she called out in front of the room, she immediately got a response.

Miyo heaved a sigh of relief upon seeing that he had not grown so overworked he was on the verge of collapsing.

"What is it?"

When Kiyoka looked up from his desk and turned to face her, Miyo modestly held up the tray she was carrying.

"Um, I just thought that maybe...it might be a good idea to take a short break."

Miyo's hesitant proposal prompted Kiyoko to look between the top of his desk and the tray Miyo carried for a moment. He nodded. "Sounds good."

Deciding that if he was taking a break, it would be better to be somewhere that felt a little cooler, the two of them walked side by side to a shaded spot of the veranda.

"Today's afternoon snack is *tokoroten*. Yurie bought some for us."

Miyo passed a chilled glass bowl to Kiyoka.

"It looks good... Did you flavor each bowl differently?" Kiyoka asked, comparing the contents of the bowl he was handed with the bowl Miyo had prepared for herself.

"Yes. Yurie taught me about this."

Kiyoka's was flavored with mustard and a mixture of soy sauce and vinegar, but Miyo's had been covered in brown sugar syrup.

In the eastern part of the Empire, including the capital, the soy sauce and vinegar flavoring was the norm, but apparently, people in the western regions ate it sweetened with syrup or sugar.

Miyo had been in the mood for something sweet. Thus, she had tried flavoring each of theirs separately—brown sugar syrup for herself, and for Kiyoka, who was not particularly fond of sweets, soy sauce.

“Thank you for the food.”

The two of them each picked up a bowl and their chopsticks and slid the *tokoroten* noodles into their mouths.

The texture was a sublime mixture of soft and chewy, and Miyo felt like she could eat it forever.

“I can’t remember that last time I had *tokoroten*, but it’s tasty.”

“I agree! The sweeter version is yummy, too.”

Miyo couldn’t help but smile.

Even in the sweltering heat, this time spent enjoying the flavors of summer and the exchange of small talk was comforting.

Sweet and sour. The two of them were eating dishes with different flavors, yet strangely, Miyo felt like they were experiencing the same thing.

“Sorry, did I make you worry?” Kiyoka suddenly remarked.

He must have been thinking he’d made Miyo overly concerned for him, looking as busy as he did. However, to Miyo, that wasn’t important.

“That’s not it. I simply wanted to relax a bit together with you.”

She was, of course, concerned about Kiyoka overworking himself.

However, when she thought of how many more opportunities would come for them to eat *tokoroten* together on a hot summer day, it seemed all the more precious to her.

She’d found herself wanting to invite Kiyoka to share this ordinary snack and a brief, ordinary moment with her.

“I see.”

A relieved smile came to Kiyoka’s face, and Miyo replied with a gentle smile of her own.

The wind chimes hanging beneath the eaves let out an airy jingle.

The summer afternoon continued on, her body and mind feeling ever so slightly lighter and cooler.

## *When She Was Drunk*

One day, just as he was leaving to go home—

“Commaaander.”

Right as Kiyoka, commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, was packing up for the day, his aide Yoshito Godou dropped by to stop him.

“What?”

“You’re heading home, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Ta-daaa! Here, this is for you, Commander!”

Looking awfully cheerful, Godou produced a white box.

“What’s this?”

“See, my Mother’s been really into making Western-style desserts lately. She’s always tended to overdo things, and she keeps making too many. And then she makes it my problem by pushing them off on me. Anyway, that’s the gist of it, so please have some.” Jabbering away with an unnecessarily detailed explanation, Godou forcefully handed the box to Kiyoka and departed with a casual good-bye. “See ya, Commander!”

A blue vein throbbed on Kiyoka’s temple as was he was left with no choice but to return home with the box.

“—That’s how Godou explained it all, so you should have some, too.”

“Okay...”

Miyo gazed at the box on top of the low dining table, blinking her eyes in confusion. When Kiyoka opened the lid of the box, the aroma of spirits wafted gently into the air.

Inside were elegant, light brown baked goods.

“Wow... They look delicious, don’t they?”

“They do.”

Kiyoka wasn't particularly fond of sweets, so he hadn't been sure what he was going to do with them when Godou handed him the box, but they looked surprisingly tasty.

Miyo quickly brought out small plates, and they each sampled the baked goods.

*This flavor...*

Brandy slowly spread through his mouth when he bit down. It brilliantly harmonized with the fragrant aroma of the dough into an extremely delicious flavor.

Western sweets weren't that bad after all, Kiyoka thought, relishing the flavor, when he suddenly realized something.

It was definitely delicious. However, the alcohol was quite strong.

"Miyo. How are you at handling your—"

Kiyoka gulped down the word "alcohol."

"Hee-hee. Those were so tasty..."

In the blink of an eye, all the treats had vanished from Miyo's plate.

Then, in a move that was very unusual for her, she wormed her fingers under the lid of the box. Sensing something amiss, Kiyoka grabbed her hand in a panic.

"Wait, stop."

"Kiyokaaa?"

Murmuring with her already slurring speech, Miyo sluggishly lifted up her head.

Lightly pink cheeks. Dull, watery eyes. She was clearly drunk.

*"Hee-hee."*

She languidly cocked her head slightly and grinned.

Miyo, who very rarely ever smiled, was now beaming ear to ear. She repeatedly giggled and chortled. Kiyoka couldn't help but stare at her expression. Then he put his head in his hands.

"This can't be... I never thought she'd be *this* easily affected by alcohol."

"I feew. A bit, wightheaded... Tee-hee-hee."

Miyo's eyes drooped, and her mouth slacked with delight. The pristine nape of her neck had flushed red, becoming subtly alluring.

Kiyoka brought his unnaturally fast heartbeat under control and averted his eyes.

He was just imagining things, all a trick of his senses. By no means was he feeling anything improper or untoward.

“I wanna have one mwuah.”

“Hey, stop, no more.”

Miyo reached out her hand the instant he took his eyes off of her, but Kiyoka managed to stop her before she got to the box, taking it away.

He couldn't let his guard down for a moment.

After a short while, Miyo's breathing fell into a steady rhythm, and she drifted off into a peaceful, comfortable sleep. Putting his coat over her shoulders, Kiyoka subconsciously broke into a smile gazing at her sleeping face.

*Godou... I'm chewing you out tomorrow the first chance I get.*

Inwardly, he gave his subordinate a good thrashing for being the source of all this trouble.

Afterward, Kiyoka strongly advised his fiancée, who could not remember the night before, to never drink alcohol in front of others again.

## *An Average Day for Kazushi Tatsuishi*

Kazushi Tatsuishi was the young head of the Tatsuishi family.

Though much of his twenty years of life had been quite restricted—a fact his unworthy younger brother surely would have vehemently denied should he hear it—he was currently living out his days comfortable and free.

As such, Kazushi's mornings started late.

When he would awake atop the mattress in his room, the sun would usually be close to its zenith.

“*Nwahhh...* I slept too much.”

Sitting up, he gave a stretch. The alcohol from the night before had completely left his system, and he wasn't feeling too bad. Now then, he thought in his freshly woken brain, it was time to figure out what he was going to do today.

At that moment, someone began banging nonstop on the door of his room.

“Master Kazushi! Master Kazushi, please wake up! It's almost noon!”

A young boy, his voice unstably deep and prone to cracking due to puberty, yapped incessantly outside his room.

Once it came to this, the boy wouldn't stop until Kazushi answered; he very well might force himself into the room.

“Good grief! What would he do if I happened to be in bed with a beautiful woman right now? Sheesh.”

Mumbling, Kazushi obediently opened the door.

“I'm awake. Ichi, can't you wake up your master just a bit more quietly?”

“As long as you're awake. Save your complaining and eat your breakfast already. I'm stuck waiting on you before I can clean up.”

The young boy said this curtly before turning on his heel. His name was Ichita Kainuma, and he was the only servant left in the now empty Tatsuishi household.

Ichita's parents had worked in the Tatsuishi estate, so the boy had been coming to the place for ages. Now, however, he had taken on all the housework as a live-in servant for Kazushi, the lone remaining resident.

Incidentally, the majority of the servants employed by the Tatsuishi house up until then had been dismissed, with Ichita's parents going off to work as servants for another wealthy family somewhere.

Kazushi took his combined breakfast and lunch under the glaring gaze of Ichita before getting himself dressed in his room and heading toward the entryway.

Until very recently, several servants would have already been silently cleaning around the manor at this time of day, but these scenes were absent now.

Still, Kazushi didn't find the empty house lonely in the slightest. In fact, it actually felt refreshing to him. Previously, there had been a dreadful atmosphere hanging about the manor, largely due to his father.

"Yup, another beautiful morning."

"I told you, it's already noon."

Ichita gave this cold retort from behind, a broom in his hand and looking ready to get some sweeping done.

"That was quite sharp there, Ichi."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. If you're heading out, please hurry up and leave."

With Ichita practically chasing him out, lacking one iota of deference toward his master, Kazushi once again strolled aimlessly out to the noontime capital.

He didn't have any particular destination in mind.

Draped in a flashy *haori* coat, he strutted about as he saw fit.

Heading into town every day, regardless of whether he had any reason to, was a habit he'd formed back when he felt the need to escape the stifling atmosphere of his family's estate.

"Where should I go today...? Hm?"

Squinting his eyes, Kazushi spied some men in a very familiar uniform slightly removed from where he stood. Why, one of them appeared to be an acquaintance of his.

*Well, I can't just pass by without teasing him a little, can I?*



With a light spring in his step, Kazushi approached the person in uniform—a military uniform.

“...This foul curse only targets boys and girls in their teens, and—”

“Heya there, fantastic morning, isn’t it?”

“*Ugh*. Kazushi.”

The man he had called out to and interrupted was none other than Yoshito Godou, who gave him a blatant wince.

He appeared to be in the middle of a patrol, and there were three other unit members with him, but Kazushi had no interest in them.

His only target was his colleague, who he delighted in teasing.

“And it’s past noon, for crying out loud! Are you seriously wandering around looking like that in broad daylight?”

“There’s no harm in dressing the way I want. You’re really starting to resemble Mr. Kudou, the way you nitpick the small stuff like that.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Buzz off.”

“My, aren’t you the serious one, Godou.”

“*Tch*, enough already! You’re interrupting our work here! Scram.”

Kazushi couldn’t suppress a smile, watching Godou wave his hand at him as if he was shooing away a bug. It really was hilarious to see a man so earnest at his core pretend to get worked up.

And that was what made teasing him so fun.

“All right, all right. But we should head out for drinks together again soon.”

“Like hell I’m going out with you!”

In a good mood from having seen Godou so indignant, Kazushi departed with an even lighter spring in his step and resumed roaming around without any real destination, window-shopping along the way.

After walking a little while, he passed by a young girl along the roadside wearing a rather well-worn kimono.

“Oh, Kazushi.”

The young girl, her hair braided and tied up into a loop, called out to him as they passed each other.

*Who was this again?*

He had encountered many a woman throughout his life. Kazushi racked his brain, sifting through the overwhelming amount of potential answers.

“You haven’t been coming by our place lately.”

Seeing her smile after saying this, he finally remembered.

She was a waitress at a café he had frequented. She was a sociable and talkative girl, and he had often enjoyed chitchatting with her.

Kazushi had stopped going to the café because he'd gotten sick of it, but it wasn't that he disliked the place. He was simply quick to grow bored.

"Oh, I guess I haven't, huh."

"Honestly, you forgot who I was just now, didn't you?"

"No, no, I could never forget a girl as cute as you!"

"There you go again. Ever the smooth talker."

