



Akumi Agitogi

Illustration by Tsukiho Tsukioka



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AKUMI AGITOGI

Translation by David Musto

Cover art by Tsukiho Tsukioka

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Miyo's first cousin.

Son of the head of the Usuba family.

TAKAIHITO

Crown Prince.

Possesses the power of Divine Revelation.

SUMI SAIMORI

Miyo's mother. Deceased.

Kiyoka and Hazuki's mother. Very prideful.

HAZUKI KUDOU

Kiyoka's older sister. Mother of one.

YURIE

Servant of the Kudou family. Even Kiyoka is no match for her.

© PROLOGUE 9

The stagnant air clung to blackness darker than night.

Kiyoka had been thrown into the innermost part of the underground military headquarters prison, where neither sound nor light from the outside world could reach him, forcing him to rely on what sparse illumination in the place there was.

During his stay at the Imperial Palace, Kiyoka had been charged with a crime he had no knowledge of. Finding resistance or escape impossible in the face of the many things he needed to protect, he had ultimately allowed himself to be arrested.

There was no opportunity for an investigation. Or any interrogations, or a trial.

Since Kiyoka's captors planned only to use him as bait, they'd simply roughed him up a little before dumping him into a cell.

The stench of earth, matter organic and inorganic, and filth of all kinds choked the underground prison and its bare dirt floors.

His sense of time had grown hazy in this place, where both night and day were equally dark. Though he'd managed to count the hours for the first three days of his imprisonment, it wasn't long before he stopped, realizing the futility of his efforts.

And when he did, what happened?

Strangely, his mind filled with scenes from the normal, day-to-day life he had lived prior to this.

I wonder what Miyo's doing right now.

The tearful face of his fiancée—to whom he'd selfishly revealed the feelings

he had for her—floated into the back of his mind.

In spite of his vow to stay by her side and protect no matter what, he had left her behind, trembling with unease and crying out of fear.

Kiyoka had anticipated that this would happen, of course. He had made preparations for that very reason. But when the worst actually happened, he was assailed by powerlessness and incessant regrets.

Because of this, he had no room to criticize anyone else—including Arata for siding with the Gifted Communion. Kiyoka had broken his promise, just like Arata had.

Now the only things keeping him sane were images of Miyo from their everyday life.

When she would cook or when she would see him off in the entryway every morning. When she would stretch with all her might to clean the high areas of the house or the way her eyes would light up sometimes while looking at something commonplace and unremarkable.

The lovely smile she would show him, like a blossoming flower bud.

Down to the tiniest gestures that she would make, purposeful or not.

All of it was charming. All of it was endearing. Her presence warmed his heart, and even amid the darkness, she served as the light guiding his consciousness.

When they had first met, he hadn't thought for a moment that there would come a day when he would feel this way.

Miyo must have felt like she was always on the receiving end of everything, but the truth was that Kiyoka had gained much from her himself.

From the very first moment they'd met.

Being by her side had taught him that the things he accepted as a given weren't to be taken for granted. With her, the smallest everyday events seemed precious and blessed.

This feeling was a breath of fresh air to Kiyoka, who had always been pressured by his role as a Gift-user and his duty as a soldier. It filled him with irreplaceable warmth.

Alas...if only he could get home soon.

No, no, I can't. I can't hope for that.

Feeling nothing but the cold ground, Kiyoka shook his head.

He wanted to get out of here. He wanted to return to the everyday life he once had.

But yearning like this would only let the darkness swallow him even further. The more he hoped for a potentially unattainable future, the more he would sink into the pitch-black depths of despair, losing any way to recover.

This facility was built to break people that way, and there were plenty who succumbed to it. As a soldier, Kiyoka knew that very well.

So while he was here, he couldn't look forward to the future. He couldn't let himself hope. The only things he could let himself think of were his memories.

Nevertheless, Kiyoka didn't plan on rotting in jail without doing anything.

Relying solely on his sense of touch, he moved his hands, which throbbed painfully in their shackles, to make signs.

Then he activated the arts he had prepared in advance.

Although Gifts and arts were suppressed here, it was no trouble for Kiyoka to connect with the arts he had set up outside the prison ahead of time.

Miyo...

At this point, he believed he knew her fairly well.

Even though he'd implored her to wait, he was sure that Miyo wasn't going to obediently sit around right now. She would try to fight back in one way or another.

It was beyond his control. He got the sense that he could forgive Miyo for absolutely everything, this part of her included.

That was because Miyo had finally learned to act on her feelings after being unable to voice them for so long.

Amid the gloomy darkness, Kiyoka gently closed his eyes, thinking only of his beloved.

₩ CHAPTER 1 **₩**

Snowy Path

Her shoes crunched loudly with each step she took down the paved road, blanketed in white.

The early winter morning sky, like rolling whitecaps, had grown bright. As she let out wisps of breath into the frigid air, Miyo continued marching toward the military headquarters.

There were surprisingly few pedestrians out on the streets; she passed a person or two every once in a while, at most. Though it was still early, she had never seen the capital so quiet before.

It was as if the whole city were holding its breath.

The Gifted Communion had revealed the existence of Grotesqueries to the public at large, sowing an atmosphere of creeping dread in the hearts of the people, and on top of all this, the thick snow was making the streets difficult to traverse.

Though it was understandable why most people wouldn't want to be out and about, the quiet was still unnatural.

The average citizen of the Empire shouldn't have known anything about the coup Usui had carried out at the Imperial Palace and the military headquarters, yet perhaps they sensed from the bleak atmosphere that a major event had taken place.

"Hoooh..."

Stopping for a moment, she rubbed her fingertips together, which were freezing even beneath her gloves. When she turned back around for a moment, the only things she saw in the freshly fallen snow were her own scattered footprints.

Miyo was genuinely alone.

Though she had chosen this path herself, she'd ended up keeping the details of the situation from Hazuki, and even if she'd wished to ask the members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit for help, their activities were being restricted as well. There was no one who would be able to accompany Mito in her foolhardy endeavor right now.

That being said, she had also resolved not to get anyone else involved. Though she wouldn't have hesitated for a moment to ask for Kiyoka's help if he had been here.

Even knowing how reckless it was, all she could do was carry on alone.

She faced forward again and marched down the snow-covered road. With each step that brought her closer to her destination, she felt the chill of winter getting closer to her core.

There was very little that she could do. But that didn't mean she could do nothing.

If Usui's schemes were an attempt to lure her to him, then diving into his clutches and waiting for her chance to free Kiyoka seemed like the most reliable path she could take.

Miyo continued on until she finally stepped onto the major avenue leading to the entrance of the military headquarters.

But she didn't just waltz up to the gate. Instead, she observed it from the shadow of a nearby building.

One, two, three...

Even though there wasn't a soul on the street, security was extremely tight; grim-faced soldiers patrolled along the fence that traced the perimeter of the headquarters.

Miyo counted their numbers. She could see three from her position.

Were these soldiers personally backed by Usui? Or were they simply obeying the orders they'd gotten from the top? Either way, their motives were impossible to discern at a glance. If the soldiers knew what was going on, then just giving her name might be enough to get them to take her directly to Usui.

Conversely, if they hadn't been informed of anything, then they would turn her away at the gate, and that would be the end of that.

If the latter scenario happened, then she would have no choice but to force her way through the checkpoint somehow.

...It's okay. I can do this.

Miyo felt the presence of her Gift inside herself and stiffened up slightly.

There was a way forward. By using the power of Dream Sight, Miyo could put the soldiers to sleep and drag them into the dreaming world.

But that was easier said than done. Dream Sight wasn't the most convenient of powers since it struggled to induce slumber in many people at once. Plus, if her target was able to resist the drowsiness she inflicted, her plan would fail.

To infiltrate the headquarters successfully, Miyo would have to wait patiently for the gate to open, then swiftly exert her Gift on the guards. In the event she didn't succeed at putting them all completely to sleep, she would have to dash through the gate while her targets were still struggling against drowsiness.

Miyo concentrated and intently surveilled the area around the gate.

"Huh?"

After a short while, she suddenly felt someone pull her sleeve from behind, and she let out a small gasp.

"Wh-who's there ...?"

Miyo turned around in alarm and was greeted by a sight so shocking that it caused everything she'd been thinking through just now to vanish instantly from her mind.

Standing there was a thin boy who looked no older than ten. He was about as tall as her shoulder, and his eyes were calm as he stared hard at her.

His light brown hair, which seemed almost blond in the morning sun, was evenly trimmed to his shoulders, and his eyes were grayish blue. His clear skin was so pale that it nearly blended in with the snowy street.

The boy's features, so beautifully androgynous that they gave him the appearance of a foreign-made bisque doll brought to life, seemed vaguely familiar to her.

However, what surprised her more than anything about the boy's appearance was his outfit.

Even though one could feel the winter chill through several layers of clothing this morning, the boy was wearing only a white long-sleeved shirt and a pair of checkered pants; he was without a coat or *haori* and had neither scarf nor gloves.

Miyo nearly shivered just looking at him.

"Er, um..."

Where had this child come from? From where she stood, she couldn't see any parents or families nearby.

Unaccustomed to interacting with small children, Miyo nervously knelt down and tried asking the boy about his circumstances.

"Um, are you lost?"

Gazing into his beautiful eyes while questioning him, she realized they were the spitting image of another pair she knew very well.

They're the same as Kiyoka's...

It wasn't only his eyes. The pale color of his skin and his features were also just like her fiancé's.

Upon closer inspection, he looked like a child version of Kiyoka himself. Kiyoka had inherited his complexion and eye color from his mother—could it mean this boy was a relative of her mother-in-law, Fuyu?

However, Miyo had never heard of anyone of the sort living in the area. And relative or not, was it even possible for someone to look almost identical to her fiancé?

The relative theory held up to even less scrutiny when she considered how

Kiyoka had inherited his handsome features from his father.

As Miyo lost herself in her thoughts, the boy finally spoke up.

"Don't go to the military."

Miyo stiffened in fright.

While the boy's voice was fittingly high-pitched, his tone was practically the exact same as Kiyoka's normal manner of speech, possessing a brusqueness that belied his youthful form.

Was this even possible?

Was it really a coincidence that she had come across a young boy with the same looks and manner of speech as her fiancé, here, of all places?

Kiyoka...

When she looked down, visions of Kiyoka appeared on the plowed road then vanished, one after another.

She was on the verge of tears. The truth was that she'd been incredibly uneasy about marching straight to Usui's side alone, and during unguarded moments, she felt like she would lose control entirely.

Miyo wanted to turn to someone. She wanted support.

She had swallowed back her feelings of timidity many times.

Though Miyo wasn't trying to throw her life away, she knew Usui would be satisfied if she came to him on her own. She was the only one who could hope to exploit this hole in his defenses.

Thus, she needed to continue on, no matter how anxious she felt.

Miyo managed to rouse her spirits, realizing she needed to look proper in front of a child, and stood face-to-face with the boy.

"Why shouldn't I go to the military?"

The boy who resembled Kiyoka furrowed his brows at her question.

"Because it's dangerous. Going in alone? Way too reckless."

He seemed to have a complete understanding of the situation. That was

enough for even Miyo to tell that his presence was somehow related to Kiyoka.

No matter how closely she looked him over, she couldn't see anything unusual about the boy.

She had learned from Arata that brilliant arts users could create familiars that seemed wholly indistinguishable from living creatures. Did that explain who the boy was?

Keeping this in mind, she took another look at him and realized that she could sense something vaguely uncanny about him—something she didn't sense from normal people.

"Are you one of Kiyoka's familiars?" she asked, not expecting much of an answer. To her surprise, however, the young boy readily nodded his head.

"Yes. I am a familiar of Master Kiyoka Kudou... I appear here by my master's will."

The child, who Kiyoka must have modeled after his own appearance in his youth, stared at Miyo and asserted himself.

Kiyoka wanted to stop Miyo from going to Usui.

Miyo had been fully aware of this ever since he had told her in their last moments together to wait for him. If that was what he really wanted, then she should have stayed put.

"I am going to the military headquarters to see Naoshi Usui personally. No matter what Kiyoka may say to me."

She wasn't going to put this off any longer. She didn't want to be someone who only ever took advantage of Kiyoka's kindness.

As the one set to become the wife of Kiyoka, a military officer who fought as a Gift-user, she had prepared herself long ago to patiently wait for him to return home, but this current problem was not a simple quarrel among Gift-users.

This issue revolved around none other than Miyo herself. Consequently, she knew she couldn't leave it up to someone else.

If Miyo was capable of taking action, and if being husband and wife meant supporting one another through hardship, then there had to be something she could do herself.

"Don't go. That's the last thing you should do."

"No, I'm doing this. I've gotten a handle on using my Gift and arts, so I'll have plenty of chances to succeed," Miyo declared, concealing the uneasiness deep in her heart.

"Don't go."

"I'm going."

"Lay low in the Imperial Palace, or go to Sis and stay safe."

"No. I cannot do that."

As the boy with Kiyoka's face pleaded with her, the worried look Kiyoka had given her when he told her he loved her flickered into her mind, shaking her resolve.

She was irritated at herself for having been too cowardly to reply in kind, and she could wait no longer to properly convey her feelings to him.

"I should be the one to speak with Naoshi Usui. If I don't, no one will be able to move forward."

That went for Usui, the Usubas, and Miyo. As well as Arata, who had left her side.

Everyone was still caught up in the laws that bound the Usubas and Sumi's death.

If the Usuba family was to have a new start, then she couldn't allow Kiyoka to take care of Usui for her and leave it at that.

It wasn't right for her to pretend she didn't have a stake in this.

"You there."

Focused on her conversation with Kiyoka's familiar, Miyo belatedly realized that one of the guards had called out to her and approached from behind.