Behind the young girl, cheerfully laughing out loud, Kazushi saw an unbecoming black fog. It resembled some type of curse, and while it didn't seem to be affecting her at all now, it would likely cause physical and mental harm to her if it stuck by her for long.

*Curses definitely aren't a good look on a cute young girl like her.*

As Kazushi flashed a smile, he casually pulled out his trusty fan from his sleeve.

"Well, I need to get going now," she said.

"Ha-ha, sounds like you're busy."

"I am. But you should drop by the café again. I'll always have time for you."

Kazushi tapped the young girl's shoulder as she went on her way, and the black fog dispersed immediately.

"Got it. I'll swing by soon."

"I'll be waiting, then! Bye!" the girl said, hurrying off. After watching her depart, Kazushi began walking off in the opposite direction.

On top of entertaining himself by teasing his close acquaintance today, he had also helped someone out; that put him in a good mood.

Continuing on a bit farther, he arrived at a peaceful park.

Near the park pond was woman in a kimono who cut a beautiful figure carrying a lace-trimmed parasol.

*Well, well, well.*

She was probably the wife of some noble, as she had a personal attendant.

He couldn't get a good look at her face, but he could surmise just from the air about her that she had to be quite a beautiful woman.

Kazushi wasn't sure why, but he was having a particularly lucky day.

*It wouldn't be very manly of me to leave without talking to her, would it?*

Without much thought, Kazushi approached the woman, like a butterfly drawn in by a flower—until he froze with his smile on his face.

It was then that the woman, noting his presence, relaxed her fair and refined countenance into a smile.

“Oh...Mr. Tatsuishi. Hello.”

“H-heya there, Miyo.”

A cold sweat beaded on his temple. He had been in real danger. If he had tried to do anything untoward to Miyo Saimori, then Kazushi would have literally lost his head.

All that aside, the shabby and miserable young girl he once knew had drastically changed. Kazushi was shocked he had mistaken her for the wife of a high-ranking noble. Though in a way, that was exactly who she was *going* to be.

“Lovely weather, isn’t it? Out for a stroll?”

“Indeed, I am.”

Miyo nodded slightly at Kazushi’s question. This mannerism was just as lovely, and while it was no concern of his own, Kazushi grew worried about her attracting unwanted attention.

However, before that, there was something he needed to address.

“What is that in your hand there?”

There was a black fog escaping from Miyo’s free hand. Miyo frowned at Kazushi’s question.

“Um, there was a gentlemen handing them out. He said it was a lucky stone...and pressed me to take one.”

Sitting in the palm of Miyo’s hand was a small, semitranslucent rock. The rock was white, but it was emanating the black fog nonstop. This was another curse.

*I see now.*

Kazushi didn’t understand why, but apparently, there was a freak going around passing out curses.

“That stone is bad news.”

“Really, you think so, too? It did seem...a bit creepy.”

“Can I see it for a moment?”

Kazushi took the stone from Miyo, clenching down on it and crushing it. The effects of the curse completely vanished from the unexpectedly brittle stone.

“That should do it.”

“Thank you very much. “

Kazushi broke into a smile as he saw Miyo’s look of relief and peace of mind.

He appeared to have done yet another virtuous deed.

“Oh, no worries, it was a piece of cake. Give Kudou my regards.”

“I will. Good day.”

Leaving Miyo as she smiled and waved, Kazushi turned in the direction of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station with a glint in his eyes...

*Awww.Guess that means work after this.*

...all while inwardly drooping his shoulders in disappointment.

By the time Kazushi had finished his slate of odd jobs and returned to the Tatsuishi estate, the sun had long set. Given that he would often come home at the crack of dawn, this was actually early for him.

He had assisted with destroying the base of operations for the criminal organization spreading this curse everywhere, so he was quite exhausted.

That being said, Kazushi had mostly just watched from the sidelines as the Great Demon Commander had run roughshod over the criminals after learning his fiancée had nearly been put in harm’s way.

*Phew... Huh?*

No one had come to greet him in the entryway. Kazushi cocked his head and stepped inside his abode. Searching for Ichita, he reached the dining hall, where he saw the boy with his face down on the table.

Near Ichita was his dinner, long gone cold, and a small rock releasing a fog.

“Sheesh, looks like work followed me home.”

Kazushi crushed the stone with an exasperated smile before taking a seat and beginning his meal.

The food Ichita made him tasted rather average, but Kazushi was still fond enough of it to eat it cold.

He’d had quite the eventful day.

However, his physical fatigue felt almost pleasant somehow, and his heart was perfectly satisfied. Maybe having a day like this wasn’t so bad every once and while.

That thought came to Kazushi as he watched his servant's tranquil face and rhythmic, sleepy breathing.

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## *Thunderstorm*

A summer evening. Just as the faint rumblings of thunder resounded from afar, dark black rainclouds abruptly appeared in the sky, releasing drops of rain.

The slightly unsavory smell of the rain made Miyo pause in the middle of preparing dinner.

*An evening shower. It looks like it's picking up.*

Before long, the sound of thunder grew closer and the rain stronger, as if a waterfall were gushing down from the rooftop.

Though the inside of their house was bright from the electric lamps, the outside was now pitch-dark since it was already close to sunset.

“Oh no, silly me.”

While Miyo had been distracted by the evening shower, the pot had gotten close to boiling over, so she frantically took it off the fire.

She peered into the pot to check and was relieved that the bottom of it didn't seem to have been burnt. Just then—

—a flash of light covered the dark, charcoal sky.

She had barely registered it before a tremendous boom pierced her ears, loud enough to numb them completely.

“*Eek!*”

Overcome by the sound, Miyo dropped the pot lid and covered her ears. Just as she let out a small shriek, the area around her was instantly enveloped in darkness.

Her eyes went wide, but it was so dark she couldn't see a thing.

“No, a b-blackout...?!”

Though she mentally understood what was going on, Miyo was frightened by the unfamiliar situation and was frozen in place.

*Wh-what should I do?*

First, she needed to turn the electric lamps back on... But wait, if the electricity had stopped completely, then she couldn't turn them back on.

In which case, she just needed to light some candles. However, she wasn't sure if there were any in the kitchen or not, and searching for something that may or may not be there in the dark was virtually impossible.

Anxiety atop confusion. In addition, her heartbeat had quickened from fear, and as Miyo stood there, immobile, she heard Kiyoka's voice come to her from the kitchen doorway.

"Miyo, are you all right?"

"K-Kiyoka..."

She gently reached out for him, groping through the dark. Then a big, strong hand gently took her own.

It was Kiyoka.

Her icy cold fingertips were enveloped in warmth, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

"I heard you scream. Are you hurt at all?"

While she couldn't really see his expression, after hearing his voice concern for her safety and sensing his familiar presence very close to her, her pounding heart grew calm.

"No, I'm fine... I was just a bit startled."

"As long as you're all right."

After he confirmed they were both safe, a silence fell over them.

A short while passed, but it didn't seem like the electricity would come back on anytime soon. The sound of the rain resounded, like stormy sea waves beating on the roof, accompanied by the occasional boom of thunder.

She didn't know if it was because of her nerves or the darkness, but a feeling of helplessness came over Miyo, and she unconsciously drew one step closer to where she felt Kiyoka's presence.

Letting out a sigh, not saying a word, Kiyoka slowly strengthened his grip on Miyo's hand and gently pulled her closer.

Before they knew it, the two of them had gotten close enough together to hear each other's breathing.

Miyo's heartbeat grew louder for an entirely different reason.

They were far closer than usual. Their hands, clasped together, were hot. What was going to happen next?

“Miyo...”

She was sure that a trick of her mind had made Kiyoka’s breathy voice sound much more sultry than normal. As she began to imagine something indecent, Miyo’s cheeks flamed with heat.

Then all of a sudden, the two of them were illuminated in artificial light. The electricity had come back on.

Her fiancé’s face was far closer than she had thought.

Now that the lights were on and Miyo could get a look at things, she finally realized the outrageous act she had been barreling toward.

“Eeep! K-K-K-Kiyoka! I’m sorry!”

“Oh, no, um...”

Stunned, Kiyoka stared at his own hand after Miyo instinctively jumped backward.

*Wh-what in the world was I thinking?*

Her chest drummed with fierce thumps.

She couldn’t believe how dangerous darkness could be. She had also learned that a blackout was a shameless phenomenon that forced one’s earthly desires to the surface.

Miyo hid her bright red cheeks with her palms, her thoughts racing incoherently.

At her side, Kiyoka stared vacantly at the hand that had been clutching hers...

*If that was how it was going to be, then it should be a bit more... Though that’d probably not go over well... But she didn’t seem completely against it... No, there’s no way, right?*

...and racked his brain in confusion.



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Too bright.

The light, strong enough to pass through her eyelids, gradually roused Miyo.

Enveloped in the smell of silky, unfamiliar sheets, she slowly opened her still-heavy eyes and saw that the morning sun was peeking through a gap in the nearby curtain.

The light shining on the bed from the high window was very bright.

*Wait...*

Miyo usually woke from her sleep with the rising sun.

From the brightness of the light, she immediately gathered it was far past her normal wake-up time.

“Huh?!”

She rose in a panic, looking around her.

It was an unfamiliar room. Why had she been sleeping here? Unable to immediately remember, she felt a bit confused.

“Miyo.”

From nearby, she heard Kiyoka’s voice. She looked in that direction and saw he was in the middle of getting himself dressed.

A white shirt covering his muscular and lithe upper body, he was illuminated by the sunlight, and his long, dazzling unbound hair looked almost holy as it glistened.

Even as he was getting dressed, his beauty was unmatched. No matter how many times she laid eyes on him, she couldn’t help but stare.

Once he finished buttoning his shirt up to the top, Kiyoka drew closer to Miyo.

“You awake? Good morning.”

“G-good morning, Kiyoka...”

As they greeted each other, Miyo’s sleep-addled brain finally cleared, and she recalled the events of the night prior.

*Oh, that’s right.*

After completing their wedding ceremony several days ago and wrapping up most of their courtesy calls yesterday, they had decided to stay at the

Kudou main estate to decompress from all the stress.

Hazuki had been the one to propose they get some rest there.

She must have been unable to sit by while Miyo and Kiyoka were mentally and physically exhausted from all the unfamiliar events they had been put through. Though Tadakiyo and Fuyu would both be at the estate as well, Hazuki had said staying there would be a perfect way to relax, and as there were servants on hand, they wouldn't have to do any housework.

Kiyoka did have a servant—Yurie—who came to his house to help out. But Miyo felt bad about leaving everything up to the old woman, so she would often find herself helping out.

That explained why they had been practically forced into a three-day break at the Kudou estate.

They were staying in Kiyoka's childhood bedroom, which still had some of its original furnishings.

*To be perfectly honest, I'm very grateful for all of this...*

Hazuki, now Miyo's true older sister-in-law, was showing more concern over Miyo than ever before.

This applied to their stay, as no matter how industrious and hard-working Miyo may have been, she had wanted some time to be at peace, and she was truly grateful for Hazuki's consideration for her in proposing it.

She really was her mentor in life.

All of that aside, however...

"I-I'm sorry, I've slept in so late."

Returning to her senses, Miyo rushed to get out of bed before Kiyoka stopped her with a gentle smile.

"No need to rush. You're tired, aren't you? You get to relax as much as you want these next three days; no one will fault you for sleeping in a little late."

With a touch of embarrassment, Kiyoka added that he'd woken later that morning himself. Miyo felt a tickling in her breast that was hard to describe.

Suddenly, Kiyoka brought his fingertips to Miyo's chest. He gently adjusted the somewhat disheveled collar of Miyo's nightgown.

*I—I, I didn't—*

Miyo hadn't noticed the precarious position of her collar whatsoever, a careless movement away from exposing her breasts. If she had been in this state from the moment she'd woken up then—

*Eeeep!*

She inwardly screamed. Immediately looking down, she hid her burning face, steam threatening to rise out of her ears. She was so unbearably, excruciatingly ashamed that she wanted to hide under a rock.

“M-m-my, my apologies...”

When Miyo gave a stammering apology, barely above the volume of a whisper, Kiyoka burst into laughter.

“Don’t let it bother you.”

“I-it does.”

“It’s a bit late for that.”

“Wh—?! Wh-wha, h-how can, why would you say that...?”

Miyo could feel her face getting redder and redder. Her emotions were in such disarray that she couldn’t tell if she was annoyed or embarrassed at Kiyoka’s completely insensitive remark.

They had become husband and wife, so naturally, they shared a bed or floor mattress every night, which led to various areas being exposed. Of course, this also made her so embarrassed she thought her heart would stop.

However, that wasn’t the issue here.

Kiyoka chortled quietly. Then he made a remark to tease Miyo even further.

“We were told we could relax as much as we want, after all. Why don’t we *relax* in our room a bit longer?”

“Huh?”

“After everything, I made sure to get the day off today, too, so we could *relax* to our hearts’ content.”

“What...? U-um...”

Kiyoka was putting a tremendous amount of emphasis on the word “relax.”

However, the sun was already high in the sky. What did he expect them to do in here to relax?

Kiyoka’s handsome face slowly inched closer to Miyo as she sat on the bed, confused. She leaned back in surprise, and the momentum sent her falling backward.

“K-Kiyoka...?”

“Miyo...”

He put away his smile and hovered over Miyo, staring hard at her with a look of pure seriousness in his eyes.

Slowly but surely, Miyo began to grasp what Kiyoka meant by “relax.”

Her heart beat fiercely, painfully so. Her entire body—not just her cheeks—flushed, and she began to sweat.

Kiyoka’s hair glistened in the sun as it flowed down over her, as if she was being enclosed in light. Even though she had seen all of it countless times before, she couldn’t take her eyes off his blue-tinged irises as they closed in, his sharply sculpted nose, or his shapely, thin lips.

The unequivocal heat of affection was radiating from him.

*N-no, surely he’s not... But it’s already morning...*

Nevertheless, as Kiyoka gazed at her with sincerity, Miyo found it impossible to resist him. The moments she felt his kind, profound love were so very sweet, so very comforting

They melted together, enough for her to wish they could stay that way forever.

Miyo listened to her heartbeat pounding in her ears as they gazed into each other’s eyes—she wondered how long they must have spent like that.

Miyo came back to her senses when there was a sudden, surprising knock at the door.

“Miyooo, Kiyokaaa? Are you awake?”

It was Hazuki’s voice. At that same moment, Kiyoka heaved a big sigh, abruptly got up, and separated himself from Miyo.

For just a brief second, this made her feel a touch sad, but she desperately shook her head side to side.

*What in the world am I thinking?*

Still, the urge to be with him always, the difficulty to part from Kiyoka for even a moment... Such feelings seemed to be growing stronger and stronger by the day since the wedding.

Their happy moments spent together, loving and being loved.

It was far too addictive for Miyo, and she threatened to grow dependent on it.

As she agonized over her own desire atop the bed, Kiyoka immediately headed to the door and opened it.

“What?”

His voice was almost terrifyingly firm. The temperature drop in his tone compared to moments before, when he had been speaking with Miyo, was tremendous.

“Oh, what’s that grouchy look first thing in the morning?”

Hazuki’s eyes happened to meet Miyo’s as she peered inside the room from the doorway.

The heat hadn’t abated yet, and Miyo was sure her cheeks were still red. Unable to bear it, she dropped her face and cowered slightly.

“Oh my, oh my, did I perhaps interrupt the newlyweds at a bad time?”

“Don’t get cute.”

“Sheesh, how rude. Do you really think it’s okay to talk to your sister like that?”

Miyo could only see Kiyoka’s backside from where she sat, and Hazuki’s expression was hidden behind the door, so she couldn’t confirm it for herself, but just from hearing their conversation, she could tell that they were staring each other down as though they were right in front of her.

“Well? What are you here for?”

“Oh, right, right. I wanted to ask you two. You said that you were going to go out boating today, didn’t you?”

“Oh!”

Miyo couldn’t stop herself from letting out a gasp.

She had completely forgotten. She had heard that they could boat around the pond in the nearby park, and they decided it would be the perfect change of pace for their stay.

With everything that had happened right after waking up, these plans had completely vanished into the far reaches of her memory.

“Well, it’s closer to noon than morning at this point, but are you still going? Or not?”

Hazuki’s question prompted Kiyoka to turn back to Miyo.

“What do you want to do? Think we can make it? If you’re not in the mood, you don’t have to push yourself...”

“I’ll go. I want to go.”

Miyo didn’t hesitate to reply.

No matter how much freedom she may have had to rest, she couldn’t let herself spend the whole day laying around inside the manor. That had been

made painfully clear to her moments ago. She was running headlong into becoming a hopeless layabout.

With her mind made up, she immediately got off the bed and stood up.

“I-I’ll get changed!”

She hurried with quick footsteps to exit the room, but Kiyoka stopped her. He gently pulled back one of her hands, and Miyo looked up at him.

“Kiyoka?”

“That’s not it.”

“...Darling. Um, er...?”

There was still some heat left in Kiyoka’s hand gripping hers, and in Miyo’s own hand, too. The lingering afterglow of the few minutes prior began to drift about them.

“I don’t have any problem at all with spending the rest of the day here.”

“What?”

“We can go to the park whenever we want. I can manage that, even without taking time off.”

“B-but...”

“You don’t like that idea? Spending the whole day together with me in this room, restoring our spirits...”

She felt herself being sucked into Kiyoka’s clear eyes. The resolve she had found to go outside began to shake at the foundation.

She could never dislike such an idea—he was right.

Miyo had always considered the time they spent alone, affirming their love for one another, more precious than anything else. Kiyoka’s words tempted her far more than he could have imagined.

But even so.

*Pull yourself together, Miyo. You’re going to get swallowed up at this rate.*

She scolded herself.

Kiyoka truly was a sinful husband. It was clear just how much he had corrupted Miyo’s thoughts like this.

“I-I’m not against the idea... But I want to remain an upright and decent person!”

“Pfft!”

As soon as Miyo shouted this, she heard the sound of laughter from beside her.



It was then, all of a sudden, she realized she had forgotten something very important. The two of them weren't the only ones in this room, were they?

She slowly glanced over in the direction of the stifled laughter that was still going. There she saw Hazuki clutching her stomach, straining as she shook from her hearty laugh.

Appearing to notice Miyo's eyes on her, Hazuki still continued to laugh, her breathing ragged, as she managed to speak.

"O-oh, don't mind me, hee-hee. Go ahead, keep going. A-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, that was hilarious. 'An upright person,' was it? Th-that's too adorable, hee-hee. Kiyoka, I guess that means you aren't upright or decent, are you?"

"Sis..."

"D-don't get mad at me, please, a-ha-ha-ha-ha! Just forget I'm here. *Pfft*, hee-hee-hee. Go right ahead and flirt to your hearts' content."

Ignoring Kiyoka, who was looking at her with cold disgust, Hazuki continued to belly laugh.

When she had first come to her senses, Miyo had felt incredibly shameful and wanted to crawl under a rock, but now she, too, had regained her composure.

"Kiyoka, my hand."

"You sure you want me to let go?"

"I-I'm going to go get changed!" she firmly asserted before smoothly removing her hand from Kiyoka's grip. The faint reluctance she saw in his eyes surely had to be a trick of Miyo's imagination.

Kiyoka would never sincerely want for the two of them to spend a slovenly day together. *Certainly not*.

"That's too bad. Here I thought I'd get to see more of your innocent tête-à-tête, too."

"Enough already."

Pretending she didn't hear Hazuki and Kiyoka's conversation from behind, Miyo hurried to another room to get herself ready.

In the end, Miyo and Kiyoka left the manor shortly before noon.

The beginning of summer was approaching, bringing truly agreeable weather: a pleasant warm sunlight, and a refreshing soft breeze.

Miyo today was wearing Western clothes, a change from her usual preference.

After trying to wear them for the first time last year, she now had purchased, with the advice of Hazuki, several dresses, blouses, and skirts.

Her current outfit was from this collection of hers.

It was a dress with a white lace collar. It was slim and followed the curves of her body a bit, but it looked quite cute with its large brown, wooden buttons on bright green fabric.

Kiyoka was also dressed in Western clothes—a very simple outfit of a white shirt and dark brown pants. If anything, this served to show off his tall, well-built body, and it looked attractive on him.

Though, of course, Kiyoka usually looked charming no matter what he wore.

*Kiyoka is always so stunning.*

She still couldn't believe that such a handsome, kind, and capable man loved her and had married her.

Miyo felt this deeply as she walked behind him, holding a white lace parasol.

The city had a different atmosphere at midday compared to the time when Miyo would usually go visit it. Noon was close at hand, and large crowds of the capital's workers were coming and going, traversing the streets to find their lunch spots.

Men in suits were prominent among them, but included in the crowds were a fair number of men and women in kimonos, and other women dressed in Western garb like Miyo.

*That said...*

She had gotten used to it at this point, but even now, Kiyoka would get stares from all the people he passed. Not only from the women, but occasionally the men, too.

Without fail, every one of them would widen their eyes and stare hard at Kiyoka as they came across him.

Whenever this happened, no one would pay any attention to her. Kiyoka alone was special.

The pure, valiant, striking...not atmosphere, but energy, that he gave off. This power, or presence of his, fascinated people.

"Miyo, what's wrong? You've gone quiet."

Walking in silence, Kiyoka, glanced sideways to check on Miyo while showing concern for her.

“No... It’s nothing.”

“Really?” Kiyoka asked, tilting his head in confusion before extending his hand.

“Don’t get separated.”

“Okay.”

Miyo grabbed Kiyoka’s outstretched hand.

She definitely couldn’t bring herself to confess that she’d been struck by how oh-so-wonderful he was.

After all, she was sure it would make him terribly exasperated with her. He would find out that she loved everything about him so much that she could say with full certainty that she would never grow tired of him for the rest of her life.

Slowly, the two walked through the noontime city clamor and reached the park before long.

The area was colored with vibrant, well-trimmed plants, and roses beginning to bloom. It had not only a large pond, but also a brand-new Western-style gazebo. It was an interesting sight to behold, while still being a space where one could relax.

It seemed less like a park and more like a vast garden.

“It’s so pretty...”

Miyo liked places that were lush with greenery. She especially enjoyed them if they were near water, like lakes or fountains, and she had dropped by parks with these features several times while she was out and about.

However, there weren’t many places that had a pond large enough to accommodate a rowboat.

“This must be the boat.”

A lone wooden boat, looking a bit antiquated with its somewhat faded color, was moored with rope at the pond’s edge.

Fortunately, there didn’t seem to be anyone else using it.

Kiyoka jumped into the boat first. Thanks to his unsurprising keen sense of balance, he was able to stand in the rocking boat without the slightest twitch of a brow. He held out a hand to Miyo.

“Watch your step.”

“I will.”

Miyo gently took Kiyoka's hand and timidly moved into the boat. Though the boat did rock, Kiyoka carefully supported her, and they avoided the disaster of the boat capsizing.

"Thank you."