"A civilian? If you don't have business here, then get lost," the soldier said, looking at Miyo suspiciously.

Perhaps now was the time to tell him who she was and see if they would take her to Usui.

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"U-um. so. I'm-"
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But just as Miyo turned to the soldier to give her name...

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"No! Come here!"
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Kiyoka's familiar grabbed Miyo's hand. His grip was unexpectedly strong, so she staggered slightly in the direction he tugged her in.

Apart from that, her eyes went wide at the familiar's abrupt, overbearing behavior.

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"We're leaving!"
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"W-wait... I-I'm-"
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Miyo may not have been strong, but she was still a fully grown adult—yet that didn't stop the tiny version of Kiyoka from dragging her away from the military headquarters.

The soldier who had accosted her silently watched them depart.

He made no attempt to pursue her, so it appeared that the guards hadn't heard anything specific about her from Usui.

After walking for a little while, the tiny Kiyoka finally stopped, letting go of Miyo's hand.

"What were you thinking? What did you plan to tell him?"

"...That I'm Miyo Saimori, Kiyoka Kudou's fiancée."

The familiar let out a huge sigh at Miyo's timid and honest reply.

"Kiyoka Kudou is considered a criminal right now. It seems like Usui hasn't filled in the rank-and-file about everything, so you'd just invite unnecessary suspicion on yourself by claiming to be Kiyoka's fiancée."

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"That's...that's true, yes..."
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Miyo lowered her eyes, feeling as if Kiyoka himself was scolding her.

It wasn't that she hadn't imagined such a situation.

But if that happened, she had been prepared to put whoever questioned her to sleep with her Gift. That was why she had been watching for the right moment to approach.

However, Miyo wasn't able to come up with a good reply.

The familiar's concern was justified, and although she may have had some odds of success, she could admit that her plan was imprudent and foolish as well.

"...But this is all I can do."

She couldn't conceive of any other way forward. If she tried to ask anyone for advice, they wouldn't do anything but admonish her to wait like Kiyoka had told her.

In fact, Takaihito had tried to stop her from leaving the Imperial Palace, and Hazuki had also communicated in both action and word that she wanted Miyo to stay at the Kudou main estate.

She was sure that they wouldn't have treated her like this if her Gift had been like Kiyoka's, easily understood and destructive in nature.

"You're not going to listen to me no matter how many times I tell you to go home, are you?"

Miyo shook her head vehemently at the familiar's exasperated question.

This was one point she couldn't concede. Miyo didn't believe that she would be able to solve everything herself, but she still felt it was her duty to free Kiyoka and stop Usui.

"In that case, you should at least look for someone to help you and figure out the enemy's movements."

"Wh-what am I to do?"

Miyo didn't know anyone who would be willing to help her, had some power of their own, and could act freely right now. And besides, wouldn't heading straight into the enemy's center be the most surefire way of learning about them?

The tiny Kiyoka looked sullenly at Miyo, his expression seeming to ask if she

really couldn't think of anyone.

"Wouldn't the Usubas help you out?"

"Oh..."

Her eyes widened. She realized that there was an option she had overlooked.

Miyo had assumed she couldn't ask her grandfather for help given his old age, but regardless, both Usui and Arata's origins lay with the Usuba family.

Although she believed she'd gotten the gist of the family's circumstances from her dreams, perhaps she had been too hasty in that assessment.

Miyo was embarrassed at herself for resolving to take action all on her own and recklessly rushing to do what she needed to do.

I really didn't think everything through enough...

She clenched her first so tightly that her skin whitened underneath her gloves. A mix of frustration and embarrassment rose up inside her, bringing her to the verge of tears.

In her rush to plunge ahead, Miyo had forgotten to take stock of her surroundings.

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"...I'm sorry."
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"Hmph."

The tiny Kiyoka replied to Miyo's despondent apology by exhaling sharply and looking away from her.

Miyo took two deep breaths, removed her gloves, and vigorously slapped both her cheeks. The dry smacking sound echoed across the deserted city streets.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

The familiar widened his eyes in confusion. Miyo's cheeks stung with numbing pain from both the force of her slap and the cold winter air.

Still, this was just fine. She'd psyched herself up anew.

After Miyo had endured the brief moment of pain, she took the familiar's

small hand, placing it inside her glove.

"Huh? What are you doing ...?"

"It's okay. Sorry for holding us up. Let's go," Miyo said, taking a step forward as she looked back at the familiar, who was walking beside her with short-gaited steps, his expression slightly perplexed.

$$\Diamond\Diamond\Diamond$$

Miyo hadn't visited the Usuba home since stopping by to give her New Year's greetings.

Things had been busy because of the holidays, so there hadn't been much time for her to catch up with everyone.

While her grandfather, Yoshirou, had told her she could think of the residence as her familial home, she felt hesitant about coming there on a normal day without a seasonal event as a pretext.

For no reason in particular, Miyo approached the gate stealthily, trying not to make a sound before she rang the bell.

"Glad to see you, Miyo."

After a short while, Yoshirou personally opened the door, greeting her with a faintly sorrowful yet still gentle smile.

"You must be freezing. Hurry on in; the house is warmed up."

"...Thank you."

Sniffling, though not because of the cold, Miyo managed to choke out a reply as her voice caught in her throat.

True to Yoshirou's word, the interior of the parlor had been warmed with a brazier, and it promptly melted the chill that had penetrated to her core.

She had been in this very parlor during her first visit, when she was nearly ripped away from Kiyoka's side.

At the time, she would have never imagined herself facing her grandfather again amid such dire circumstances.

Together with Kiyoka's familiar, Miyo looked at Yoshirou.

"Um, G-Grandfather, it's good to see you again, after New Year's."

She still wasn't used to referring to him as her grandfather, so she felt a bit bashful.

Yoshirou turned his tranquil eyes to Miyo, who lowered her gaze. Then he looked sternly at Kiyoka's familiar, who was sitting next to Miyo.

"Who is this, Miyo? He looks quite a lot like your fiancé... No, it couldn't be—"

Cutting off his words as if choking them back, Yoshirou suddenly widened his eyes then said something more outrageous than she ever could have expected.

"He's not Kudou's illegitimate child, is he...?!"

"No!"

Without a moment's delay, the familiar vigorously interjected, practically barking his refutation.

Illegitimate...child...

Miyo was stunned into silence by both Yoshirou's statement and the previously docile familiar's drastic shift in attitude.

The familiar had leapt to his feet as though he were a cat with its fur standing on end.

Confusingly, he was reacting as if he were Kiyoka himself—his face was flushed, and he seemed equal parts angry and flustered.

Miyo had never once suspected Kiyoka of having an illegitimate child, but on second thought, she supposed it wasn't entirely out of the question.

Kiyoka had turned twenty-eight at the beginning of the New Year.

Normally, a man of his age would have married a long time ago, so it wasn't at all strange to believe he could have a child the same age as the familiar.

Or if, perhaps, he had spent his student days in debauchery.

Of course, she hadn't taken Yoshirou's accusation seriously, but the familiar was glaring sideways at Miyo. He must have thought she looked convinced.

"He doesn't have any children, okay?"

"I-I know."

Realizing that she'd lost herself in a reverie, Miyo snapped back to her senses and nodded rapidly.

She didn't want to consider the idea of Kiyoka having fathered a child with another woman. If anything like that came to light, she wouldn't be able to bear it.

She had no choice but to acknowledge that she felt an uncontrollable possessiveness toward her fiancé.

Yoshirou seemed satisfied, quietly taking in the familiar's reaction before raising his hand up to silence him.

"Sorry, I was only teasing."

"There are some things you shouldn't bring up, joke or not."

Gently closing his eyes to regain his composure, the familiar sat back down on the floor cushion.

Miyo smiled, charmed by his childishly sullen attitude.

"I take it you're a familiar, then? Impressive work, I must say."

As Yoshirou expressed his admiration, the familiar turned to face Miyo; he must have been uncomfortable with Yoshirou's intense observation.

"That's not important... I want you to listen to what Miyo has to say."

How much of the present situation had reached Yoshirou's ears?

Suddenly, Miyo doubted herself and fell quiet. After deciding that it would be best to explain things from the beginning, however, she stammered and began relating everything that had led her to the Usuba house.

She told her grandfather about when Usui had first showed himself to Miyo and his subsequent schemes. About how Usui had endangered Kiyoka in an effort to lure Miyo to his side, along with how she had been unable to convey something very important to Kiyoka before he was spirited away.

"I'm terribly worried about how much longer Kiyoka can remain unharmed,

but...I just don't what else to do."

Kiyoka's familiar was moving around just fine at present, and Usui was trying to use Miyo's fiancé to lure her to him, so it was difficult to believe Kiyoka was in imminent danger.

Even though she knew this logically, she didn't know when Usui might change his mind, nor did she have an idea how long the present situation could be maintained.

Usui could grow impatient if Miyo stayed away and harm Kiyoka in retribution.

Her hands tensed in her lap.

Only now did it dawn on her that her anxieties were the source of her restlessness.

Yoshirou never cut in during Miyo's summary, even when she paused here and there—he simply waited for her to finish.

She was hardly the best of speakers, so she imagined that her explanation was clumsy, especially since she didn't have the time to put her thoughts into order.

Yet when her story finally came to a close, Yoshirou had very few words to give her in reply.

"I see... That must have been awful. I'm glad you came to me, Miyo."

"....*"*

The tears came bubbling forth. Why hadn't she come to ask her grandfather for advice sooner?

It was clear just how anxious she had been and how little composure she had. So little, she hadn't been able to notice something so simple.

"Thank you...very much."

"It makes me happy that you came to me for help. I mean it."

Miyo was unable to say anything for a short while.

Nevertheless, she fought back her tears to move the conversation forward,

taking a series of breaths to calm herself. When she did, Yoshirou deliberately lowered his head.

"I deeply apologize for what Arata has done."

Her grandfather wore an expression of deep regret as he bowed to her. Regardless of the fact that a member of the Usuba family had perpetrated all this, Miyo was also linked to the Usubas, and Arata was a full-grown adult who was responsible for his own actions.

In other words, Yoshirou didn't need to feel guilty about Arata's behavior, much less apologize for it.

"Not at all. But why did Arata...or rather, Naoshi Usui, for that matter..."

For no reason in particular, Miyo stared at the elegant table in front of her.

She had no doubt that Arata always kept the Usubas, and Miyo herself, on his mind. That alone she was certain of. As such, she had never considered the possibility of him causing her harm.

But if that was the case, then why had he elected to join Usui's side? What was he after? Did he have some sort of ulterior motive? Miyo didn't understand why he had done any of this.

"Both Arata and Naoshi's mistakes stem from problems with the Usubas' way of life that have persisted to this day. As the head of the family, the responsibility lies with me for my failure to adapt to the changing times following the Restoration."

"No, of course not."

Miyo had learned of Usui's ideas when they'd met in his dream.

The simple fact was that everyone had just wanted to serve their purpose. This was true for Usui, Arata, Yoshirou, and the emperor, who had interfered with the Usubas and the Saimoris.

She could condemn them for being mistaken in their methods, or for being selfish, but that wouldn't get her anywhere. When it came time for her to oppose Usui, she would need to refute his claims that ran contradictory to her own.

At the moment, however, she didn't feel inclined to dismiss their feelings outright.

Raising her head, Miyo stared straight back into Yoshirou's eyes.

"...Please, will you tell me about the past? What happened within the Usuba family?"

Miyo didn't believe that she could manage to accomplish everything with her power alone. She simply wanted to stop Usui. Yet she lacked the material she needed to stop him, to appeal to his heart.

If she couldn't make him question what he was doing, then she would find herself being overwhelmed instead. This must have been what the familiar had been trying to tell her before, too.

"Let's see. Where exactly should I start...?"

Following a few moments of indecision, Yoshirou began telling the tale of the Usubas.

The man named Naoshi Usui had been unruly from his earliest years.

He was violent with other children his age, and he would kill dogs, cats, birds, fish, and all sorts of small animals. He would act with impulsive cruelty for no apparent reason, and he was such a problem child that even the adults didn't know how to handle him, for when servants would be tasked to watch him, the slightest displeasure would result in kicks and punches.

To make matters worse, he awakened to a tremendously powerful Gift early in life, and before long, no one was able to keep him in check. On the one hand, it was a boon that Usui had been born with the Usubas' valuable powers, as the number of Gift-users in the Empire continued to dwindle. But if Usui kept behaving as he did, it wouldn't be long before there would be causalities.

Recognizing this, the adults in the Usuba family arrived at the decision to seal Usui's Gift while he was still young and inexperienced with his powers.

Then, right as this was set to occur—Sumi and Naoshi came across each other.

Sumi was a bright and cheerful girl with an overly helpful streak. She got close

to Naoshi even as he caused problems for the adults day in and day out, and she fearlessly looked after him.

Naoshi found her annoying at first, but he soon opened his heart to Sumi, who would empathetically worry about him on some occasions and scold him harshly on others. Eventually, he grew dependent on her.

Thanks to their bond, Naoshi began harming others less and less frequently.

And the adults didn't want to let a valuable Usuba Gift-user go to waste.

Bound by their meritocratic focus on whether one possessed supernatural powers or not, they naively regarded the change in Naoshi as a good thing, and they reneged on their plan to seal away Usui's powers.

The relationship between Sumi and Naoshi eventually developed into one resembling a noble lady and her retainer, or perhaps an owner and their faithful guard dog.

Everyone assumed that they would be betrothed in time and eventually lead the Usubas.

But then came the emperor's unexpected interference.

The trading firm that the Usubas managed as a family, which served as their primary source of income, rapidly fell into decline, and the Saimoris, enticed by information from the emperor, intervened in the Usubas' situation. They dangled the offer of providing the Usubas financial support in exchange for Sumi's hand in marriage to Shinichi Saimori.

At the outset of the crisis, Yoshirou, Sumi, and the rest of the Usuba family rallied together in a desperate attempt to get back on their feet without the Saimoris or any other outside assistance. However, it soon became clear that someone was interfering at every turn with their efforts to escape financial ruin.

With their backs driven up against a wall, Sumi resolved to marry into the Saimori family despite the intense opposition from her family.

Among those against the idea was the matured and now remarkably docile Naoshi.

He asserted that the Usuba blood wasn't meant to go outside the family, that it was strange for Sumi alone to make a sacrifice, and that if ruin was the Usubas' only option, then they should face it together as a family.

But his appeals didn't sway Sumi in the slightest. Her will was firm.

Unable to overcome her resolve, the family reluctantly accepted her marriage to Shinichi Saimori, starting with Yoshirou.

Yet even then, Naoshi remained unconvinced.

He remained unamenable to anyone and everyone's justifications for the arrangement, whether they were from Sumi, Yoshirou, the other Usubas, or his own parents. Consequently, his former cruelty began to resurface, and as if giving up on everything, he broke away from the family.

"We all tried hunting Naoshi down. Though between our family being on the brink of collapse and Naoshi's brilliance as a Gift-user, we failed to locate him..."

Yoshirou's agonized expression, mixed with regret and irritation, grew even more clouded.

Miyo compared the scenes from Usui's memories she'd witnessed in her dreams and the story Yoshirou had told her.

Tranquil days, abruptly darkened by shadow.

If not for the emperor's scheming, Usui would have surely remained by Sumi's side, supporting her for the rest of his life.

That meant the emperor's acts of self-preservation were squarely responsible for the disaster and disorder currently gripping the Empire.

The same had been true for the previous incident at the Burial Grounds. The emperor's selfish actions brought harm to innocent, unrelated people and led others astray.

"The Usuba family as a whole is at fault for failing to control Naoshi, so his latest rampage is our responsibility. We were far too naive."

While it was true that the Usubas had been far too lax and optimistic about tackling the problems they faced, it was undeniable that many aspects of their situation had been out of their control.

After all, they hadn't chosen to furnish Usui with a powerful Gift—that was pure misfortune.

Miyo felt a terrible gloominess form in her chest, as though she'd been personally involved with everything she'd just heard.

It was then, after quietly listening to Yoshirou's story, that the familiar spoke up.

"The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit is also responsible for failing to detect Usui's movements behind the scenes."

Yoshirou merely shook his head in lieu of a response to the familiar's words of consolation. This was an admission of his own wrongdoing.

For a few moments, the room was seized by a suffocating silence.

But at long last, Yoshirou heaved a sigh, lightening the stifling mood.

"Miyo, did that answer your question?"

"Y-yes, it did. Thank you very much."

This previously unknown bit of Usuba family lore would aid her in deepening her understanding of Usui. Of course, no matter how much she grew to understand him, she still wouldn't ever be able to side with him.

Perhaps that was because she had been raised outside the Usuba family, despite being of their bloodline.

Yoshirou nodded at Miyo, who had lowered her head.

"I don't have much I can say myself, but...the Dream Sight Mediums of the past have left behind records and memoirs. I had assumed that you would need them before now, but we can't afford to think that way any longer. They'll prove useful in utilizing your Dream Sight powers, so if you need them, feel free to take a look."

"Thank you very much."

Up until now, Miyo hadn't intended on using her Gift to proactively accomplish something. On that note, the main reason she had started training was to get to know her powers and keep them stable.

But if she was going to confront Usui, then it seemed like it would be very important to learn how the Dream Sight Mediums of the past had employed her Gift.

Miyo was very grateful for Yoshirou's proposal.

"How long will you be able to stay here?"

The familiar answered Yoshirou's question before Miyo could.

"Two to three days at the most. If Miyo wishes to change something."

His tone was quiet and frank yet pregnant with hidden meaning.

Two to three days, if she wished to change something... What exactly did he mean by this? Was he saying that something might happen a few days from now?

Though she had her doubts, she decided not to voice them. Yoshirou didn't mention this, either, and merely acknowledged the reply.

"I see. In that case, do as much research as you'd like, and get some rest."

"I will."

With this reply, Miyo and the familiar stood up, and one of the Usubas' servants led them to a room on the second floor. This was where they could relax for the time being.

The pair were led to the very same Western-style room Miyo had previously spent several days in.

It was very fancy, and the various pieces of imported furniture made it seem less like a guest room and more like a place set aside specifically for Miyo's visits.

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"...Phew."
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The fireplace was already crackling, and when Miyo sat down in a chair, a sigh of relief escaped her lips as it hit her just how tense and nervous she'd been.

The familiar hopped into the chair opposite her. A moment later, he scowled after attempting to rock his legs back and forth—they were too short to reach the floor.

That reminds me...

Miyo discreetly waited so that she and the familiar could regain their composure, then she asked the familiar something that had been on her mind.

"Um, what exactly should I... How should I refer to you?"

She couldn't help sounding somewhat timid. While she felt it was a bit over the top to speak to a child as she would an adult, when she considered that she was, in fact, conversing with an aspect of Kiyoka, her manner of speaking naturally grew more formal.

But that hadn't stopped Miyo from asking him the question that had been on her mind ever since she had realized the boy was Kiyoka's familiar.

The way she spoke to the familiar was one thing, but the name she addressed him with was far more important.

Familiars were distinct entities from their masters. Although the boy moved according to Kiyoka's will, he wasn't Kiyoka himself, so she wanted an appropriate name she could call him by.

"Huh? Just refer to me like normal."

For some reason, the boy tilted his head with suspicion at the question and frowned.

But his response only made things more troubling for Miyo. Addressing the familiar by her fiancé's name was a nigh-impossible hurdle to climb.

If only there were a nickname she could use instead.

The thought led to a flash of inspiration, and Miyo struck a bargain.

"Then, um, could I call you 'Kiyo' instead?"

As far as she was concerned, it was a brilliant idea. Even if calling the familiar by her Kiyoka's full name was too awkward, she could manage this much. Kiyo was quite an adorable name.

The flames of the fireplace quickly popped and crackled amid the silence between them.

For some reason, the familiar suddenly grew flustered after a moment, and

his face turned red.

"Wh-what, that's, um... Is that really what you're going with?"

"Would you rather I didn't...?"

Was something about the name disagreeable to him? Miyo thought it was quite a good idea herself.

But when Miyo grew disheartened and fell silent, the familiar—Kiyo, rather—did a complete about-face and shouted, "It's okay!"

His pale cheeks were still dyed crimson, like a ripe red apple.

"The name's fine!"

"Really? I'm glad."

Miyo felt herself instantly grow brighter and more cheerful. Having her suggestion accepted, she unconsciously raised her voice.

That was why she didn't pay any attention to what Kiyo actually mumbled quietly with displeasure:

"You still haven't even given me a nickname yet."

"Is something the matter?" Miyo asked.

"It's nothing," Kiyo denied curtly. Miyo was completely taken aback and blinked in confusion.

His appearance was exactly like Kiyoka's, yet his mannerisms and behavior possessed the endearing cuteness of a real boy.

Despite his curt attitude toward her, she found herself smiling.

"What are you grinning about?"

It was clear just how serious her condition was, given that she didn't find it annoying to be viewed like some strange uncanny creature.

Having learned for the first time how truly adorable children were, Miyo realized she was enjoying herself, and her smile grew even wider.

"No, it's nothing."

"...Fine, whatever."

Kiyo wasn't one for words, perhaps because he was a familiar. Kiyoka himself could also be brusque and inarticulate, but even he was more articulate than this.

She did, however, feel a twinge of sadness when it struck her that Kiyoka could have been like this as a child.

As Miyo and Kiyo engaged in their childish back-and-forth, there came a knock at the door.

"Come in."

At her reply, the same servant from before excused herself and opened the door.

"Lunch is ready. Where would you prefer to take your meal?"

"What? Oh... It's that time already..."

She looked at the clock and saw that noon was fast approaching. Much more time than she'd thought had passed since she'd departed the Kudou estate early in the morning.

Though she'd been too nervous to think about it earlier, Miyo was starting to feel hungry now that lunch had been brought up.

"Is it all right if we eat in here?"

The servant acknowledged Miyo's request and returned after a short while with a tray bearing the day's lunch. One by one, they laid out plates of Western fare, typical for the Usuba house, atop the imported mahogany table.

Today's lunch was steaming hot macaroni au gratin with a garnish of boiled potatoes and carrots, spinach and turnips flavored in a French style, and two round slices of bread, smaller than a balled fist.

Every part of the meal smelled delicious and fueled her hunger.

"It looks amazing."

She leaned in close to get a good look, and the steaming vapor faintly brushed her face, bringing tears to her eyes.

In truth, she hadn't been able to eat much of anything since Kiyoka was

captured. She had been too worried about his safety and too preoccupied with coming up with a way to help him.

During that time, she hadn't been able to taste anything, no matter how delicious the food looked, and she never had much of an appetite.

Still, she felt guilty about worrying Hauki. Plus, when Kiyoka did return, he would be sad if Miyo was gaunt from malnourishment.

Deciding that she couldn't let that happen, she'd forced down tasteless food day in and day out.

Perhaps I have an appetite because I feel so relieved.

When last she stayed with the Usubas, the food hadn't tasted like much to her, either.

Miyo looked at Kiyo across from her and felt tears coming on.

"Are you not going to eat anything, Kiyo?"

Kiyo looked up at her, his cheek resting on his hand, as if to say he never thought she'd ask him such a question.

"Familiars don't need food."

"Oh...I'm sorry, I should've known."

Familiars weren't actually human, so of course they wouldn't need to eat. Kiyo looked so similar to a normal human boy that she had forgotten that simple fact.

Skillfully made familiars possessed the form of living creatures. They were convincing not only to the eye but also to the touch. However, their insides were completely different from the beings they imitated. They didn't possess the same organs or internal structures as living creatures, so they could be more accurately described as living skin stretched over papier-mâché.

Miyo slumped, disappointed by her own stupidity.

"It's okay."

Exasperated, Kiyo straightened up in his chair and reached out his hand. Then he gently patted Miyo's head with his soft palm, different from Kiyoka's.

But the way he rubbed her head was exactly like her fiancé's; her chest tightened.

"Sorry that I can't eat together with you. But my master will be relieved that you're eating."

His words—faltering yet filled with his best attempts at warmth and consideration—seeped into her heart. They reminded her of Kiyoka's own clumsy reassurances, which had saved her many times before.

Feeling like she would be brought to tears if she said anything more, Miyo simply nodded then clasped her hands together to give thanks for the meal and picked up her spoon.

When she scooped up the pure white gratin, steam billowed into the air. After blowing on the spoon enough to cool it down, she brought it into her mouth.

"...Delicious."

Smooth, rich, and just a tad sweet. The gratin melted away in her mouth.

It was still hot, but that didn't stop her from scooping up her second, then third, bite. Before long, Miyo was eating like her earlier lack of appetite had all been a lie.

"That's good."

Hearing Kiyo's voice, she looked up. The familiar had been expressionless from the moment they met, but now his eyes had softened slightly into a smile, and Miyo found herself beaming back at him.

"Yes, but..."

She'd scarfed down about half her gratin.

Still smiling, Miyo made a mental note to ask how the dish was made before she left the Usuba home.

"I'd like to eat this with Kiyoka next time... He might not be fond of this type of dish, but I'd still like to taste it together with him."

"Sounds like a good idea."

Kiyo chuckled, looking terribly pleased for some reason as he squinted his

eyes.

Her meal finished and her stomach full, Miyo was guided by a servant and shown to the Usuba family storage room, together with Kiyo.

Though used for storage, the room didn't come off as unorganized, with there being a great many items tidied and put into order.

Most of the items had been put away in old wooden boxes, and it didn't take Miyo long to find where the records Yoshirou had mentioned were stored.

Along the wall were large stacks of antiquated and discolored paper bundles.

Some items were threadbound, some were rolled up into tubes, and still others were simply stacked on top of each other. Judging by the degree of degradation, the higher up something was, the newer it was, while the closer to the bottom, the older the document.

It was clear that the papers hadn't been touched in a long time, as dust clung to everything.

"This area seems to have what we're looking for."

Kiyo immediately took a bound volume from the pile and checked it. The first document Miyo picked up, unfortunately, appeared to be the memoirs of a past head of the family because the handwriting clearly belonged to a man.

After doing a quick scan, Miyo and Kiyo picked out a mountain of documents that seemed concerned with Dream Sight and moved them to a separate room.

Borrowing one of the Japanese-style rooms with Yoshirou's permission, the pair sat down and began carefully examining the papers they had brought with them.

"It looks like moths have eaten through some of these, and a lot have gotten too blurry to read properly."

"...I can't really read any of these..."

As she listened to Kiyo's groans, Miyo dropped her shoulders in disappointment.

Perhaps because there weren't very many Dream Sight Mediums in the first

place, there were few memoirs on the topic, and the ones that did exist were all ancient, penned in flowing cursive characters. On top of this, they also contained many unfamiliar words and turns of phrases.

As someone who lacked a proper education and who had only ever copied printed characters, Miyo found the documents extremely difficult to decipher.

She was totally out of her depth. And given how enthusiastic she had been to finally move forward, she felt even more dejected than she would have otherwise.

"Can you read the most recent ones?" Kiyo asked.

Even the "most recent" documents were almost a century old, dating back to the birth of the previous Dream Sight Maiden. Nevertheless, she found a few sections here and there that looked readable.