"Be careful when you sit, too."

Miyo cautiously sat down, and once he had undone the rope, Kiyoka sat opposite her and took the oars in his hands.

Kiyoka began to row, and the boat left the pondside in the blink of an eye.

"Wow..."

The clamor of the city instantly faded into the distance. Even the sounds of children playing in the park barely reached them. The middle of the pond, removed from all other people, was very quiet, with only the sound of water around them.

As there was nothing to impede it, the gentle breeze caressed the surface of the water and tousled Miyo's hair.

"How is it? This is your first time in a boat, right?"

"It is. I don't know why, but it's very calming."

Perhaps this was what others meant when they talked about feeling healed.

Atop the boat, swaying in the ripples, nothing but the quiet sounds of nature reached her ears. It was like her heart, exhausted and agitated from her restless days, was starting to unwind.

Miyo never imagined a boat ride would feel this good.

"But I feel bad leaving all the rowing to you..."

"It doesn't take that much strength, so I'm fine."

But Kiyoka couldn't enjoy this wonderful stillness if he couldn't do anything else but row. Miyo closed her parasol.

"I'd like to try rowing."

Kiyoka looked surprised by Miyo's enthusiastic proposal and furrowed his brow, unsure.

"I don't think you should. It will probably be hard for you."

"Just once is enough."

"I guess it's okay if it's just for a little bit."

Kiyoka nodded with what seemed like reluctance, before they immediately changed their positions in the boat.

Miyo grabbed the oars, still warm from Kiyoka's grip, and mimicked how he had rowed. Or more precisely, she *tried* to mimic it.

*Th-they're so heavy!*

Just now, Kiyoka had told her it didn't require much strength. In truth, Miyo had no strength to speak of compared to Kiyoka, who had looked so nonchalant as he rowed. However, she had still thought that she should've been able to row on her own for a little while.

Although she somehow managed to move the oars, her maneuvering of them was lackluster even when she desperately put all her strength into the act, so the boat barely moved forward at all.

*"Hng... Ngh, haaah."*

Her arms grew sluggish, and Miyo exhaled all the air she had built up in her lungs. She had only rowed for a few seconds, but her fingertips had already started trembling.

"I told you it would be hard for you." Kiyoka sighed with exasperation. "Our arm strengths are totally different."

"I know... I'm sorry."

Miyo had just wanted to give Kiyoka an easy time, but it looked like she had overestimated herself.

"I'm, so frustrated..."

"Don't get so down. Miyo."

Hearing her name, Miyo timidly cast her eyes back.

When she did, Kiyoka took something from his pants pocket and presented it to her. When Miyo put out both her hands, he dropped it lightly in her palms.

It was very light. Light, and soft. It was...

"Wow, it's so cute. Is it a doll...?"

An animal doll, made out of organza silk crepe that featured a small flower pattern.

It was a strange animal with triangular ears, a bit like a dog, a bit like a cat, and a bit fox-like as well, but the black embroidered eyes were round and cute. It was quite adorable overall.

The doll was small enough to fit in the palms of Miyo's hands. Its round, puffy body appeared to be stuffed with cotton, and a red ribbon tied in a bow adorned its neck.

"Not a doll, really. It's a protective charm."

“A charm? But you’ve already given me so many...”

Kiyoka shook his head as Miyo cocked her own.

“While testing a variety of different charms, I got interested in this new variety. This is a test run.”

Miyo looked hard at the doll in her hands.

The threading was clean and uniform, and the quality was on par with something you could find at a general store. He said it was a test run, but that couldn’t possibly mean...

“Are you saying that you made this yourself?”

“No, no, the doll was something I bought... Um, I just thought you’d be happier to receive that sort of thing.”

Miyo felt like she had been shot through the heart as she watched Kiyoka turn aside and answer awkwardly in embarrassment.

Unlike accessories or other ornaments, it would take a lot of courage for a man to buy a doll like this, even as a present for a woman.

Yet despite that, Kiyoka had bought this with only her in mind.

“I am. It’s cute, and it makes me so...so very happy.”

In her childhood, Miyo had always yearned for dolls and stuffed animals. She would get jealous hearing elementary school friends talk about carrying their beloved toys around the house, reading and sleeping with them.

While she was no longer at an age to be playing with dolls, she loved cute things.

“It’s a protective charm, you said? I’ll be sure to take good care of it.”

“Right. Given its size, you don’t need to carry it around with you... I just tried to make something that could serve both as protection and as a furnishing for your room; don’t overthink it too much. Displaying it in your room somewhere is enough. The house has the barrier around it, so I doubt it’ll serve much use anyway.”

“It’s cute, so that’s fine with me. I’ll find somewhere in my room to display it as soon as we get home.”

When she looked at the adorable object, a wide smile came to her face.

She couldn’t help it; she was so happy.

“It’s getting windy. Let’s head back.”

“Okay.”

Smiling, Kiyoka took the oars again and began rowing the boat.

The two of them moved to the garden gazebo and ate the homemade lunches they'd brought.

These lunch boxes had been prepared by the Kudou family chef, and Hazuki had thoughtfully insisted Miyo and Kiyoka take them.

The beautifully stacked lunch boxes, gold lacquered with a floral pattern, included one tier of all Japanese-style dishes, one tier of all Western-style dishes, and another tier full of rice balls. Each level offered a diverse and colorful array of foods, including everything from tiny bits of simmered dishes and vegetables and fish in a miso dressing to fried foods and other impressive items.

Even the rice balls were varied in flavor—from salmon to kelp and *katsuobushi*—and arguing over who would eat what was enjoyable in and of itself.

"That was very tasty. I'll have to thank Sis when we get back."

"Right... The weather's nice today, so I was thinking we'd take a bit of stroll before we head back. How's that sound?"

"Yes, let's do that."

The two walked side by side along the garden promenade, without any real destination in mind.

The sunlight filtering through the trees would sparkle every now and then, and the leaves glowed green with the sun shining through them. Walking along the wooded promenade, they eventually spotted a small building up ahead.

"What's that?"

"Looks like a tiny shrine."

The somber brown, wooden shrine was so small that even a child wouldn't be able to fit inside. Despite its age and size, however, it appeared to be kept up, with sake and flower offerings before it.

"I don't sense anything to worry about. The god enshrined here probably protects the land and people of this area."

"Does that mean you sometimes sense...bad things at shrines, too?" Miyo asked, curious, and Kiyoka nodded.

"Regular shrines, roadside shrines, and statues aren't all inherently good. There's no telling who could be worshipping at ruined shrines, so they're particularly dangerous, along with abandoned roadside shrines and idols. You should keep your distance from them."

“Um, what about the *jizo* statue we prayed to when we visited the villa...?”

“That one is harmless. It’s doing a good job protecting the area, so if anything, it’d be best not to show it any discourtesy.”

“I see.”

Miyo didn’t have Spirit-Sight, so even if there was some inhuman malevolent presence around, she wouldn’t have noticed. She needed to take care not to pray at any old shrine she came across.

“Of course, there’s no guarantee that ordinary evildoers aren’t hiding in such places, either... These places are usually in out-of-the-way areas that are seldom frequented, so they occasionally turn into hideouts for outlaws. I’ve seen it plenty of times in my line of work.”

“That makes sense...”

Miyo hadn’t considered the possibility. However, Kiyoka was right that shrines weren’t only inhabited by gods or Grotesqueries. After all, shrines were originally meant to accommodate a large number of people at once.

When she turned to Kiyoka and looked up at him, there was an ineffable, pained look on his face.

“Kiyoka?”

“Ah, sorry. I was just remembering something a bit unpleasant. You can’t always judge whether a person has evil intentions or not from how they look, nor is the person themselves always self-aware of their own evil deeds or intentions... I just thought that, was all.”

Where exactly had that come from all of a sudden?

Miyo hadn’t the slightest idea, but since Kiyoka had worded his statement so ponderously, she had reservations about probing further, and they continued forward past the shrine. Whatever Kiyoka was talking about, she was sure that it wasn’t something of any importance to her, as he hadn’t brought it up to her before. That was what Miyo had decided to silently convince herself.

After walking once around the whole park, Miyo and Kiyoka headed home.

She had used up her physical stamina walking around, but she now felt like all the thorniness that had long settled in her chest—the intractable tension, the exhaustion—had been wiped clean.



A bit of an incident happened right as Miyo and Kiyoka arrived back at the main estate.

“Kiyoka?”

He abruptly stopped right after they had stepped inside the entryway.

“They’re being awfully noisy.”

Miyo didn’t immediately understand what he was saying, but perking her ears up, she could hear people bickering about something, just as Kiyoka had said.

Kiyoka frowned with utter contempt.

“It must be *her* again.”

“Do you mean Mother?”

Though Kiyoka did not respond to Miyo’s question, his expression was answer enough.

He pondered something for a few moments before heaving a sigh.

“Sorry. I’m going to go see what’s going on. In the meantime...you must be tired. Go on ahead and wait in our room or the parlor.”

While Miyo was tired, it wasn’t too much for her to endure, and she was curious what was going on herself. She shook her head at Kiyoka’s proposal.

“No, I’ll go, too.”

“...All right. Let’s go, then.”

The voices seemed to be coming from the second floor. Miyo and Kiyoka exchanged glances and climbed the stairs.

It was then, right as they had climbed the last step—

“Ugh, enough!”

—they ran into Hazuki just as she tore out of a room, a scowl on her face.

“Sis.”

Hearing Kiyoka’s voice, Hazuki softened her expression.

“Oh, hello you two. You were home?”

“We just got back in. We heard voices from the entryway and came to see what was going on.”

Hazuki headed over to Kiyoka and Miyo wearing an apologetic frown.

“Oh, sorry about that... Mother’s in a bit of a mood.”

According to Hazuki, someone had broken a ceramic doll in Fuyu’s room without her knowledge. It was a beautiful, foreign-made, pure white doll of a woman resembling the Holy Mother, standing on a small music box.

The doll had fallen to the ground and had broken while Fuyu was away from her room.

It was one of the many gifts she had received from Tadakiyo; her distress had already gotten out of hand, as no one could get through to her.

“Though perhaps it would be more accurate to say she’s not mourning but upset and taking it out on others.”

Hazuki slumped.

“See, the doll itself? It’s not that expensive or even that rare. Father told her that to try soothing her, but...no luck.”

It was a tragic twist of fate. Miyo hugged close the doll that Kiyoka had given her.

Gifts from one’s beloved, no matter how cheap or common they may have been, or how many of them one may have received...still contained precious memories and emotions. By gazing at the many, many presents one received, one could recall the moment they had been gifted, and indulge in the happy emotions around it.

It was only natural Fuyu wouldn’t be able to keep a level head over such an item breaking.

*Hmm...?*

Thinking that Kiyoka must have felt a bit of pity for his mother, Miyo looked at him to find, contrary to her expectations, a rather strange look on his face.

If she had to compare it to something, it was a bit like how he would look when she would tell him she was going alone to visit her grandfather or cousin Arata at the Usuba estate. A mix of wanting to pleasantly see her off, while also wishing she would stay by his side... It resembled his face in those moments.

“What did the former family head say, then?”

“Is that how you refer to your own father...? Anyway, Father isn’t particularly mad or saddened by it from what I can tell. I haven’t heard yet if he’s going to look into the reason why it broke or anything.”

“He’s probably not going to dig too deeply into it.”

“I bet not. So, for now, just leave in her peace. It’ll be dinner soon, so if you wanted to get changed beforehand, you should go do so,” Hazuki said as she descended the stairs to the first floor.