"There are several words I recognize...but I don't know what they're actually saying."

"In that case, mark any section that stands out to you. I'll look them over later."

"Okay..."

She didn't have any objections to Kiyo's decision, but she was ashamed that this was all she could manage. If only she had attended girls' school and formally studied language, then she might have been able to read it properly.

A sigh escaped her lips as a sense of powerlessness she had felt many times throughout her life welled up within her.

"Don't be so discouraged. Look, right here."

Miyo leaned forward to look at the spot Kiyo was pointing out to her. Naturally, though, she wasn't able to read any of it.

According to his simple explanation, written there was an outline on how to use the power of Dream Sight.

"It appears that Dream Sight has been used for many, many years as an ability to glimpse both past and future. People have also used it to help find lost items or appear in others' dreams in the guise of a god." "Appearing in dreams..."

Miyo ruminated on Kiyo's words.

The term "appearing in a dream," referred to a phenomenon where the gods or the deceased appeared in someone's dreams or at their bedside to pass on a divine message. This phenomenon often cropped up in old tales and legends, so even Miyo was familiar with it.

With Dream Sight, this did indeed seem possible.

She could imagine users of Dream Sight showing up in people's dreams to direct their behavior or entice them to correct a mistake.

Kiyo continued, tracing his finger along the document as he simplified what he read to make it easier for Miyo to understand.

"Before you activate your power, touching the body of the person you decide to use Dream Sight on will stabilize its effects. After this, you decide on an objective while maintaining awareness of the Gift within you. That means choosing whether you want to see into the past or future or enter into someone's dreams, for example."

Miyo had learned the exact same steps from Arata, and she'd executed them to save Kiyoka when he was possessed by the thoughts of the Burial Grounds' spirits. She'd done the same to save one of the neighboring villagers during their visit to the Kudou villa as well.

During those times, Miyo had felt a clear and certain response within her.

"Finally, you work your Gift on the target you've set in an attempt to actualize your determined objective—I guess it works the same as any other Gift."

"...Arata must've read this as well, then."

The name of her absent cousin escaped her lips.

She looked over the documents they had taken out of the storehouse and piled them up on the table.

Miyo was sure that Arata had pored over these texts again and again, all while waiting for the Dream Sight Medium, who he was meant to protect, to finally appear.

What exactly was he thinking right now, having gone over to the Gifted Communion's side?

She believed that he wouldn't consider turning against Miyo or the Usubas, but there was still the possibility that his goals had come to overlap with Usui's.

Speaking of the leader of the Gifted Communion, it was undeniable that he was also thinking of Miyo, even if only as an extension of Sumi.

"Probably."

Kiyo looked up from the documents then averted his gaze after staring at Miyo for a moment. There was vague displeasure in his eyes.

Then he returned to his book and turned the page before letting out a slightly absentminded exclamation.

"Oh."

"Did you find something?"

At Miyo's question, Kiyo furrowed his youthful, well-kempt brows and murmured in surprise, bringing a slim finger to his chin. A few seconds later, he scanned the text and murmured.

"I see. Here."

He took his finger off his chin and used it to point to a section of the text.

"This section mentions a Gift-user who had the ability to alter the sensations of people's ears, eyes, nose, tongue, and skin."

Miyo looked at Kiyo with a start.

The power to control the five senses. That meant there had been a Gift-user in the past who also possessed the same ability as Usui.

Kiyo returned Miyo's gaze and nodded slightly.

"It says that it was an extremely powerful ability and that the people who acquired it often had heavy restrictions placed upon it. The Gift-user written about in this memoir was apparently a relatively mild-mannered person, so he was spared the restrictions. Also, as for this Gift's weakness..."

"Weakness?"

"The Gift can only be used for an extremely short amount of time, an hour at most. Also, if the effect does get maintained for a full hour, the ability can only be used about three times a day. And the range is limited to basically the user's line of sight. The user will fry their brain if they attempt to activate it any more than that."

It stood to reason that using such a powerful Gift indiscriminately would take a heavy toll on the body.

However, Kiyo appended a hypothesis of his own to the book's explanation.

"That said, I think this depends on how it's used. Even if the Gift is only active for a short while and in a limited range, if Usui can regulate it to use it frequently in minute ways, a bit like turning the switch on a machine on and off again, then he'd probably have plenty of useful applications for it."

If it was impossible for Usui to use his Gift for extended periods of time, then that explained why he had spent so long studying the science of Gifts and preparing for his rebellion after fleeing the Usubas.

If his powers had been less constrained, he could have simply controlled and manipulated the most important people in the country one by one.

But since this wasn't the case, he must have decided that he needed military might of his own then gathered a fighting force of loyal artificial Gift-users.

...But if all this is written out in here...

It would mean Arata had known about Usui's weaknesses all along. Since their first encounter with Usui, he had acted as if he were as equally bewildered by the man's abilities as everyone else, but that had all been an act.

But for what end? Or rather—when had this all started?

Feeling a chill go down her spine, Miyo adjusted her posture and looked at the open document in front of her.

For a short while, she was unable to focus, but soon she stared hard at the text and got to reading amid near silence, save for the ticking of the clock. Before she knew it, the sun had set.

A servant called for Miyo and Kiyo and showed them to a room where dinner

was prepared.

Sitting at the table with Kiyo, who didn't eat a bite just like at lunch, Miyo finished her warm Western-style dinner without issue. After cleaning her plate, she was summoned by Yoshirou to partake in some after-dinner tea together.

When she stepped once more into the parlor she had first come to on her arrival, Yoshirou was already there waiting for her.

"Ah, forgive me for calling you here."

Yoshirou's expression had softened slightly. Miyo was relieved to see his face looking slightly less clouded than it had that morning.

"Not at all. Thank you for all the consideration you've shown me."

Sitting down next to Kiyo on the floor cushion prepared for her, she bowed her head.

Miyo could acutely feel that Yoshirou was showing them the utmost care and consideration he could provide. Her meals today contained much more easily digestible foods than they had had during her previous times there, and she assumed that Yoshirou hadn't joined them for dinner to avoid making her nervous.

Right now, she was grateful for it.

"You don't need to thank me for something like that. I just hope you were able to relax a little bit."

A servant placed a teacup filled with hot green tea before Miyo and Kiyo. They then bowed, leaving the room and quietly sliding the door closed.

Miyo reached out for the teacup and felt its heat seep into her chilled fingertips.

"Find anything useful?"

She nodded slightly at Yoshirou's question.

"Yes. It was a little difficult for me, but..."

She hadn't been able to do a thing on her own. It was only because Kiyo was there with her that she'd managed to obtain any information.

Even if she was discouraged by how ashamed she was, she didn't want to belittle herself. It was impossible to handle absolutely everything herself.

There were some things that Miyo had been able to obtain in her life and some things that she hadn't. That was all there was to it.

She remembered what Yoshirou had told her during the summer she spent in the Usuba home.

"Wouldn't you say being able to share the things we can't endure on our own, like we're doing now, is what family's all about?"

She looked around to put herself at ease. Things were different now from when no one ever treated her with kindness. Miyo had a family to share her burdens with.

She had forgotten that in her earlier panic and confusion. Right now, she was feeling calmness in her chest, thanks to both Yoshirou's thoughtfulness and Kiyo being at her side.

A smile naturally formed on her face.

"Kiyo helped me go through the documents. I still don't know for certain what exactly I should do, but I was able to read up on some very important details. It was worthwhile."

"Was it? Glad to hear it."

Yoshirou nodded with a smile of his own before continuing.

"Ah, right. The bath's been drawn up for you, so go soak for as long as you'd like. Forgive me for not being able to do anything more."

"Not at all. Thank you very much."

Although the room had a brazier in it, the winter cold still chilled her bones, especially after spending all day sitting still, poring over documents. Miyo was very grateful for the opportunity to warm up in the bath.

Then she turned to Kiyo.

"Kiyo? If you're up for it, would you like to join me in the—Kiyo?" she began to ask, only to stop when she saw his dumbfounded expression.

Kiyo was at a loss for words, his mouth hanging wide open. Tears welled in his eyes, and his cheeks gradually turned pink. Then he abruptly drooped his head, seemingly dejected, only to then vigorously look back up at Miyo and shout:

"No!"

Miyo blinked in shock at Kiyo's excessive reaction.

She recalled him reacting similarly to the nickname she'd proposed to him a short while ago. It was quite befitting for a boy his age, and Miyo had often witnessed her male classmates act that way back when she attended elementary school.

But Kiyo was a familiar. Miyo had invited him simply because she thought it would be fun to bathe together—was that really something for a being like him to be so embarrassed about?

"Even a familiar must get dirty and dusty from moving around outside, yes? I just thought you might want to wash up..."

Miyo had replied under the assumption that Kiyo's refusal stemmed from the fact that familiars weren't people, so they didn't need to bathe, but he shook his head with tremendous speed.

"No! That's not it!"

"Huh? Then why not?"

Yoshirou jumped in, a slightly merciful smile on his face, to reprimand Miyo as she grew confused.

"Well, hmm...Miyo? How about you let him off the hook here, okay?"

None of this was making any sense to her. Let him off the hook? Why?

Kiyo slowly regained his composure and took a series of deep breaths before he turned to Yoshirou and nodded. Her grandfather nodded in kind.

...In magazines, they say that young boys and women will occasionally bathe together, so I'm not really sure what the problem is.

However, given that both Kiyo and Yoshirou were against the idea, there must have been some grounds for them to object that Miyo didn't know about.

Feeling a bit disappointed, she decided not to push the issue any further.

After rinsing herself, Miyo sank slowly into the hot bathwater of the Usuba manor's cypress-scented tub, feeling so wonderful that it was like she was relaxing to her very core.

"Ah, it's so warm..."

Miyo breathed out as she sank lower into the bathtub and closed her eyes.

She certainly wouldn't be spending her time like this if Kiyo hadn't shown up this morning and prevented her from marching right to Usui's side. For all she knew, the familiar could have saved her from getting into a life-or-death situation right about now.

Miyo also now understood Hazuki and Takaihito's apprehensions. Clearly, she'd been so unstable until recently that other people could tell.

Right after Miyo entered the Usuba home this morning, Yoshirou had told her that he would get in touch with the Kudou estate, so she was sure she had worried them sick.

I feel bad for what I did... But that being said...

In the end, Miyo still wasn't planning to go back.

As the hot bathwater increased her blood flow, she felt the presence of her Gift calmly circulating throughout her body.

This presence, one that she originally struggled to grow accustomed to, but which was now an utterly natural part of her life, reminded Miyo that she couldn't hide away until everything was solved.

Staring at the waving vapors of steam rising up from the bath, she talked to herself.

"I wonder if the other Gift-users who possessed Dream Sight were troubled like I am now?"

The history of the Dream Sight Mediums recorded in memoirs and records were filled with constant turmoil.

They sometimes confronted Grotesqueries with other Gift-users, while

cracking down on Gift-users who wielded their powers for evil. During times of war, they stealthily rendered many stalwart fighters powerless.

If the emperor ordered it, the Dream Sight Mediums wouldn't limit using their abilities on other Gift-users or bad actors, either.

Though it may not have been clearly laid out in the texts, there must have been plenty of conflict.

"If Mother had inherited Dream Sight instead of me...then maybe everything would have worked out okay."

Though if that were the case, then Miyo would have likely never been brought into this world.

She couldn't stop her mind from wandering to scenarios that were pointless to speculate over.

After taking a long soak to warm up her body, she left the bath. Changing into her nightwear and getting her appearance in proper order, she left the changing room to find Kiyo sitting alone in the hallway, his arms wrapped around his knees.

"Kiyo, you must have been freezing out here. You really should've waited for me in the room."

Although she knew that he didn't feel cold as a familiar, she felt frigid just looking at him. Kiyo had refused her invitation to bathe with her, so there wasn't anything more she could do about it, but his light clothing wasn't helping, either.

Kiyo shook his head as he stood up.

"It's fine. I'm a familiar. My master commanded me to protect you."

"I see..."

Feeling a twinge of loneliness, Miyo gently took Kiyo's hand.

His tiny palm hadn't gone purple yet, but it was still very cold. Though it struck her that familiars may not have had any body heat in the first place, the numbing temperature of his skin amplified her sadness even further.

"What are you doing?"

Upon hearing Kiyo's objection, Miyo looked down at him and forced a smile.

"I wanted to hold your hand... Can we stay like this until we get back to the room?"

"...I don't mind, I guess."

She broke into an honest smile at his haughty manner of speaking, so at odds with his appearance, and returned with him to their room.

It was there that, once again, Kiyo vehemently protested another one of Miyo's proposals.

"There's no way we're sharing a bed together! Don't be absurd! I don't even need to sleep at all, you know."

"But the fire will die out during the night, so I'm sure it will get much colder."

"I've told you already, familiars don't get cold."

Miyo had merely invited him to sleep with her because the bed in the room was so large. Yet he'd reacted like her proposition was completely outrageous. A part of her started to believe that maybe, deep down, Kiyo didn't like being around Miyo.

Kiyo is supposed be acting according to Kiyoka's will... Does that mean Kiyo's dislike of me is a reflection of the feelings in Kiyoka's heart?

No, that couldn't possibly be it. Just a short while ago, the two of them had slept with their bedding next to each other.

Perhaps this signified that even Kiyo possessed his own unique emotions and preferences, even though he was a familiar, and he disliked Miyo.

That was a sad realization in its own right.

But when Miyo frowned and slumped in despondency, Kiyo began to panic.

"No, wait, er, it's not like I dislike you, it's...if anything, my master would be too happy, or how can I put it, um, well."