Even now, they could faintly hear Fuyu's angry, woeful cries. Hazuki was right that nothing good would come from Miyo or Kiyoka getting involved.

However, there was one thing that stood out to Miyo from listening to her conversation with her husband.

"Kiyoka."

"What?"

"Why is it that Father isn't going to follow up on how the doll was broken?"

"Ah, well..."

"With how deeply Father cares for Mother, I figured he would try to pin down who broke the doll if she's that upset over it..."

Kiyoka furrowed his brows at Miyo's question, looking a bit conflicted.

"...That's fair. It could be he's not following up about the doll *because* he cares for her so much."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, since he cares for her so much, he might find it more important to attend to Fuyu instead of expending his energy on finding out what happened to the gift."

Miyo wasn't sure if she fully understood what he meant. Slowly processing what Kiyoka had told her, she questioned him further.

"So, in other words, soothing Mother's emotions is the higher priority, so the gift itself doesn't matter at all?"

"To sum it up, yes."

There were parts of the explanation that Miyo wasn't fully convinced by, but Tadakiyo and Fuyu's relationship was, in some respects, a departure from the norm, and she was hearing this from their own son. Perhaps this was how it was.

Convincing herself with these thoughts, Miyo parted from Kiyoka to get changed in their room.

Later on, Fuyu failed to show up to dinner.

Tadakiyo arrived and said they didn't need to wait for her, so Miyo, Kiyoka, Hazuki, and Tadakiyo all sat down to eat.

Tonight's meal was another multifarious offering of first-rate Western cuisine.

Beginning with an appetizer that used a colorful variety of seasonal vegetables, there was a thick, rich soup with a name Miyo had never heard before, along with fish-based and meat-based dishes. All of it was soft enough to melt in her mouth, with a complex seasoning of several flavors mingling together, and as such, despite the fairly large amount of food, Miyo ended up licking her plate clean.

While the quality of the dishes was to be expected, what really impressed Miyo were the flavors; she couldn't imagine how the chef had arrived at them.

Kiyoka and Hazuki both happened to drink wine with dinner, while Miyo and Tadakiyo had water.

Hazuki enlivened the dinner as she grew tipsy, and Tadakiyo joined in with her. Kiyoka contributed no more than perfunctory acknowledgements to the conversation when they tried to draw him in, while Miyo only answered when something was asked of her.

The usual dinner scene continued on.

Finally, once they had finished dessert, they left the dinner table behind.

Miyo drummed up her resolve and called out to Tadakiyo as he went to leave the dining room.

"Um, Father."

"What is it, Miyo?"

Miyo was met with Tadakiyo's gentle smile, his outward appearance quite at odds with his actual age. He was a good father-in-law to her, always showing her the utmost kindness.

"Um, well... What about Mother's dinner?"

"Oh, you're worried about her? Thank you. I was planning on bringing it to her now."

"You're going to do that yourself?"

Miyo's eyes widened in shock.

While he had passed on the mantle, he was still the previous patriarch of the Kudou family. It was unbelievable to think such a person would bring a meal to his wife himself.

That would have been unthinkable in a regular household. No matter how devoted a husband may have been, it had to be relatively rare for them to go

that far.

*I guess Father does truly and deeply love Mother after all.*

Though it may have been rude, she couldn't help being impressed. She also grew a bit envious of Fuyu, having someone care for her so deeply, and it warmed her heart.

However, it appeared that Miyo was the only one comforted by this, as a blank, disagreeable look came over Kiyoka as he listened beside her.

"Hee-hee, I didn't disgust you, did I? Fuyu and I are always like this, really."

"No, no, I'm certainly not disgusted. I...admire you two."

To stop herself from grinning, Miyo covered both her cheeks with her hands as she talked.

At this, Kiyoka broke his silence for the first time.

"Admire them...? You admire this?"

"I do. I think it's wonderful how they always show such love for each other."

Miyo wasn't sure what the issue was. She cocked her head slightly in confusion, but Kiyoka maintained his scowl and didn't reply.

"Miyo, would you like to go to Fuyu's room with me? Having you along might help her get back to her usual self. You too, Kiyoka, of course."

"Yes, I absolute—"

"That's not a good idea."

Kiyoka had interrupted Miyo as she replied. However, Tadakiyo casually waved off his son with a smile.

"What's the problem? Kiyoka, you're our son, so you could at least try to cheer your mother up a little. Now that we're on the same page, let's get going, shall we?"

Miyo dwelled on Kiyoka's reaction as she followed after Tadakiyo, quickly speeding off. Ultimately, Kiyoka appeared to have resigned himself, and he followed behind them after heaving an enormous sigh.

The group carried the meal, going up the stairs and arriving at Fuyu's room on the second floor. Tadakiyo, going ahead of Miyo and Kiyoka, knocked twice on the door.

"Fuyu, I'm coming in."

He seemed accustomed to this, opening the door before Fuyu could answer and entering without hesitation. This took Miyo slightly aback. She

announced her presence and hesitantly followed after him.

Miyo had seen Fuyu's room at the villa, and her room in the estate was similar, as everything—from the ceiling to the wallpaper, the rugs laid out on the floor, to the curtains and all the other furnishings—conformed to her tastes, straddling the line between flamboyant and refined.

Fuyu herself wasn't doing anything, simply sitting in a chair and staring out into the pitch-black night.

"Fuyu, honey. I brought you dinner. Won't you at least have a little to eat?"

"Thank you... However, I don't think I could stomach a bite right now. Especially in front of a stranger."

The "stranger" she had spoken of was clearly Miyo. Still, Miyo was used to Fuyu's nastiness at this point, so she didn't get bent out of shape over every little comment.

*Mother's voice lacks its usual spirit... She must be very depressed.*

Miyo grew concerned upon hearing Fuyu's tone, which lacked its usual vigor and pride.

From there, Tadakiyo said everything he could to appease Fuyu, until she finally decided to eat.

Although Miyo and Kiyoka watched on as it happened, they couldn't help being bored without anything to do.

Miyo had wanted to help cheer Fuyu up, but once she was actually in front of the woman, she keenly understood that there wasn't anything she could do.

"Kiyoka?"

She happened to look at Kiyoka, who was staring hard at something on top of a chest of drawers.

A collection of white ceramic fragments atop a white handkerchief.

This must have been the remains of the doll in question. The base and larger fragments were still vaguely doll-shaped.

"It must have been quite beautiful before it was broken..."

Kiyoka picked up the base with a pull-out drawer that functioned as a music box, which was relatively intact, and flipped it over to look at the bottom, then put it back where it had been.

Peering over at his hands, Miyo had a brief glimpse of a mysterious symbol on the bottom of the base.

*What was that just now?*

Initially, Miyo had thought it was the signature of the doll maker, but the design seemed too unusual for that. More than a signature or insignia of some kind...it resembled the drawings used for arts.

Was Miyo overthinking this?

*But the Kudous are a Gift-user family, so it wouldn't be much of a stretch for them to utilize arts... If it were something harmful, Father or Kiyoka would have removed it.*

At the very least, it wasn't anything Miyo needed to be concerned about.

Fuyu's room was luxurious, but many of the furnishings—flower vases, clocks, animal figurines, framed landscape paintings, incense burners—prevented it from feeling distasteful.

Miyo couldn't tell which among them were gifts from Tadakiyo or things she had picked out herself. However, they all complimented Fuyu very well, and either way, she had a superb eye for quality goods. Miyo definitely wanted to follow her example.

"Okay, Fuyu dear. We'll leave, so go ahead and enjoy a relaxing dinner... Kiyoka, Miyo, let's go for now."

Fuyu's mood finally appeared to have settled, and Tadakiyo spoke gently to her before addressing the young couple as well.

Miyo nodded slightly, and Kiyoka huffed out his nose, as if to say it was about time.

"You really never change, do you."

When they stepped out into corridor, Kiyoka finally hurled a comment at Tadakiyo, having held back his displeasure the entire time.

"What does that mean, hmm?"

Tadakiyo turned around, revealing that his full-faced smile was still on his face. Even though he'd asked Kiyoka for clarification, it appeared he didn't actually have any questions.

"I'm talking about your poor tastes... No matter how much you both may love each other, I don't see what's so wonderful maintaining control over Fuyu like that."

"Huh?"

Unable to understand what Kiyoka meant, Miyo couldn't help but stare blankly at him.

"Control? Now that's not a very nice way of putting it. We're both on the same page, you know. Besides, I'm not controlling her at all."

"I think it's safe to say that your morally questionable actions—such as giving Fuyu art-enchanted 'presents' that allow you to peek into her private space and listen in on her—are the same thing as controlling her."

"What?!"

It took Miyo a moment to comprehend what they were talking about; she put her hands over her mouth in complete shock.

That meant she'd been correct to think that the pattern on the doll had been from arts.

Peeking in on Fuyu's private space and listening in on her conversations? Miyo was somewhat doubtful there were arts or instruments capable of such things, but more importantly...

"Does that apply to all your gifts...?"

"That's right." Tadakiyo affirmed Miyo's dumbfounded murmur without dropping his smile at all. "Actually, most of the items in Fuyu's room are things I've given to her. I carefully applied arts on each and every one of them to make sure I can always keep an eye on her."

Miyo stared on speechlessly as Tadakiyo—looking not just unashamed but pleased—explained himself.

She found it almost impossible to believe. However, since Kiyoka had brought this up in the first place and Tadakiyo had admitted to it so readily, there was no doubt as to its veracity.

Miyo's mental image of Tadakiyo and Fuyu's pure love crumbled away completely.

Now that she knew the truth, Tadakiyo's unchanging expression, which she had always felt was kind and gentle, suddenly seemed incredibly unsettling.

Someone peeking in on her private moments day in and day out—the thought alone was so terrifying it made her mind go blank.

A dreadful chill ran down her spine.

"Still, it's a shame about that doll breaking. It was a precious memento from our early days together, you know."

"That's rich. You were probably the one who broke it, weren't you?"



Shocking revelations were coming out one after the other. The stimulation was so overwhelming, Miyo no longer had the energy left to react to each new fact.

“Oh, and what would make you think that?”

“None of the servants are clumsy enough to accidentally break one of their mistress’s possessions. And on the off chance they did mess up and break it, they wouldn’t keep quiet about it, either. Besides...”

“Besides what?”

“You can peek into that room twenty-four seven to begin with. If a servant had broken the doll, they would have been dismissed immediately, regardless of whether you really cared about it or not. It’d be an issue of the Kudou family’s reputation. Despite that, none of the servants were fired today.”

“I see.”

“In other words, the doll could only have been broken by a family member on purpose or by accident. The possibility of the latter seems low, given what I saw of the situation. As for the former, Fuyu would never destroy her own gifts, Miyo and I couldn’t have done it while we were out, and Hazuki has always avoided Fuyu’s room. That narrows it down to you.”

Kiyoka looked dignified and quite reassuring as he smoothly laid out his reasoning. Meanwhile, Tadakiyo smiled, nodding as if impressed.

“There’s just one thing, Kiyoka. If that’s the case, did I break the doll accidentally? Or deliberately?”

Miyo wasn’t sure why, but for some reason, Tadakiyo had suddenly presented Kiyoka with a question of his own. It was as if he was playing some sort of game.

“Hell if I care.”

Fed up, Kiyoka quietly cursed as he gave up on the question.

“Well then, assuming it was deliberate, what do you think my motive was?”

Tadakiyo’s eyes glittered like a child’s, indicating he was thoroughly amused with the situation. Since Kiyoka showed no signs of answering, Miyo timidly spoke up in his stead.

“Um...was it because...the doll wasn’t necessary anymore...?”

“Really now? And why wouldn’t I need it anymore?”

“Oh, um... I—I don’t know...”

Miyo hadn't thought this through much. To make matters worse, her head was now a jumbled mess.

Giving arts-enchanted items to his wife Fuyu, calling them presents, and placing them in her room to constantly spy and listen in on her, only to then break them himself.

When Miyo put everything together like this, it was pure madness.

In truth, Tadakiyo had behaved so aberrantly from start to finish that arriving at the motivations behind it seemed totally impossible for Miyo.

As she stood there baffled, Kiyoka lightly placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't toy with my wife, you perverse old man."

"She was just trying to come up with the answer for you since you weren't answering yourself. Also, 'perverse old man'? That stings a little, you know."

A throbbing vein popped up on Kiyoka's temple.

"It looks like you're asking for an objective perspective on your perversion, so I'll give you one. I'm sure you'll claim that breaking the doll was some way of affirming Fuyu's love for you or something. That way, you could watch her get sad that the doll was broken, reaffirm that her feelings haven't faded at all, and gloat to yourself. Utterly childish."

"See, you do understand."

"I wish I didn't."

Tadakiyo clapped his hands several times, looking satisfied. Then he turned around.

"What's the problem? Fuyu and I have always had this sort of relationship. This is just the shape our love takes, and all my gifts are proof of it."

Letting out a bashful, deeply pleased giggle, Tadakiyo departed.

Miyo couldn't move from where she stood, shocked by the chaotic series of developments. These revelations had entirely destroyed her image of Tadakiyo and Fuyu's pure romance, leaving only a horrid, unpleasant aftertaste behind.

Of course, it wasn't the relationship her mother-in-law and father-in-law shared she found unpleasant—it was because she couldn't fully process it all.

There was a weight in her chest, as if she had forced herself to swallow a big, fatty piece of meat.

It felt like she had ingested something that would put a great amount of stress on her stomach to fully digest.

Even after listening to everything, there was still one thing that bothered her. It was Tadakiyo's comment about him and Fuyu "being on the same page."

If she took this at face value, that meant they had both agreed to this arrangement of Tadakiyo giving Fuyu arts-enchanted presents to spy on her...

*Then Mother also knows the truth of those gifts...*

Miyo trembled.

The feeling that she had observed something terrible came over her, something she never should have seen.

"Miyo. You don't have to remember anything about our conversation just now. Actually, just forget it entirely."

Kiyoka said this out of consideration for Miyo, who was trembling all over. But he didn't need to have said it; Miyo had already driven everything from the past several minutes deep into the recesses of her mind.



Finished with her bath, Miyo headed for the bedroom.

Inside, Kiyoka was sitting on the bed in his sleeping *yukata*, having already bathed.

"Kiyoka, I'm finished washing up."

"Got it."

Kiyoka cleaned up the documents he was reading for work and beckoned her over. Miyo obeyed and gently sat down next to him.

"Kiyoka."

"What is it?"

During her bath, Miyo had thought back over various things.

Like the fact that perhaps Kiyoka's words in the park that day, which had seemed so incomprehensible, may have been alluding to Tadakiyo's behavior. And the fact that Hazuki, who hadn't been around for their conversation with Tadakiyo, knew it all, too.

However, none of that was what weighed on Miyo's mind the most.

"Um, it's regarding...the doll you gave me."

That appeared to be enough for Kiyoka to surmise what Miyo wanted to say. Vigorously turning to Miyo, he swiftly answered her.

"It's not like that. I absolutely didn't have those thoughts in mind when I gave you that doll, and I wouldn't resort to any tricks like that. I swear to God."

"Okay..."

At times like these, she was certain that if Hazuki were here, she would have said her brother was just making himself look more suspicious by being so frantic.

But Miyo found Kiyoka's panicked display heartwarming and endearing.

"I'm serious."

"Yes, I know. You don't need to emphasize it so much, I understand."

As if to continue from that morning, Kiyoka laid Miyo down on the bed as she failed to hold back her giggle. He looked so serious.

"I do think that it wouldn't be a bad thing to have at least one arts-enchanted item like that among your belongings, though."

"What...?"

Kiyoka suddenly buried his face in Miyo's neck. His breath felt hot and ticklish. Before she knew it, her chest was filled to the brim with his scent.

"You're always at risk. If I don't give you that, at least, I'll be worried to death about someone taking you away or hurting you."

"K-Kiyoka, please don't talk so much...!"

A strange sound threatened to escape her lips each time Kiyoka spoke, and his breath caressed the back of her neck. She somehow managed to endure it, wrapping her arms around Kiyoka's head and softly hugging him close.

"If you really think that's necessary, please just say so, Kiyoka."

In the end, Miyo would be probably the same as Fuyu.

She might have her activities spied on all day, have all the sounds and words she said listened in on. Even knowing all that, she was sure she'd accept it.

*After all, I belong to you.*

If that was enough to prove it, if that was enough to put Kiyoka's mind at ease—she wouldn't mind if Kiyoka observed her daily life to his heart's

content, even if she found it embarrassing.

“Are you serious about that?” Kiyoka asked in a husky voice, rubbing his face into Miyo’s nape like an indulgent child. Miyo stroked Kiyoka’s hair.

“Yes, I’m serious.”

“I’m not joking, I might actually do that.”

“I know. I don’t mind.”

Slowly, Kiyoka lifted his head. Their lips drew close and brushed against each other. They leaned into a deep, passionate kiss.

They melted in their love together.

“...Darling, I love you.”

“And I, you.”

No one object, no piece of evidence, could capture the totality of their love. But the tokens of their bond, in all shapes and sizes, proved that a small part of the love they shared was real, no matter where the two of them may be.

Miyo yielded herself to the warmth that enveloped her whole body and closed her eyes.

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## *Team-Building Get-Together*

“Let’s have a team-building get-together!” Godou suddenly declared.

Kiyoka glared at him sharply.

It was the end of the summer, and after being laid up in bed for a short time, Kiyoka had finally returned to work and had gotten back into his daily routine.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

His subordinate had burst into his office, but he didn’t have any pressing business to communicate—just nonsense to spout. Unfortunately, Kiyoka didn’t have the slightest hint of tolerance for a subordinate to act like this.

Nevertheless, Godou slammed his desk with a grave look, ignoring his boss’s cold reception.

“I’m talking about team building, Commander!”

“Quiet. If you’ve got spare time to fool around, I’ll make you work overtime.”

“I don’t have any spare time, and this isn’t about fooling around. Drinks! We need to get drinks together!”

“That’s the last thing I need! Buzz off and go home.”

Collecting the documents had he finished processing, Kiyoka began getting ready to leave for the day.

He had finished his work. The only thing left was to return home, and he definitely wasn’t going to entertain his obnoxious aide’s ideas. Drinking parties were nothing but trouble, and he wasn’t having any of it.

Kiyoka stood up to signal that if Godou wasn’t going to leave, he would, but Godou got in front of him and blocked his way.

He beamed an aggravating grin at Kiyoka that was completely opposite his serious look moments prior.

“Nuh-uh, that’s not going to work! I’m not letting you go home today!”

“Move. You’re getting on my nerves. Out of the way, I’m leaving.”



“I thought you might say that, so...”

“...”

“I called over a veeeeery special guest!”

Kiyoka’s eyes widened, and he glanced over at the door to his office. He hadn’t sensed anyone at all. Despite that, someone had appeared in the doorway at some point.

*...I didn’t even notice.*

The man was capable of moving without alerting Kiyoka of his presence. There was only one person skilled enough to accomplish that feat.

“Good evening.”

The man Kiyoka would describe as his natural enemy popped his shrewd smiling face into the office. He had wavy chestnut-colored hair and friendly, handsome features, and he was flawless in both dress and conduct. No matter how many times they met each other, Kiyoka could never let his guard down around him.

The next head of the Tsuruki family—rather, the next head of the Usuba family—Arata Usuba.

“...Godou. You must have a death wish if you’re inviting outsiders into our station.”

Kiyoka threatened Godou, taking his anger out on his subordinate. But Godou didn’t seem to care at all.

“Well, this was just to ensure we take you out tonight, by force if necessary!”

“An idiotic reason like that isn’t going to fly, you buffoon.”

This wasn’t a problem Godou could just laugh off. Leading an outsider to the reception room was one thing, but bringing them all the way to this office was a complete violation of military regulations. The punishment would be severe.

Kiyoka assumed a hostile position, signaling for Godou to prepare himself for the worst, when the outsider in question brought the two men’s spat to a halt.

“No need to get heated, I have permission from Major General Ookaito.”

“Excuse me? The major general gave you permission? For this farce?”

“Well, you know how good my negotiation skills are.”

“...You’ve got to be kidding.”

Flabbergasted, Kiyoka lowered his raised fist.

Everyone around him was off their rockers. Both the two brazenly violating military regulations, and the one giving them permission to do so. Not that Kiyoka wanted to speak ill of his superior.

“Oh yes, and I have a message from Major General Ookaito, too: ‘You could stand to do some team building with your subordinates from time to time.’”

“...”

Kiyoka just barely choked down his retort about the advice being unwanted and followed Godou and Arata.

Kiyoka saw red for a brief moment when Arata informed him, with an affable, nonchalant smile, that he had already filled Miyo in on the situation. For some reason, it was Kiyoka’s job to lead the way to their favorite pub near the station.

“I made sure to reserve us a table!”

He had lost the energy to quip back at Godou, who proudly puffed his chest out behind him.

“Where’d all this team-building talk even come from?”

“I mean, you’ve gotten so unsociable ever since Miss Miyo showed up.”

“...”

“Only joking, of course... I had a bunch of things I wanted to ask Tsuruki here, see. I figured it would be a waste not to have you join us, Commander.”

“Doesn’t sound like a waste at all from where I’m standing.”

As they talked, Godou, having slipped in front, energetically pulled open the sliding door with a “Good evening,” and the three men flipped back the hanging entry curtain one by one to step into the pub.

The Akita was a five-minute walk from the station, and the unit members patronized it regularly. The place was small, and the building was old and fairly grimy, but this was all the more reason why it became a hangout spot for men on their way home from work.

The boss was a good-natured old man, and it was a comfortable place overall, so when anyone in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit talked about getting drinks, this was usually where they ended up.

“A rather folksy little place, isn’t it?”

Arata looked around with curiosity.

“Oh, of course, this is exactly the type of place—*Bleh!*”

So pleased he could’ve started humming a little tune, Godou had begun to reply to Arata when he abruptly let out a weird grunt and stopped in his tracks.

“Why is he...?”

“Godou?”

“U-uh, never mind, we should go home.”

Godou frantically turned on his heel and tried to leave the pub, but in a rare moment of unity, Kiyoka and Arata blocked his path from behind.

In Kiyoka’s case, with a slight amount of enmity and exasperation included.

“You want to go home after coming this far?”

“W-well, I mean, you know,” Godou stammered at the question, his eyes wandering left and right.

“Hey Godou, don’t just stand there, come over and drink with me.”

Kiyoka was very familiar with the voice he heard from a table in the corner of the pub. It instantly explained Godou’s sudden, suspicious behavior.

Those two truly got on like cats and dogs.

“...Tatsuishi?”

“Oh, Kudou. And Mr. Nobleman’s Son whose name I’m not supposed to say.”

“It’s Tsuruki.”

Kazushi Tatsuishi, the newly installed head of the Tatsuishi family, reacted to each of them with a cheerful smile, waving to beckon them over.

“Now, now, come on over and take a seat. Plenty of room for four here.”