Kiyo's incoherent explanation was barely audible, so Miyo couldn't really understand it.

There didn't seem to be any significant issue, so what was the problem then? Swallowing the question on the tip of her tongue, Miyo got up into bed on her own and slipped her legs underneath the duvet.

"I'm sorry, I was acting childish."

Miyo was fully aware that her immature and pouty behavior was unbecoming, but her loneliness had won out, and she couldn't help sulking.

Seeing her like this must have made Kiyo have a change of heart, as he let out a low groan before approaching the bed.

"You're not confusing me for a doll or a stuffed animal, right?"

"Um, well, no."

Miyo looked at Kiyo and cocked her head, uncertain about what had led him to ask that.

Of course, just because she was dealing with a familiar didn't mean that she was planning to treat him as an object. If anything, she was conscious of the fact that she was treating him like a human boy.

Kiyo clicked his tongue, as if something about her answer had displeased him.

"You don't get it at all! You better not regret this, okay?!"

In essence, this meant he had given in and was going to sleep alongside Miyo like she wanted. Miyo smiled at Kiyo's adorable inability to give her a simple, honest *okay*.

"Thank you."

Hearing her gratitude, Kiyo turned his head with a pout, then got into the bed. From there, he immediately rolled over to the far edge of the mattress.

The fire had died down, and the lack of light only heightened the chill in the room.

Miyo curled up under the covers and closed her eyes.

I can't sleep...

Despite the exhaustion she felt throughout her body, she refused to drift off, even after shutting her eyes.

Awful thoughts and disquieting premonitions raced through her mind, and she grew restless. She forced herself not to toss and turn to avoid Kiyo catching on and waited silently for sleep to take her.

However, her breathing made it rather obvious that she was still awake.

"You need to get some sleep, or your body'll give out."

When she heard Kiyo tell her this, a single tear streaked down from the corner of her eye for some reason.

She hadn't meant to cry at all, so why was this happening?

"I know," Miyo replied, stealthily wiping the tear away with the back of her hand. Kiyo didn't seem convinced by this, though. Just then, she felt his small, slightly cold body come up against her back.

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"Kiyo...?"
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"You're anxious, right?"

Miyo managed only a simple agreement and nodded at his concise question.

Amid the blackness, she had grown scared that she might lose all the things she held dear. The night and the dark would take all sorts of things from her, leaving only shadows in her heart.

Miyo was convinced of this, so no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep calm.

Kiyo's presence proved that Kiyoka still lived. But that was all—Usui might well have been torturing him to the brink of death at this moment.

Even if Miyo could go and save him, would Kiyoka truly be okay? Would they really be able to return to their old lives? If those days filled with kindness and warmth never returned, then...

The anxiousness, the worry, threatened to crush her. She couldn't take it.

"I-I know. If I don't sleep, I won't be able to save Kiyoka."

Eating meals, getting sleep. Even these normalities, the natural behavior of every living creature, had grown so trying without Kiyoka's presence.

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"But...but..."
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Her voice trembled, and as a sob threatened to escape her lips, Miyo turned over to Kiyo and embraced his small frame.

It was all on the spur of the moment. She simply wished to feel that the tiniest bit of Kiyoka passed through Kiyo's breaths.

"H-hey now..."

Miyo didn't pay any attention to Kiyo's bewilderment.

The boy struggled to get out of her arms, until at last he gave up and went still. Kiyo didn't have a heartbeat. Despite that, she felt her emotions gradually calm.

I'm so glad Kiyo's here with me. Truly.

Her breathing grew easier, and her body, wrapped up in the duvet, slowly grew warm.

Before she knew it, Miyo drifted off into a peaceful sleep.



This is what I mean. You just don't get it.

Kiyoka struggled to hold back the groan that nearly escaped his throat.

The interior of his cell was choked by thick darkness as usual, and since it was underground, it was exposed to intense cold. There were few environments more horrible than this place.

No matter how durable a Gift-user's body was, it was difficult to hold out for long inside this punishing place, both mentally and physically agonizing.

Usui, or perhaps Arata, knew this and had put Kiyoka here on purpose.

Just getting a sense of time back from my link with my familiar makes it all much better, but that said...

Because of his connection with the familiar, Kiyoka now felt uncharacteristically shameful, the blood rushing to his face. His hair had come undone at some point and was now hanging over his shoulders, as if to hide his blush.

He hadn't thought he would still be so innocent and inexperienced at the age of twenty-eight that he would get embarrassed over things like these, but the sensation of Miyo pressing up to him was more intense than he could have ever imagined.

Since Miyo was unaware of this, however, a sense of guilt pressed down on Kiyoka, too, along with a strange urge to run that he couldn't endure. It was as though he was doing something bad and hiding from people. This was all in spite of the fact that he was stuck in a cell.

Still, Miyo might have reached her limits, too.

It was plain to see that she had reached her emotional breaking point from putting on a brave front and holding back her tears. He couldn't even reproach her for anything.

Kiyoka thought back to his conversation with Takaihito before he had been captured.

"Kiyoka, first, I must apologize," Takaihito began, when it was just the two of them, before lowering his head. "Forgive me."

He continued as Kiyoka frowned, unsure what the crown prince was apologizing for.

"From here on out, both you and your fiancée will be forced to undergo many hardships. This is the path I have chosen for you."

Kiyoka had suspected as much, so he wasn't surprised.

He'd surmised that Usui was bound to target him next. If suppressing Kiyoka with pure martial strength was too difficult, then this time, Usui would exploit Kiyoka's social position to undermine him.

Kiyoka was the head of the Kudou family and the commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

By pinning false charges on Kiyoka, Usui could essentially hold his house and family against him as hostages, forcing the commander to give himself over.

In all likelihood, Usui would use this method to apprehend him.

"To prevent any casualties, we shall need the Gift of your fiancée, Miyo

Saimori."

Though Takaihito's expression didn't change, it was mixed with a twinge of regret.

"...So you're saying that some kind of trouble needs to befall me to make Dream Sight fully bloom, then?"

"Indeed... Only Miyo Saimori's words and thoughts will reach Naoshi Usui. No matter what anyone else says to him, it shall surely be in vain. Miyo will need the power of Dream Sight to meet with Naoshi Usui, and to make her powers mature, we'll need a crisis."

Takaihito slid his finger through the air, as if counting down one by one.

Kiyoka agreed that Miyo was the only person who could sway Usui.

She was Usui's sole obsession, his regret, and his future. There was no one else to whom he would speak honestly and show sincerity.

Usui likely controlled the government and military in secret at this point, so it would be extremely difficult for anyone besides Miyo to get near him for a confrontation. He would simply slip away, and that would be that.

One thing about this scenario had thrown Kiyoka for a loop, however—the fact that Usui had brought Arata Usuba over to his side.

In any event, Kiyoka understood the point Takaihito was making, but whether or not he could accept it was another question entirely.

"Is this why you told me you wished to see her character for yourself?"

"Forgive me. Given she is your prized jewel, I did not believe anything strange would come of it. However...if she were to flee in your hour of need, or be reduced to shutting herself away in fear, then everything would be for naught."

Kiyoka began to object that Miyo would never act like that, but he then realized that there was a chance such a path might have appeared within the futures Takaihito saw.

To be completely honest, the latter scenario could have very well transpired if Miyo were still the person she had been when they first met.

However, Miyo had grown stronger since then, and she no longer hesitated to act on her own now that she'd overcome many hardships. Or rather, it was more accurate to say that she was in the process of reclaiming her innate strength.

Miyo was kind even when she felt worried and lost, and she had gained a support system who she had learned to accept help from.

Takaihito must have decided to put Kiyoka and Miyo through this trial because he felt the same.

"She's not my prized jewel, but I put my trust and faith in her," Kiyoka replied, but for some reason, Takaihito looked dubious at the reply.

"You truly think this?"

"...Is there anything wrong with that?"

"No, I do not have any objection to your second point. But I question the former."

In a rare moment of authenticity, Takaihito didn't attempt to conceal his exasperation. Kiyoka could only scowl and stay silent.

Kiyoka and Miyo's relationship was the same as that of any other betrothed couple, nothing more and nothing less. Although Kiyoka felt deep affection for Miyo, these feelings weren't so special to warrant calling her his "prized jewel" or anything of the sort.

This was why he had rejected the idea, but there seemed to be a discrepancy between his perception of things and Takaihito's.

"This is why you have a reputation for being cold and unfriendly, you know. Once this is all over, you need to reflect on what you say and do... Let that be all for now, though. Take heed to prepare sufficiently."

"As you wish."

Kiyoka gave a short reply and hung his head with reverence.

To abide by Takaihito's plans, Kiyoka hadn't been able to tell Miyo the full extent of the situation.

She needed to be stirred to action by watching Usui's forced capture of Kiyoka while being kept in the dark about the truth of the situation. Otherwise, it would be difficult to make her Gift blossom.

Despite all that, Kiyoka didn't wish to harm her.

"I'm sorry..."

It was meaningless to apologize to her in a place like this. Nevertheless, Kiyoka couldn't sit by and let those words go unsaid.

He wanted to end everything quickly, set Miyo's mind at ease, and make sure she got the rest she needed. He wanted to hold her close.

That was why the familiar was sharing its senses with Kiyoka and supporting Miyo to the fullest.

Once again, Kiyoka linked his senses with the familiar, Kiyo. Enduring the peculiar agony of Miyo wrapping his arms around him, Kiyoka reaffirmed his resolve.



A white fog enveloped everything before her eyes.

The damp mist was so thick that it seemed like just touching it would leave her drenched.

The light of the sun could not pierce this veil of fog, and though her surroundings weren't pitch black, the world was covered in a faint white, like early dawn.

Miyo stood transfixed before the stone steps that were rising into the mist; she couldn't see even ten paces ahead.

Where is this?

Despite her confusion, Miyo wasn't shocked or surprised.

She was in the world of dreams, which she had experienced several times by this point. And this place, neither hot nor cold, filled with nothing but a damp fog caressing her cheek, was part of a dream, too. This was her first time here. She hadn't the slightest memory of this place.

The stone stairs, stretching out into the fog, should have struck her as creepy and ominous, yet strangely, Miyo felt neither fear nor anxiety rising inside her chest.

Instead, she sensed the squirming of her Gift, as if the deepest part of her heart, her very core, was being set aflame.

If she had to describe it, the impression she felt the most was a mystical one. Or perhaps otherworldly and mysterious was a better description.

As she closely observed the stairs, suddenly lights shone on the left and the right sides of the steps, one by one.

Small lanterns that only barely reached Miyo's knees lined the sides of the stone steps. As if to invite and guide her farther, they continued lighting up, starting right in front of her and continuing on ahead.

She didn't sense any danger. Without any hesitation, she took a step forward.

However, someone's hand was resting on her shoulder.

"Kiyoka..."

At some point or another, Kiyoka had appeared beside her, dressed casually in his *haori* coat.

She turned slowly to her fiancé and saw that he wore a gentle smile.

...This is a dream, after all.

He didn't say a word. It made sense, given that he was nothing more than an illusion summoned from Miyo's own loneliness. But even so, she couldn't believe how reassuring it was just to have him by her side.

A large, rough hand took Miyo's own.

The slightly warm sensation was one she was familiar with.

Holding back tears, Miyo linked her hands together with Kiyoka's and began ascending the stone stairs.

They advanced through the white fog, taking one step after the other. Miyo didn't know how long they had been going up before a faint human silhouette

appeared amid the fog.

As they approached, Miyo could see that the shadow was clearly a woman's, and when she closed in even further, she realized to whom it belonged.

"...Mother."

There stood Miyo's mother—Sumi Saimori.

She was young, no older than Miyo was now, with long black hair going down her pink kimono. Her expression was very gentle, and she gazed at Miyo with a soft look in her eyes.

This was proof that Miyo wasn't looking in on her mother's past through the dream world, but that Sumi was fully present in front of her.

But this is still just a dream, right?

In the past, Miyo had said her good-byes to her mother in her dreams. She'd also said her farewells to her former self, who had wished to die and set off on a journey to her mother's side.

Miyo hadn't come face-to-face with her mother since, so why was she here now?

"Miyo."

Her mother called out to her in a calm, feminine voice, the same as she'd heard in her dreams before. It was soft and gentle, but it had a flat, almost inhuman quality that made it seem somehow unreal.

Suddenly, Miyo gasped.

On the stone steps stretching out endlessly behind Sumi, other shades appeared, one after the other. From what Miyo could make out, there were five in total.

The shades all had female silhouettes and were cloaked in red *hakamas*. It seemed like they were staring at her and Kiyoka.

What is all of this?

Just what was this all supposed to mean, and to whom exactly did all these silhouettes belong?

She didn't understand why, but ever since her mother had come into sight, the burning sensation of her Gift in her heart had grown more and more pronounced.

It was so hot. Burning and painful.

There were still three steps left between her and Sumi, but Miyo stood where she was, unable to move.

She put slightly more strength into her grip on Kiyoka's hand.

Her mother kept her gaze fixed on the two of them as she lightly stepped down the stone steps and approached.

"Miyo. I'm sorry."

Sumi dropped her eyes slightly as she voiced her apology. Not understanding what she was saying sorry for, Miyo could only stare back in confusion.

"I ended up making you shoulder all the pain, all the heavy burdens."

The nineteen years she had lived at the Saimori estate and her destiny with Usui— Miyo sensed that these were what Sumi was referring to.

That wasn't the case at all. None of that was her mother's fault in the slightest.

Miyo tried to object, but Sumi continued without giving her daughter a chance.

"You've had to bear both my share and the Usuba family's share up until now... That's why."

Just a tiny bit. I'll help you just a tiny bit.

The moment Sumi spoke, the burning sensation of the Gift in Miyo's chest grew hotter. But it didn't feel like her insides were ablaze. No, her whole being was burning like a single flame. Slowly, her entire body heated up.

"M-Mother...I—I."

Miyo closed her eyes. It was hot. The heat continued to increase, but by contrast, she felt the back of her brain drastically cool.

Then it happened.

As her brain seemed to chill completely, her line of sight instantly opened up in front of her.

"What...?"

It shouldn't have been at all possible, but she could see out a thousand leagues in front of her in all directions. It was as though the past, the present, and the future had surged into the back of her mind.

In a single instant, her Gift parted the thick fog all around Miyo, flooding out of her like a dam had burst forth, as if her mind were filled with crystal-clear water.

"What is this?"

She saw it. A world that she had never known stretched out before her eyes.

It was like she had been cast into a vast ocean.

Scenes of all different kinds floated into view and burst like bubbles. Within the bubbles were the reflections of a naive young girl and boy.

"I'm Sumi, Sumi Usuba. Nice to meet you."

"Hmph. Whatever, I don't care."

"Well, I do care, Naoshi."

"Ugh, you're obnoxious."

"Are you hurt? Were you fighting? There's blood. You gotta get patched up."

"Shut up. Leave me alone. What do you care?"

"I do care, though. I told you that already."

"...Do what you want, then."

"Naoshi! Not another animal... Don't you feel sorry for them?"

"Who cares what happens to them? They're all weaklings, so they aren't worth much alive or dead."

"If they're worthless because they're weak, then I must not be worth anything, either, since I'm weaker than you, too."

"I didn't say that..."

"Why do you harm people? Every time you harm someone else, you get your own mental and physical scars, too. Don't you see that?"

"They insulted you, said that giving birth to a child with Dream Sight is the only thing you're good for. They don't know anything."

"...I'm sorry. Maybe I need to take on those scars of yours, then."

"You don't have to do that. I'm going to protect you, okay? So don't make that face, Mis—um...Sumi."

"Someday, I want to ensure everyone in the Usuba family can openly walk out in the sun."

"Are you going to become the head of the family?"

"I don't know. I haven't really thought that far. But I just want everyone to live freer lives. That goes for you, too, of course."

"Even if I was free to do what I wanted, I'm sure I would still stay here with you. Forever and ever."

"Tee-hee. Nope, I won't allow it. You can't just keep looking at me, Naoshi, you need to—"

"There's something I have to tell you, Naoshi. I'm going to get married to the Saimoris after all."

Suddenly, Miyo returned to her senses.

She brought her fingertips up to her cheek—it was wet. She didn't know why exactly she'd been crying. But she felt distraught somehow, like there was a lump in her throat.

Was all of that just now...?

On the defogged steps ahead of Miyo, the figure of Sumi had vanished, along with the several shades that had been behind her.

The flames from the lanterns had disappeared; now there was nothing here but stone stairs continuing up into the gray sky.

Miyo gazed out on the clear, open world in blank amazement.

Nothing about her had changed at all. Yet in spite of it, she somehow felt

overpowered now that the scenery had changed so decisively.

"Kiyoka."

From her side, her fiancé continued to smile at her in silence.

Thinking to herself that a dream was really nothing more than an illusion, she turned to face him.

"Kiyoka...please, wait for me. I promise, I will come to see you," Miyo declared, balling her fist and bringing it to her chest. Kiyoka replied with a single nod before he disappeared as well, like a wisp of smoke.

Miyo kept looking down in front of her for a moment, as if reflecting on the traces he had left behind, before she raised her head and descended the stone steps.

₩ CHAPTER 2 ₩

Know the Heart

"I'll be going, then."

Miyo bowed deeply to Yoshirou in the entryway of the Usuba home.

Ultimately, she spent three days and two nights at the Usuba estate, but now it was time for her to depart. She had obtained enough of a lead to decide where she was heading next.

Miyo borrowed her mother's kimono and *hakama* from storage and got changed.

An ecru kimono with a maroon *hakama* and a light pink *haori* coat. The entirety of the outfit, including the dark brown leather shoes, had been cared for and maintained so they could be worn at a moment's notice.

When she wrapped herself in her mother's kimono, Miyo felt as if Sumi were there supporting her.

Miyo believed that the things Sumi had told her in the dream weren't an invention of her consciousness but her mother's genuine feelings.

"Be careful... Come back here at night."

"I will."

Nodding and bowing a second time, Miyo began walking down the snowy roads of the capital with Kiyo.

The snow had melted and pooled a bit since she'd first arrived, then it had frozen over again in the vestiges of the morning cold. As the soles of her shoes crunched with each step and she took extra care to avoid the smooth frozen patches, Miyo continued straight toward the capital's business district.

It was currently late morning.

Perhaps owing to the hour, there were many people on the streets. Rickshaws and automobiles flew up and down the street. A bustling crowd had formed, consisting of people dressed traditionally in hats, gloves, and kimonos beneath *haori* overcoats, alongside people in scarves wearing thick jackets over Western-style clothes.

However, hardly any of the passersby looked cheerful or upbeat.

"How did you know?" Kiyo asked abruptly, walking next to Miyo with his hand in hers.

Not comprehending the intent of his question, Miyo cocked her head.

"Know what, exactly?"

"About where we're heading right now."

"Ohhh," Miyo said, realizing what he meant.

After reaching one of the capital's large boulevards, they turned almost immediately onto a narrow road then exited out onto the main street on the other side. This pattern repeated as they left the manor-filled residential area where the Usuba estate was located until they arrived at a section of the city filled with corporate offices and large stores with historic reputations.

Their destination was one of the area's long-standing inns.

After finishing what they needed to do at the Usuba estate, Miyo and Kiyo both arrived at the same answer when they thought about where they needed to go next.

The Akitaya Inn.

This famous storied guest house had a history that spanned back to the early days of the shogunate, and it was frequented by the wealthy, along with celebrities from a variety of different disciplines.

Given all this information, Miyo wouldn't normally have been aware of the place.

"...I saw it in my dream."

Her direct answer to his earlier question surprised Kiyo slightly.

The familiar's eyes widened, but he didn't respond beyond that.

"Kiyo, you mentioned that we would leave the Usuba residence in two or three days. You had this all planned from the start, too, didn't you?"

"Well, I did know about the inn."

As they continued their somewhat protracted journey, a magnificent gate at last came into view along a street a block removed from the main road.

Before them stood a two-story wooden building—Akitaya. They passed through the gate into a beautifully maintained courtyard that was filled with large paper lanterns, each bearing the number of the room they hung outside of.

Continuing along the stepping stones that connected the gate to the entrance, Miyo quickly opened up an extremely old door that was composed of glass fitted into a dark brown wooden frame.

"Pardon me."

"Hello, welcome to our humble establishment."

It was still early in the day for any guests to drop in. The proprietress of the inn clearly hadn't been waiting for Miyo and Kiyo to arrive, but she came out immediately to greet them regardless.

The middle-aged woman looked at Miyo and Kiyo and seemed to waver for a moment before her face tightened, as if she'd suddenly realized something.

"May I ask the nature of your visit to our inn?" she inquired.

"My name is Miyo Saimori. I have come with business for one of your guests lodging here."

Straightening herself out and bowing slowly as she spoke, the proprietress put her hand up to her mouth with an "Oh my," and nodded. "Miss Saimori, then. I was told to expect you."

It appeared she had already been filled in. Miyo couldn't help but be impressed by the tactful reception befitting the inn's reputation.

The proprietress escorted Miyo and Kiuo to one of Akitaya's detached

cottages.

This was a special room, connected via a hallway that extended through the middle of the courtyard. Only one group could stay in the cottage at a time. In other words, anyone who lodged here was essentially reserving an entire building, a feat that would require a considerable amount of wealth at a luxury inn like Akitaya.

This building could be used only by a chosen, influential few, and it had the highest degree of confidentiality in the entire capital.

When Miyo thought about who she was about to meet, it struck her that the location shouldn't have come as much of a surprise.

Miyo was enthralled by the beautiful pine garden, blanketed in snow with melting water drops echoing as they fell from the gutters, before she stepped inside the detached cottage together with Kiyo.

"Cough, cough. I've been waiting for you. It's been quite a while, hasn't it, Miyo?"

"It has. It's good to see you again, Father."

Coming to greet Miyo and Kiyo in the detached residence was a youthful-looking yet feeble middle-aged man—Kiyoka's father, Tadakiyo Kudou.

They hadn't seen each other in person since the end of last fall, but Miyo had assumed their next meeting would be for the wedding, so the reunion had come earlier than she had expected.

Tadakiyo wore multiple layers of *haori* and cotton-padded wear over his casual kimono, but despite the thick assortment of garments on his person, he would let out a dry cough every now and then.

He looked just as sickly and weak as he had been before.

Right after entering the cottage, Miyo placed her fingers on the floor and bowed her head, but Tadakiyo told her to relax in a soft, feeble voice.

"...Kiyoka, you've...certainly gotten a bit smaller."

Tadakiyo laughed, and a vein bulged on Kiyo's temple.

"I haven't gotten smaller."

Kiyo narrowed his eyes in anger, causing Tadakiyo to clutch his stomach and laugh harder, which made the familiar grow even more frustrated.

It's so heartwarming.

It was as though Tadakiyo was reenacting how he'd interacted with Kiyoka during his youth. She found it calming.

Nevertheless, Miyo and Kiyo couldn't afford to take things easy. The longer they dawdled, the bigger their problems would get, and even if they managed to settle everything cleanly, they would still end up having a hard time dealing with the aftermath.

Miyo quickly shifted her mindset and looked Tadakiyo in the eye.

"Allow me to apologize for bothering you like this."

"It's fine. It was all planned to happen like this anyway."

Tadakiyo nodded calmly, gentle and meek as usual.

"Incidentally, where is Mother ...?"

There were no signs of Fuyu in the room, and it didn't seem like she would be making an appearance. The two were supposed to be staying at this inn together—had something happened?

Miyo's worry for her mother-in-law's safety was included in her question, but Tadakiyo shrugged his shoulders.

"Fuyu wasn't in the mood, so she shut herself up in the bedroom. I don't think it's because she dislikes you, Miyo, so I hope she hasn't hurt your feelings."

"No, um, never. I don't mind. I just hoped I could see her, even for a moment..."

"I understand. I'll let her know."

Miyo felt relieved to experience her father-in-law's eccentric love for his wife again after so long.

She heard Kiyo mumble something along the lines of "better to just leave her be," but she decided not to argue with him.

When all was said and done, Tadakiyo could occasionally be very strict with Fuyu, but he cared about her so much that he typically prioritized her wishes over Miyo's without a second thought.

Miyo corrected her posture and broached the main subject of her visit.

"I have something I would like to ask of you, Father."

Tadakiyo smiled in response to her statement, despite the sharpened look in his eyes.

"And what might that be?"

"Can you help me put a stop to the Gifted Communion?"

This was the purpose behind Miyo's visit to the previous head of the Kudou family.

Tadakiyo was bound to have built up a considerable network of personal connections during his years of acting as the Kudou patriarch, serving the emperor, and carrying out his duties as a Gift-user.

Owing to her limited experiences interacting with other people up until now, this was something Miyo lacked, and while Kiyoka may have had many acquaintances himself, she couldn't get his help while he was imprisoned.

But if she was going to face off against the Gifted Communion, she would need people who could fight.

The small group of elite soldiers who made up the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit would be nowhere near enough. The Gifted Communion could artificially bestow Gifts on large amounts of people, so they would easily crush the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit with sheer numbers in a fight.

To oppose them, Miyo's only option was recruiting as many Gift-users who weren't members of the military as she could.

"I do not have the strength to take on hundreds myself. I need just enough martial power to keep the Gifted Communion's forces in check. For that, I would like you to reach out to all the other Gift-users you may know." Tadakiyo closed his eyes and crossed his arms as he listened to Miyo's request. She stared at him, trying to maintain her courageous mindset, as she waited to see how he would answer.

"Well, I suppose that would be how to do it."

Letting out a deep breath, Tadakiyo slowly opened his eyes.

"I am technically retired from public life, but I am still acquainted with several families who have inherited Gifts, and I also have a few connections. Even if it'll be difficult to compel them to take up arms, I can at least reach out to them. They'd probably come together pretty fast."

"Does that mean...?"

"Yes. I can also reprimand the families who are complicit with Usui. A browbeating might be enough to coax them into helping."

While Tadakiyo's description sounded a bit ominous, it was clear that he was going to help her.

Miyo lit up at the news.

"Thank you very much!"

She hadn't thought he would be so ready and willing to agree to her request.

While he may have been kind, Tadakiyo was by no means soft.

Given that she was an amateur, Miyo had expected that he would ask her many different questions to test her plan, and she'd prepared herself to be turned down two or three times.

"Hee-hee. Kiyoka, you brought Miyo all the way here, right? Did you not tell her that this was how it would go?"

Miyo looked down at Kiyo, wondering what Tadakiyo meant, but the familiar looked at Tadakiyo and shook his head.

"I didn't say anything, and I didn't bring her here, either. She told me she was coming here all on her own."

At Kiyo's answer, Tadakiyo looked completely taken aback and blinked in shock.

"Huh, you didn't tell her? But then, in that case, Miyo, how did you...?"

It was then that Miyo finally picked up on what the two were talking about.

How had she known that Tadakiyo and Fuyu had come to the capital? Furthermore, how had she known where they were staying?

Anyone would have found it strange. Normally, she wouldn't have been informed about this.

"I saw it in a dream," Miyo answered quickly, smiling. "I'm finally able to see things in my dreams."