“Nooooooooo thank you!”

Sake cup in one hand and wearing his gaudy, brightly-colored kimono as loose as always, the playboy slid up to them and pulled a reluctant Godou to the empty seat.

Kiyoka was convinced Kazushi was just as sloshed as he looked.

Sighing at the spectacle of his two incorrigible subordinates, Kiyoka headed toward the seats with Arata.

“...Okay, time to start our little get-together I guess...”

The man behind this whole night immediately addressed the table, but his expression was far gloomier than usual, suggesting his spirits were low.

Conversely, Kazushi squinted with glee, while Arata maintained his usual genial smile.

The addition of Kazushi made their group look even more dubious than before. However, none of the other men took even the slightest notice.

*...What about this is a team-building get-together, exactly?*

Kiyoka was the only one who couldn't help but feel suspicious about the group around him.

For the initial table appetizer, they were served cold tofu drizzled with a specially made sauce. From there, they were brought *shochu* and sake, as well as their own individual servings of the grilled meat dishes, the pub's famous simmered seasonal vegetables, and more, one after another.

By the time all the food had just about disappeared from their plates, the mouths of the four men had grown much looser than when they'd first arrived.

"Seriously, why are you even here in the first place, Tatsuishi?" Godou grumbled quietly, to which Kazushi shot him a gleeful sidelong glance.

"What, am I not allowed here?"

"Playboys should just go to those places with the pretty ladies in them like they're supposed to."

"Everyone needs a change of pace now and then, don't they?"

Kiyoka knocked back his *shochu* before he tried to ply Kazushi, happily squinting as he replied to Godou, for information.

"You're taking your head of family work seriously, right?"

"I suppose, though I'm not really thrilled about it. It's annoying, and I'm very lonely being by myself in the house."

Although in essence admitting to laudable work, Kazushi shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

All of Kazushi's family had been sent off far away after the spring incident involving Miyo and the Saimoris. The previous head of the Tatsuishis and his wife had retired to the countryside, while Kazushi's younger brother was training in the old capital. That left Kazushi to live in the relatively large Tatsuishi estate by himself.

Kazushi was carefree and single, so Kiyoka had assumed he would lose himself completely to entertainment, but that wasn't quite the case.

For even when his family had lived in the manor, Kazushi would often wander about enjoying himself and staying away from home. In other words, he wasn't new to leading a carefree lifestyle.

"Actually, what about your family, Godou? I have a bit of hard time imagining what it's like..."

Arata was the one to ask the question.

"My family? Well, we're a rowdy bunch, that's for sure."

"Rowdy...you mean you have a lot of brothers and sisters?"

"I have an older brother and a younger sister, sure, buuuuut..."

Three children didn't constitute a very large family. But Arata, who was unfamiliar with the Godou household, cocked his head, thinking that perhaps this meant Godou's brother and sister were quite talkative.

However, Kiyoka understood what his aide meant, of course. The one who caused the most trouble in the Godou household wasn't Godou or his siblings—

"My mother's the rowdiest of us all, actually."

Godou turned his ruddy face to Kiyoka, seeking his agreement.

"Why are you looking at me?"

"You know just as well as I do, don't you Commander? What our house is like."

"...Well, sure, I guess."

Godou's mother had a wide range of interests, and she would often move from one hobby to the next very quickly.

She would try her hand at music, painting, and other artistic pursuits, and attempt making challenging foreign dishes and sweets; Kiyoka had even heard of a time she had grown fond of traveling and would leave the house for several months at a time.

Kiyoka remembered that the Godou family home felt small despite its size, packed with the mistress of the house's collectibles and creations, along with tools for her various hobbies.

Her personality could be described as "spirited," a little bit strange, and extremely pushy at times. However, she wasn't a bad person, and she was far more well put-together than Kiyoka's mother.

"I'd say she's a good mother, myself. She's always looking after you."

"More like 'dragging us into her messes,'" Godou murmured with slurred speech, looking quite intoxicated.

“She sounds like quite an idiosyncratic person, then.”

Arata nodded, and Godou continued.

“Oh yeah, definitely, if it wasn’t for my older brother, I don’t think a Gift-user like me would’ve had as much freedom as a student.”

“Really now? Your school years were that carefree, were they?”

Kazushi raised an eyebrow and perked up at the word “freedom.” Kiyoka sipped from his sake cup without adding anything unnecessary.

“I was free all right. Free to study a whole bunch, seeing what a diligent guy I am and all.”

“Wait, free to study?”

“I studied abroad in England. I saw the clock tower, the whoooooole deal.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Kazushi’s and Arata’s eyes both went blank. They must have been unable to reconcile their idea of Godou with the fact of him studying abroad. Looking at the man now, it was a natural reaction.

Kiyoka was the only one who found it nostalgic, keenly reflecting on the past.

When Godou was a student, he had studied abroad in an island nation in Europe.

That country was the center of Western magical practices. Even Gift-users, who used a completely separate system of arts and supernatural powers, could get a lot out of learning the magical arts of another nation. Still, even in this day and age, there were very few parents who would actively push their children to go abroad.

Ultimately, there was still a deep-rooted mental diffidence toward the countries across the sea.

“You? Study abroad? Color me surprised,” remarked Kazushi, in a rare show of honest admiration.

“Really?” Godou asked.

“I didn’t think you were you so dedicated. I’ve gone abroad for work quite a bit, but that’s much different than studying abroad,” said Arata, the noble son of a trading company. “Did you know about this, Commander Kudou?”

“Yeah. He snapped at me right after he got back.”

“Gaaah! Commaaaaander, I told you before to forget about all that, didn’t I?!” Godou shouted.

“I don’t care.”

That took him back. Yet at the same time, it made his chest throb with pain.

Back then, Godou had been so on edge, it had seemed like he’d cut down anyone with the slightest touch. He’d condemned Kiyoka and had planned to get his revenge. To make Kiyoka feel the pain he’d felt. In those days, that had been his sole motivation in honing his own skills.

Godou was a completely different man today. Still, none of what he’d learned had ended up going to waste, and he was a far stronger now than he had been in the past, so everything had worked out.

Regardless, Godou himself appeared to consider everything that had happened back then an embarrassing memory.

“Wow, snapping at Kudou? Aren’t you bold?”

“Forget it! Forget he said anything!”

Godou shouted at Kazushi’s smirk. Unfortunately for him, it was already too late.

“Still, that’s another surprise. Right now, you come across as Commander Kudou’s loyal dog...*ahem*, loyal subordinate.”

“Hold on, did you just call me his loyal dog?!”

Arata’s doubt was understandable.

Back when Kiyoka was still young and hadn’t taken over as commander yet, Godou had come back from abroad with experience and knowledge far outstripping those of the other recruits. After training nonstop until bloodied, Godou had challenged Kiyoka, using his confidence, his desire for revenge, and his hatred of the man as motivation.

Given the circumstances, Kiyoka didn’t take it personally and brushed Godou off, and their relationship ultimately developed into what it was now. It was nothing short of a marvel.

“...Weeeell, all that was me being young and foolish. I was cocky, so I figured the Gift-users throwing their weight around in the Empire were just big fish in a small pond to the outside world. Acting all important even when they didn’t have the skills to back it up. I was blind to what was around me.”

Godou evasively added that there were also some personal circumstances at play. Kiyoka agreed that it certainly wasn't something to bring up over drinks like this.

The story of the sin Kiyoka could never fully atone for.

"Young and foolish, hmmm?"

"C'mon, that's enough about me, right? It's your turn to talk about something, Tatsuishi."

"I don't really have much to say, though... Ah! How about we talk about our preferences in women?"

Kiyoka sighed at the next hackneyed topic. Wasn't this supposed to be a team-building get-together? It was just devolving into who could say the silliest nonsense next.

As they chatted, they each ordered more drinks and food.

They all had drunk a fair amount of alcohol by this point, and the initial atmosphere was gone, the conversation growing surprisingly heated.

"Y'know, Commander, it's just not fair!"

"What isn't?"

"I wanna get married, too! I want a cute wife of my own!"

"I still prefer being alone, I think."

"Well, I've definitely considered it before."

Arata peeked over at Kiyoka.

*...All of them, just saying whatever they damn please.*

Glaring sidelong at Arata's belligerent smile, Kiyoka quickly returned his sake cup to the table.

Kiyoka had never thought marriage was that great to begin with.

He needed to get married to produce an heir—he understood that much. But if a husband and wife weren't very compatible, the results would be disastrous. Ultimately, it would turn into a truly obligatory relationship.

According to what he had heard, there were apparently services that would introduce marriage partners to one another. It sounded like a lot of men went to these places. They would tack on a never-ending stream of requirements for their partner, insisting she be young, good-looking, tactful, previously unmarried, good at cooking...

It was absolute foolishness.

*Hang on.*



As these thoughts ran through Kiyoka's mind, he suddenly thought of his own fiancée, likely waiting back home for his return.

"You're engaged to Miyo, right, Kudou? I've known her for a long time, and I always thought she'd be a real beauty in the future," Arata said.

Kiyoka couldn't have agreed more.

She was still far too scrawny, so some people may have thought she looked weak and poor, but as far as he was concerned, Miyo was gorgeous.

"She's my cousin, so it's only natural, really. Miyo's best point has to be her personality, though. She's kind and considerate...but when push comes to shove, she works up the courage to do what she needs to do. Truly wonderful, wouldn't you say?"

Kiyoka was in complete agreement on this point, too.

Due to the environment in which she had been raised, Miyo was bad at bringing her own thoughts and feelings to the surface. On top of that, her thoughts tended to go in the worst possible direction.

However, it was safe to say that if she could get past that, she would have everything going for her; she was smart, kind, and gentle, and she calmed Kiyoka just by being at his side.

*She's a hard worker, too.*

So much so, she occasionally pushed herself too hard and made him worry.

In response to Arata's incomprehensible boasting and overly proud smirk, Godou exaggeratedly raised his hand.

"Okay, my turn!"

His gesture sent some of the drinks spilling on the table.

"The best thing about Miyo is how good she is at cooking!"

Kiyoka didn't particularly enjoy hearing other men talk about his fiancée like this, but he couldn't disagree with what Godou had said.

He silently nodded in agreement.

Miyo's homemade cooking was very tasty. She had always been skilled, but she was rapidly improving because she had been learning from Yurie lately, increasing the number of dishes in her repertoire even further.

The soy sauce-simmered *tsukudani* and sesame sauce salad in his lunch that day had been delicious.

While he may have simply been viewing his fiancée in a favorable light, he even felt that Miyo's simmered side dishes tasted better than the pub's

food he had just eaten.

“Maaan, you’re so lucky, Commander. A fiancée who’s young, beautiful, kind, and a good cook...”

Godou was absolutely right, and Kiyoka wouldn’t deny it.

It was then that Kiyoka returned to his senses. Men who wanted a young, good-looking wife who was tactful, previously unmarried, and good at cooking—he had heard this before.

*That basically means I’m no better than the men who make all those unreasonable demands...*

He couldn’t let himself probe the thought any further.

“C’mon, Commander, you gotta say something, too!”

Kiyoka brushed off Godou’s attempt to drag him in and stood up.

“I’m going home.”

“Huh?”

“What? Leaving already, Kudou?”

Leaving Godou blinking in surprise and Kazushi cocking his head, Kiyoka put down his share of the bill and quickly exited the establishment.

If he stayed there any longer, he sensed he’d likely hit upon even more problematic truths. After how much he had kept other women at arms’ length up until now, he was ashamed to have ended up like this.

However, for some reason, Arata followed Kiyoka as he exited the pub.

“Would you like me to see you back home, Commander Kudou?”

“No need.”

“Yes, but, you drank quite a fair amount while you sat there listening quietly. Are you sure you’re not drunk by now?”

Kiyoka did feel the alcohol coursing through him. Nevertheless, it was far too shameful to need someone to see him home after only this much alcohol.

“I’m fine.”

“...I see. In any case, don’t be angry about having Miyo become the topic of conversation like that. It’s just some friendly banter over drinks.”

Arata’s lips curled upward. More than the previous conversation, Kiyoka found his expression, as if confident in his superior position, far more unpleasant.

“I’m not angry, really.”

When he replied with a slight huff, Arata’s grin grew even wider.

“In that case, did you start to yearn for her after hearing all her best points reaffirmed in front of you? Quite lascivious, aren’t we?”

“Enough. Go back inside already.”

“That I will. I wouldn’t want to get cut down by a drunk Major Kudou, that’s for sure.”

“I told you, I’m not drunk—”

With no end in sight, Kiyoka swallowed his protest, and walked straight toward home.



It was already close to midnight.

When Miyo came to greet Kiyoka at the door, she was stunned by the overpowering smell of liquor in the entryway and almost keeled over.

“Kiyoka?!”

“...Miyo. I just got in.”

“I—I see. Welcome back... Um, are you all right?”

It was a bit difficult to tell, even on close inspection, but Kiyoka was different than usual. His fair skin had flushed a slight pink, and he smelled dreadful. Miyo felt like the smallest whiff would make her tipsy, too.

She knew he had gone out to a bar, but just how much had he drank?

“Can you get your shoes off?”

“I can.”

“Water, do you need water?”

“...”

There was no answer.

When Kiyoka was finished taking off his shoes, he drooped down until he was sitting on the wooden edge of the sunken entryway.

Miyo had no idea at all what she was supposed to do at a time like this.

“Um, Kiyoka? Are you sure you’re all right?”

Calling to him, she placed a hand on his broad back and peeked at his face, only to grow startled and confused.

Kiyoka’s eyes were popped wide open while he drooped forward, and he sat perfectly still.

As she stood there speechless, the abnormality too much to handle, he began to babble at her.

“Miyo, you’re real considerate.”

“Excuse me?”

“We talked about that.”

“I—I see...”

Miyo was baffled. He really was dead drunk after all.

Kiyoka had never been an eloquent speaker, but even he wasn’t usually this incoherent. It was like he was a totally different person.

“I’m lucky.”

“...”

“Miyo, you’re a man’s ideal woman.”

“Ideal woman...? No, that’s not—”

“It is.”

Right as Miyo began to grow seriously concerned about his incoherent behavior, Kiyoka suddenly lifted his head, moving his exquisitely handsome face close to hers.

Caught off guard, the intense shock made Miyo’s heart pound hard enough to burst.

“Eeep! K-K-Kiyoka?!”

“You’re amazing.”

“What?!”

Miyo was at a complete loss as to what was going on, and her eyes started to spin.

Her cheeks were too hot to stand, and it felt like her heart was pounding nonstop in her ears. She started to get more and more unbalanced.

“Miyo...”

She felt his breath. This was when Miyo reached her limit.

“N-no, stop!!”

Miyo reflexively activated her Gift on Kiyoka, who had gotten even closer to her.

“Oh no...”

Her fiancé collapsed limply to the entryway floor. A second later, she heard his breathing become slow and steady.

When she confirmed that he was merely just asleep, Miyo stared at her own hand. Her heart was still beating as loud as an alarm bell.

*That really scared me... It seems like this Gift can put people to sleep, too.*

At that moment, Miyo swore to train harder to better control her powers.

Incidentally, Godou showed up at the house the next morning, pale in the face.

“How is he?! Is the commander still alive?!” He asked. “Last night when I went to leave the pub, I saw a whole forest of empty two-liter *shochu* and sake bottles near where he’d been sitting! Drinking that much in that short amount of time would kill a man! Knock him dead!”

Miyo was convinced by this explanation for the events of the night before. At the same time, however, she was startled by how well Kiyoka handled his liquor; he had woken up that morning ready and raring to go without the slightest of hangovers. That said...

“Um, there’s no need to worry, Kiyoka is just fine.”

“Oh, what a relief!”

“But—”

Right as Miyo went to explain what came next, Kiyoka finished getting ready and headed over to them.

“...Godou.”

“Commander! I’m so glad you’re still alive!”

“I’m in a terrible mood today. You’ve been warned.”

“Aha, so that’s why you look so furious, I see... Wait, what?! Why?!”

Indeed, Kiyoka naturally retained all his memories no matter how drunk he got. Thus, the very first thing he had done after waking up that morning was prostrate himself in front of Miyo.

From there, he spent the entirety of breakfast brooding in self-hatred.

“Miyo. I’m heading out to work.”

“Okay. Have a good day.”

“...I’m truly sorry about last night.”

“I-it’s all right, no more apologizing...!”

Miyo couldn’t handle him bowing so deeply like this.

“Huh? Commander, what did you do?” Godou carelessly asked, not really understanding the situation. This earned him a punch in the face, courtesy of Kiyoka.

Afterward, Kiyoka swore off all alcohol for a while.

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## *Captivated*

With a loud crackle, a fire roared up before her eyes.

Miyo knelt down on the floor near the open kitchen door, exposing herself to the frigid air of this clear winter day and gazing at the charcoal brazier with Yurie.

The smoke pluming from the red-hot *binchotan* white charcoal passed up through the gaps in the wire rack and flowed up into the air.

Atop the wire rack was a white, plump, bulging winter treat.

“Hee-hee, I can’t wait to have some of this mochi,” Miyo murmured as she used her freezing hands to conceal her uncontainable smile. Yurie smiled with her.

“Oh, I can’t wait, either. Mochi is simply delicious.”

“Yes... It really is.”

Just picturing it in her mind was enough to make her ecstatic and set her heart beating.

The texture, chewy and gummy while still being soft. The faint sweetness that lingered in her mouth, even without any added seasoning. The way it stretched out long and thick when she bit into it piping hot, as much of a feast for the eyes as the stomach.

Finally, of course, there was the scrumptious, mouth-watering flavor.

Miyo had very rarely gotten to enjoy this delicacy back in her childhood home.

She and Yurie conversed with each other, watching the mochi heat up and puff up on the brazier. Just then...

“Aren’t you cold sitting down there?” called out Kiyoka with exasperation, coming to the kitchen doorway without either noticing.

“Oh, Young Master.”

“Kiyoka!”

Literally and figuratively leaping, Miyo drew close to her fiancé.

Unable to restrain her elation, she felt her frozen cheeks growing warm. Right now, however, that was a trivial matter.

“Um, Kiyoka, we’re having mochi for lunch today!”

“S-sure, sounds good.”

When Miyo spoke with a slightly rapid cadence, Kiyoka nodded looking a bit overwhelmed. Then, after a moment’s pause, he let out a chuckle, his lips forming into a smile and his expression softening.

“You like mochi, do you?”

Whether she liked it or not...she couldn’t really say. It was simply a happy, special treat to her.

As Miyo cocked her head, unable to immediately find the right words to answer him, Kiyoka took his muffler he was carrying and wrapped it around her neck.

“Don’t get so enthralled you get sick. Just a *haori* coat isn’t nearly warm enough.”

“Okay...”

As she watched Kiyoka depart, saying that he was looking forward to lunch, there was a light sweetness in her mouth for some reason, though she had yet to eat any of the mochi.

This time, Miyo made sure to hide her flushed cheeks by burying them into the muffler.



## ✿ AFTERWORD ✿

Hello everyone, it's been a while.

It is I, Akumi Agitogi. Since I have so many books out there at this point, I feel what's done can't be undone, and I am now able to confront my oddball pen name with complete indifference, perhaps finally putting a stop to my long, drawn-out saga of pen name regret.

While I said it has been a while, in a surprising turn of events, there was but an eight-month gap between publishing this volume and the last. Given there have been one-year gaps from volume five onward, this one came out a bit earlier than usual.

I am sure the clever among you must have already realized there is some catch to all of this.

Indeed, this latest volume is, in fact, a short story collection!

This was also the beginning of my tragedy. You see, I casually thought: *A short story collection for the eighth volume? It'll also be collecting all the short snippets I've written already? That sounds great. I'll be able to have a much easier time than normal, right?*

I—I was an utter fool...

When I got started, I realized that there weren't very many small extra stories, nor were they very long, most of them being small bonus stories written for different occasions. On top of that, my pen felt like it weighed one hundred tons trying to write something I was so unaccustomed to, like "When the Long Rains Abate," and by the time I finished, it felt like my whole body was left black and blue. What a brilliant punchline. I put far too much on the line for my art.

As such, I wrote two stories specifically for this volume (most of the page count), reedited some of the short stories I had already published online myself, and added in the special extra stories I had written for various

marketing campaigns pretty much as-is to assemble the book before you. Though the new episodes written for this volume are short stories, they can basically be considered part of the main plot rather than extras.

I hope both those who are already familiar with these stories and those seeing them for the first time equally enjoyed this volume.

Now then, the anime broadcast finished without a hitch, and a second season is already confirmed.

It was a truly, truly wonderful anime, and speaking as just another viewer, I can't wait to see what comes next. I experienced first-hand how so many people's efforts came together to make such a fine work, and I couldn't be happier. I hope those of you who were kind enough to purchase the Blu-rays that included this volume will heartily enjoy the thirteen episodes, both to review the story and prepare for what's to come.

The manga adaptation is also being serialized in Gangan Online. Every time I view Kousaka's artwork, it reaffirms for me just how truly blessed this series is... Every manuscript is perfect, with nothing for me to nitpick at all, and I couldn't be more grateful. It's been over five years since it started being serialized, six if I'm including the preparation time beforehand, and I wanted to thank you, Kousaka, for working with me for so long.

I hope that we'll keep this up for many more years to come.

Allow me to thank those who supported this latest volume.

First, to my editor. Thank you for putting up with my all-out artistic desperation. Forgive me for making you so anxious. I've learned my lesson. I'll do my utmost to ensure this doesn't happen again. However, in the event that even this proves not enough, allow me to apologize in advance. I'm sorry!

Next, to Tsukiho Tsukioka, for yet another heavenly illustration. Miyo and Kiyoka in Western clothing!! So incredibly powerful! Magnifique! It is so incredible to see their beauty blow through all my expectations every single volume. My vocabulary has started to fail me. Thank you.

Finally, to all the readers. Allow me to thank you from the heart for joining me all the way to the end once again. Without a doubt, it is you, the readers, who have supported this series all the way to volume eight. Thank you. I hope you'll continue supporting it from here on out.

Well then, until we meet again somewhere.

*Akumi Agitogi*

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## —LIST OF FIRST APPEARANCES—

“When the Long Rains Abate”—this volume

“My Sister-in-Law Is Too Cute”—Kakuyomu website (November 2020)

“Sweet, Sour”—Fujimi L Bunko’s Seventh Anniversary Event (July 2021)

“When She Was Drunk”—Fujimi L Bunko’s Fifth Anniversary Event (September 2019)

“An Average Day for Kazushi Tatsuishi”—Fujimi L Bunko’s Eighth Anniversary Event (July 2022)

“Thunderstorm” X (formerly Twitter) #HappySummerReading campaign (October 2021)

“Proof of Love”—this volume

“Team-Building Get-Together”—Kakuyomu website (November 2020)

“Captivated” Pre-order/release bonus for My Happy Marriage Volume Six (July 2022)

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