Tadakiyo looked dumbfounded for a moment before he relaxed. Miyo sensed a palpable relief in her father-in-law's amused grin.

"Really? That's great."

"I can't see everything, though, so I wasn't confident about whether you would agree or not. Thank you so much for helping me."

"It's nothing... Does that mean you also saw how things will play out?"

Tadakiyo's question prompted Miyo to stop and think.

She doubted there was a Gift so powerful out there that it would allow someone to look across the past, present, and future. No matter how brilliant her Gift was, Miyo herself was still inexperienced, so she couldn't become omniscient.

So while she could see glimpses of how things would go from here on out, if anything, there were even more areas that she couldn't hazard a guess about.

Nevertheless, she had uncovered a means of saving Kiyoka, which was the most important thing of all.

"Yes, a little. I think I've seen a few important future paths."

Miyo's clear response appeared to confirm something for Tadakiyo.

Looking perfectly cheerful and carefree, he nodded in agreement then wrapped his hands around the teacup in front of him and brought it up for a sip.

"Well, that's great news. I couldn't be happier to see Kiyoka's bride blossom into such a capable young woman."

"Th-that's not true..."

She may have been able to use her Gift, but "capable" was flattering her too much.

Miyo had been called "useless" a great many more times in her life so far. To suddenly be praised as the exact opposite felt unreal.

Tipping back his teacup for another sip, Tadakiyo slowly stood up.

"Well then, get some rest for a moment, you two. I'm going to have a chat with Fuyu."

Miyo and Kiyo watched Tadakiyo leave the living room. A short while later, they were shown to a chamber facing the garden that had a lot of sunlight.

The room had Western-style furnishings, with dark wooden floorboards instead of tatami mats, a table etched with a stylish flower design and four-legged rattan chairs, vine-patterned wallpaper, and even its own fireplace.

One of the chairs was occupied by a noblewoman, reclining in elegant relaxation.

"It is good to see you again, Mother."

When Miyo bowed deeply to greet Fuyu Kudou, the noblewoman narrowed her almond-shaped eyes and cast Miyo a glance.

"I believe I told you not to call me 'Mother.' You're still the same inconsiderate girl as before, I see."

Her voice was biting, and her displeasure was plainly evident in her tone. Based on Fuyu's assessment of Miyo, it seemed that she was the same as ever.

That being said, Miyo suspected she had softened a bit compared to when they'd first met.

Watching Miyo and Fuyu's exchange, Kiyo heaved an apathetic sigh then plopped himself down in the chair across from Fuyu, despite not having been invited to do so.

With a glance, he urged Miyo to sit next to him.

"Pardon me... Thank you, Kiyo."

As she excused herself to Fuyu and thanked Kiyo, Miyo sat down beside the familiar.

Since spending time with Kiyo at the Usuba estate, she had gotten used to being by Kiyo's side.

The position was comfortable, and it put her mind at ease.

"Well? What business could this unworthy bride, who can't even manage to deal with her own family's shame, have with me?"

Fuyu jabbed at Miyo's wounds while fixing an icy glare at her. Even though she was almost fully retired from public life, her mother-in-law was as well informed on current affairs as ever.

Miyo had been prepared for Fuyu's insults, but for a moment, she shrank back.

Her mother-in-law seized the moment to assail her even more.

"Though I may not look it, I'll have you know that I am absolutely furious. You understand, don't you? Not only have I been forced to stay in this drab inn, but you've blemished the career of the son I tenderly raised myself. Unforgivable."

"...Yes, you're right."

Her accusation pricked her chest, stinging far more than any torrent of abuse.

Kiyoka had been arrested on false charges. However, even if Usui was overthrown, there was no telling if the suspicions cast on him would ever be cleared.

This had all happened because he'd taken Miyo as his fiancée, so the responsibility lay with her.

If Kiyoka suffered damage to his public image going forward and became the target of people's criticism, it would be so agonizing, so unbearable, that she wasn't sure she could mentally handle it.

Seeing Miyo only able to meekly agree, Kiyo glared at Fuyu.

"Quiet. My master doesn't remember ever being tenderly raised by you, and whether his career is blemished or not isn't Miyo's responsibility."

"My, what a contemptuous creature you are. A lowly familiar degrading its master's mother? How outrageous."

"This is my master's will. It's not my fault that he doesn't respect you, even if you are his mother. Stop taking it out on other people."

"What did you just say to me...?"

Miyo felt as though the temperature in the room had plummeted. Kiyoka didn't get along with Fuyu whatsoever, even when he was acting through a familiar.

Kiyo was voicing outrageous objections with a blank face, and Fuyu looked ready to erupt at any moment.

Right as Miyo seriously started worrying if she could ever get this situation under control, Fuyu snapped the fan she was holding in her other palm.

"I have more important things to do than waste time arguing with a child. Hurry up and speak your business."

Miyo snapped out of her flustered unease and straightened her posture.

"Y-yes, of course... I don't have any business in particular. I just wished to see you, Mother."

She was simply speaking the truth, yet Fuyu looked at her suspiciously.

Miyo couldn't help tensing up; Fuyu's disposition made it clear she suspected Miyo was up to something. Still, her explanation—that she had come because she wanted to see Fuyu—was the absolute truth.

Perhaps I wanted her to treat me harshly.

In complete contrast to her time spent growing up, right now everyone pampered Miyo. Kiyo had admonished her occasionally, but he always yielded to her in the end.

It was very comfortable. It made her want to simply rely on this kindness. But that feeling of comfort also made her uneasy.

She was worried that living a life of pampering, where she was treated like she was wrapped in silk, would send her down a path she could never come back from.

Because Miyo was unable to truly believe in herself.

"Well, I certainly didn't wish to see you... Is something funny to you?"

"...My apologies."

For some reason, Fuyu's acerbic behavior had put Miyo's mind at ease.

Having unwittingly broken into a smile, Miyo apologized in a fluster. She would come across as an unbelievably strange woman if she found herself enjoying such disparaging remarks.

"Hmph. You seem quite composed indeed if you can sit here with that silly grin on your face."

"Oh, um..."

Right as Miyo went to apologize again, she changed her mind, thinking that Fuyu's words might have been pointing somewhere else.

As expected, Fuyu paid no attention to Miyo's attempt at a response and continued.

"You look better than I expected, I will say that, but I wonder where that woman I saw, the one who dramatically declared to me that she wished to support Kiyoka as his fiancée, has gone? The one in front of me appears like she's made up her mind, but in truth, she doesn't seem fully convinced of that herself."

Hearing this, Miyo thought back to the past.

When faced with turmoil at the Kudou villa, she had, in fact, resolutely declared to Fuyu:

"Supporting him, so he can face his work without any lingering worries in the back of his head... That's my role, something I can do to help him. And I want to do it properly.

"I want to prove useful to Kiyoka. I don't want to take advantage of my position as his fiancée. I'll do whatever I can, one thing at a time, so that eventually, I'll be able to hold my head up high proudly at Kiyoka's side."

At the time, Miyo had been desperate to live up to her position as Kiyoka's fiancée. Assessing her current self, Miyo felt that she had grown at least a bit compared to back then.

Solely as his fiancée, though.

Still...

Fuyu's point was right on the mark.

Now that Kiyoka was in peril, she had resolved to finally make her affections known, to ensure she had no regrets.

However, she had wavered on revealing her affection to Kiyoka in the first place because she felt that her heart, and the feelings she carried within, was at odds with her position as a fiancée or a wife.

This indecision hadn't completely subsided.

"Listen."

"Yes?"

Miyo quietly responded to Fuyu's address. Kiyo remained quiet, watching the exchange between his master's fiancée and mother.

"The only thing we women can do to lead happy lives is love, for our entire time on this earth, what we're given by our parents and family, and our husband and his family."

"...I understand."

"Our lot is to achieve happiness only by convincing ourselves that all the things laid out in front of us, even our marriage partners, are darling and dear. It's all we have, so loving it is our only option. We all do that, and anyone who can't is no different from a child throwing a tantrum. Do you understand?"

"I do."

Fuyu's solemn view, filled with a sense of reality, sank into Miyo's chest.

Women couldn't choose. Their lives simply continued onward, and they were unable to influence anything. Thus, the only choice they had was to do their best to live while caring for the things that were arbitrarily picked and

presented to them by others.

Miyo believed that romantic feelings of love were most incompatible with such a life.

"Pushing yourself to feel love for the husband your parents picked for you and eventually doing so? That's not romance."

" "

Miyo closed her eyes, convinced. She and Fuyu shared the same opinion.

There was no need for romantic feelings between husband and wife. As long as they each respected each other, they didn't need romance to build a warm relationship together.

Miyo was convinced this was what Fuyu was admonishing her for, but her thoughts differed greatly from what Miyo had expected.

"You simply have to think of them as two separate things."

"What?"

"The heart is free. If your husband is someone that is decided for you, that you need to push yourself to feel love for, then you can always follow your heart and fall for another man instead. There isn't anyone who can rein in feelings of love, so really, who's to fault you?"

Miyo's eyes went wide with bewilderment... Perhaps she was only imagining it, but at that same moment, she thought she heard a crash in another room, like something collapsing.

She never imagined that Fuyu would openly encourage her to be unfaithful.

Although this audacious comment was typical of Miyo's mother-in-law, Kiyo's eyes seemed somewhat cold as well.

"Th-that's, not, um, well...K-Kiyoka and I, we—"

"Then what's the problem?"

When faced with the question again, Miyo no longer knew how to answer and went quiet.

True love made one lose sight of their surroundings. She didn't want to accept

that she had such emotions in her own heart, so she hesitated to voice them aloud.

If she stayed silent, she could keep Kiyoka in his current position, as Fuyu had described—a partner chosen for her, whom she needed to push herself to love. That way, no one would end up hurt.

If she wanted to support her husband as his wife, then simply having a relationship where she pushed herself to care for him was enough.

When she had snapped at Fuyu before, Miyo hadn't imagined the stirring in her own heart. She had simply asserted what she imagined her existence would be like as Kiyoka's fiancée and wife.

That being said...

"Why aren't you happy to have the person you truly love and the person you must push yourself to care for be one and the same? Do you have any idea how opulent, how privileged, these worries of yours are?"

"Privileged...?"

"That's right. How fortunate it must be to be able to give everything to your husband, familial *and* romantic love. You get to show emotions that normally might have been split between different men to a single one, so really, this worry of yours is anything but taxing—it's downright indulgent," Fuyu spat, as if to say it was all nonsense. Hearing all of this from her, Miyo started to wonder if she was the one who had been mistaken.

Miyo couldn't believe she'd be any match for Fuyu, who seemed like she could smash away any troubles and concerns with her bare hands.

"Most women gradually wither away, convincing themselves to compromise their whole lives. Love is nothing but affection that rises up slowly over years of sharing a life together. But it's different for you, is it not? Who do you have feelings for—Kiyoka your husband or Kiyoka the man?"

Her answer was a given. Miyo lifted her face up.

"Both of them."

"Greedy, aren't we...? Though that isn't that bad, either."

Though she still seemed displeased, this must have been Fuyu's way of encouraging Miyo. When Miyo realized this, a smile crept across her face.

Although it was difficult to make sense of it, this was how her mother-in-law showed affection.

"Thank you very much."

"That wasn't a compliment!"

At Fuyu's abrupt outburst, Miyo smiled once more.



Tadakiyo stood up and called out to his daughter as she went to depart.

"Cough, you're leaving already?"

Turning around, Hazuki wore a slightly lonesome, yet perfectly radiant, expression and smiled.

"I suppose so. When you told me Miyo was meeting with Mother, I thought she might need my help, but it wouldn't be right to barge in after Mother gave some honest words of encouragement for once."

Hazuki had only just arrived. Once Miyo and Kiyo came to the inn, Tadakiyo had contacted the Kudou main estate.

Hazuki had rushed over in a panic; she'd been concerned for her sister-inlaw's safety since Miyo had run away from the Kudou estate, leaving only a single note behind.

Hazuki had been ready to charge right into the room, but after listening in on Fuyu and Miyo's conversation, she started to have second thoughts.

"It's maddening. She could never bring herself to say that sort of stuff to me... However," —Hazuki twisted her lips into a grin— "are you sure you're all right, Father? After all, Mother was just advocating for infidelity in there."

"Hngh!"

Tadakiyo made an exaggerated show of clutching his chest and groaning after hearing Fuyu's shocking remark.

Then his legs gave out, and he went tumbling to the corridor floor, but of course, he wasn't serious.

Fuyu would never have an affair.

He knew from the long years they had spent together that Fuyu had eyes only for him, despite how she had admonished her daughter-in-law.

He was also well aware that he and his wife shared a somewhat twisted form of affection for each other.

For better or for worse, this was the relationship that most suited them both.

"Same as ever, I see... Try to rein it in—you two aren't young anymore, you know."

Tadakiyo answered his daughter's look of exasperation with a broad smile of his own.

He was struck by the same thought he'd had last fall—Hazuki's attitude toward him and Fuyu had gotten gentler than it once was. Before her marriage and divorce, there had been a much deeper rift between them.

Had the change come with the passage of time, or because Miyo was joining the family?

Whichever the case, for Tadakiyo, it was a joyous one.

"Hazuki."

"What?"

"Ookaito seems to be doing all right. More than all right, actually. On the political side of things, it sounds like he's bravely fighting all the crooked politicians in the government, so you can rest easy."

Almost as soon as he and Fuyu arrived in the capital, Tadakiyo had actually made sure to get in contact with a few different places before Miyo's visit.

As a result, he had gotten wind of some details regarding the present situation in the military and the government. This included information regarding Ookaito's current activities.

Hazuki bit down on her lip as if firmly keeping something in check, yet in an

instant, her previous expression returned.

"Oh? That's good, then. I heard no one could get in touch with him, so I thought maybe something had happened."

"Cough. The core of the military has fallen into Usui's hands, but on the government side of things, they're still struggling against him and have reached a deadlock, so there aren't any signs of potential bloodshed. I don't think you need to worry about him."

If Usui managed to take over the government, too, then the Empire itself would be finished. Just having the military fall into his hands could potentially lead to catastrophe if any foreign countries were to find out.

...It may lead to war.

The government's control of information was still alive and well, so the fall of the military headquarters hadn't gotten out, but at the very least, the great powers of the world were likely aware of some nondescript domestic disturbance.

Even if Usui was eventually deposed, a difficult diplomatic situation was unavoidable.

Given his important military post, Ookaito's real hardships were likely yet to come. He would need to calm growing public criticism against the government and the military, soothe the chaos, and settle any disputes with foreign countries.

"...I wasn't worried at all about him."

"That so?"

"Father, make sure you keep it a secret from Miyo that I came here. I'd feel awful for causing her any more worry."

Tadakiyo nodded, making it clear he never intended to, and Hazuki continued.

"Oh, right. How long will you two be here in the capital?"

Tadakiyo and Fuyu had traveled to the city when Kiyoka had contacted them before his arrest; apparently, he'd known that he was in danger. He'd asked his parents to be in the capital to help if anything happened to him.

Given that Tadakiyo had retired from public life, he hadn't planned to get too involved himself and had intended to watch from the sidelines to see how everything ran its course, but now that he had agreed to Miyo's request, he couldn't afford to do so anymore.

It looked like it was going to be impossible for him to wrap everything up in a short trip.

"At this point, we may as well stay here until the wedding."

"You should've just stayed in the main estate, then."

Inwardly, Tadakiyo was shocked. As her previous remarks about Fuyu made clear, Hazuki disdained her mother, so Tadakiyo had assumed his daughter would be vehemently against living under one roof with his wife.

"We'll head over once we've had our fill of the inn here."

Appearing satisfied with Tadakiyo's answer, Hazuki smiled and turned back around once more.

Watching her wave as she left, Tadakiyo slipped his hand out from his padded kimono and waved back.



A large crowd of people had gathered in front of the typically quiet and unassuming Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station.

Miyo and Kiyo hid in the shadow of a nearby building to observe the scene.

"Waste of taxes!"

"Traitors! We want you out of the Empire!"

These shouts came from the everyday citizens of the Empire, who varied in dress, gender, and age.

Some members of the crowd were holding up signs and banners reading ENEMY OF THE EMPIRE, while others looked to be reporters, and still others were trying to climb over the shuttered gate.

They had all grown distrustful of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, thanks to

the awareness-building activities of the Gifted Communion and their peacekeeping squads.

The way the protestors saw things, the government was hiding the existence of Gifts and Grotesqueries, while the members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had the nerve to take wages while they let these Grotesqueries roam free.

Both groups were being criticized for not giving thought to the people.

Although the number of protestors had dwindled compared to the start of the New Year, articles touching on these controversies were still showing up in the papers almost every day.

"...There are so many people."

Miyo sighed, adjusting her loosened scarf.

After leaving Akitaya that afternoon, Miyo and Kiyo had visited the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. This had been, of course, to try to do something that would allow them to move freely—or at least, that had been the plan.

In truth, while there didn't seem to be any guards stationed on the lookout, the mob of people outside was enough of an obstacle. Miyo would get jostled by the crowd if she approached, so just getting close to the station would prove difficult.

"I never expected we'd be able to get in normally in the first place," Kiyo murmured coolly.

"What should we do?"

"Go around back."

At Kiyo's guidance, they took the long way around to the rear of the station to avoid getting caught in the crowd. On the back wall of the station was a small door that normally didn't see use.

If they managed to get the lock open, perhaps they could get inside.

In complete contrast to the front gate, this area was basically as quiet as the station usually was.

There weren't any guards standing around, just a smattering of men and

women who appeared to share the same mindset as the throng at the front gate.

"We're lucky there aren't any lookouts, but it'll be hard to get in if the protesters are around to see us."

Nodding at Kiyo's grumbling, Miyo waited for a short while. Then, waiting for the perfect break in the passersby, she hurried to the door at Kiyo's signal.

"It's...unlocked."

"Looks like it."

Though this door was typically locked, it opened without any noticeable resistance when Kiyo pushed it, the hinges creaking slightly.

Feeling a bit guilty, as though she was trespassing, Miyo followed Kiyo's lead and went inside the station grounds.

Cutting across the yard in front of the familiar watering pump and making sure to avoid going around the front gate just in case, they entered into the main building from the back entrance.

"I-is everything all right...?"

There were no signs of life at the rear reception desk.

From what Miyo had heard, Usui had restricted the movement of the members of the unit, preventing them from even returning home. Under his direction, coming and going from the station, as well as any contact through familiars, were under strict surveillance.

In other words, almost every member of the unit was essentially locked inside the station.

Miyo had assumed they would encounter someone as soon as they arrived, but the interior was so quiet, it made her uneasy.

"They might all be in a single place. I doubt that Usui's own Gift-users have disposed of everyone," Kiyo said, taking long strides down the corridor.

They reached Kiyoka's office without coming across anyone else.

"Are you sure we can just barge in like this...?"

"We're not barging in. My master told me it's okay."

Kiyo threw open the office door without so much as a knock.

"Huh?"

Miyo couldn't do anything but let out a small gasp.

The interior of the office Kiyoka used for his desk work, which Miyo had gone in and out of multiple times a day just a month prior, was largely unchanged.

However.

In the middle of the office, a single man dressed in military garb was collapsed face down on top of a rug.

"Oh, hey there... Hmm?"

In addition to man on the ground, there was someone else sitting at Kiyoka's desk, waving at them.

What is going on here? Wh-what should I do?!

Glancing between the two men, Miyo froze in place, at a loss for words. She was far too baffled by the current situation to say anything, and she couldn't get her thoughts in order.

As she stood there perplexed, the young man waving at her from the desk came bounding over to her.

He was dressed like a playboy, and over his causal kimono he wore a vibrantly colored *haori* that was covered in a garish pattern depicting a butterfly freely fluttering from flower to flower.

It was none other than Kazushi Tatsuishi who had sitting been down in the chair of the commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit as if it were his own.

Kazushi gingerly avoided the man on the floor and walked up to Miyo.

"Well, well, if it isn't Miyo."

"Um, h-hello, Kazushi."

"Hello to you, too."

Miyo greeted the man, and Kazushi greeted her back, though his eyes were locked on the familiar beside her.

Feeling as though Kazushi was staring a hole in him, Kiyo looked back in displeasure.

"Hmmm... Hey there, little boy. How old are you? Hmm, are you Kiyoka's illegitimate child, perhaps?"

Right as the words left Kazushi's mouth, Kiyo plunged his tiny fist full-force into the man's stomach.

"Hnaugh."

"Better think twice about who you tell that nonsense."

Kiyo glared mercilessly at Kazushi as the man sank down, gripping his stomach. The look in his eyes was exactly like Kiyoka's, completely absent of any shred of pity, more demonic than human.

Next, the man on the floor behind Kazushi slowly sat himself up, looking like a corpse possessed by an evil spirit.

"Ngggh, hrnnn."

Even worse, he started letting out a strange groan as he slowly but surely closed in on Miyo and the others.

"Um, er, Kazushi. Behind you..."

When Miyo pointed at the man with a trembling finger, Kazushi staggered up from his crouch and turned around.

"Oh, Godou. You're up."

Apparently, the man wasn't a walking corpse, but Godou.

Looking downtrodden and gaunt, Godou pushed past Kazushi, seemingly struck with some epiphany. Godou knelt down in front of Kiyo and forcefully gripped both of the familiar's hands.

"I-I can see an angel... So you've finally come for me, have you? I have to say it's bizarre that you look so much like the commander, but at this point, I don't care. Okay then, I'm ready to go to heav—"

"Face reality, you idiot."

Kiyo shook off Godou's hands with an icy glare and slammed his fist into Godou's head. Groaning in pain, Godou landed face-first on the floor.

Miyo covered her mouth in shock at the cruel scene suddenly playing out in front of her.

Yet just a moment later, Godou sat up again and looked a bit more like his usual self, as though the blow had helped him come back to his senses.

Then he noticed Kiyo once more and blinked exaggeratedly.

"Huhhh?! What happened?! The commander's shrunk!" Godou shouted loudly in surprise, prompting Kiyo to cover both his ears with an annoyed glare.

"Tone it down..."

"No, but seriously, why? Commander, you're waaaaaay too small. *Ha-ha-ha*, this is so fun."

Godou clutched his stomach and began laughing, at which point Kiyo sent his fist into the man's head again.

Kazushi, acting as if he hadn't just taken a gut punch of his own, looked down at Godou with an exasperated grin.

Miyo wasn't going to get anywhere like this. She took a deep breath and, after calming herself, spoke up.

"I think that's enough, all of you."

Her voice wasn't booming, but it traveled clearly through the office, shutting the other three up.

There were a lot of things she needed to ask about, from what the current situation at the station was like to how best to act from here on out. If she didn't get to the point, their shenanigans would drag on into the evening.

Everyone took a seat on either the office armchairs or the sofa, and Kiyo immediately got the ball rolling.

"So why exactly was Godou laid out on the floor, and what is Kazushi doing in my master's office?"

Kazushi turned away with a smile, while Godou suddenly covered his head in his hands and burst into a fast-paced rambling stream of complaints.

"It's been awful! I have to manage the entire unit since the commander isn't here, and to make matters worse, those guys from HQ who Usui sent always have their eyes on us, so it's impossible to even leave! Despite all that, the hot-blooded guys in the unit all started shouting, 'We gotta go save the commander fast!' and 'We can send these guards packing, no problem!' That would make everything worse, so I tried to rein them in, but now I'm the one they're all mad at! On top of everything, we've got a huge crowd out there every day trying to break through the gate!"

Just imagining it all made Miyo sympathize with Godou's hardship. The mental strain of being caught between the men and his responsibilities must have been quite extreme.

Miyo felt a twinge in her chest at the misery of it all.

"Everyone's getting irritated about being locked up in here, and morale is getting worse by the day. We can't do anything, and yet Grotesquerie-related work still keeps flooding in like always, so now people are complaining that we're too lazy to go on patrol. I mean, first and foremost here, getting locked up like this with a bunch of guys and trying to live together is totally impossible! Luckily, they'll let us out to go out to buy food, but the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and that sort of stuff? It's supposed to be divided equally between everyone, and they *still* end up bickering about it!"

Godou was getting emotionally unstable, so Kazushi took over.

"While all this was going on, we got a message from Mr. Ookaito. Apparently, he negotiated to finally take down the military guard detail, and when Godou here heard everyone would finally be able to move freely again, he was so overcome with relief, he passed out and fell to the floor."

After seeing how haggard Godou looked and listening to his complaints, Miyo could see him doing that.

Satisfied by their explanation, Kiyo sighed.

"So I'm guessing everyone's off in the dojo or somewhere else under

Mukadeyama's orders to start preparing for battle?"

"Yeah, basically," Kazushi said with a shrug, as if it was someone else's problem.

This prompted Miyo to ask a question.

"Mr. Tatsuishi, why are you here?"

Kazushi gracefully crossed his legs, opening up his gaudy fan with a snap and squinting in delight.

"Oh, me? Well, you see, I figured that everyone must be having some trouble with Kudou captured, so once the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit got back from the Imperial Palace, I came over to the station to poke fun at them. But then I wound up getting locked in here with them all!"

"...Serves you right," Godou quietly muttered, totally dejected.

He was right that Kazushi wouldn't have gotten stuck here if he hadn't been focused on needlessly belittling Godou.

In any event, this explained why there hadn't been any guards around earlier.

Ookaito was safe and sound, and on top of that, he was exerting his influence to resist Usui. Now that the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit could move freely, Miyo had the perfect opportunity to petition them for help.

"Putting the jokes aside a minute, what are you going to do now? Is that little familiar going to give out orders for us?"

Kazushi completely ignored Godou, hiding his mouth behind his fan and looking at Kiyo.

Not ruffled by Kazushi's searching gaze in the slightest, Kiyo blankly shook his head.

"No, I'm not giving any orders. I'm nothing but a familiar. Going forward from here..."

Kiyo turned to get Miyo to finish for him, and she gave a deep nod. Straightening her posture, she lightly stacked her hands on her lap and squeezed them slightly.

"This morning, we visited Kiyoka's father and asked for his assistance. We're going to save Kiyoka tomorrow before you confront the Gifted Communion."

Godou gasped, and Kazushi widened his eyes in shock.

The room filled with tension, yet Miyo faced the two men without flinching.

She had nowhere near enough power to rescue Kiyoka alone, so their understanding and cooperation would be indispensable.

"That's way too dangerous...!"

Godou was the first to object.

It was only natural. His superior's fiancée, who he knew full well was powerless, was saying she would march into the jaws of death.

That was no different from when Miyo had thought about stepping right into Usui's clutches.

However, compared to that morning, her state of mind and level of preparation were wildly different. Back then, her thoughts had been incoherent, but now her mind had cooled and cleared to its innermost core.

...I'm weak and not well educated.

There probably wasn't a single person at the military headquarters who Miyo could best. Yet giving up wouldn't solve anything.

"Even if it is too risky, I'm going."

"Hold on, that's not—"

Kazushi reined in Godou as he insisted on trying to stop her, holding out his shuttered fan in front of him to cut him off. Godou went quiet, glaring at Kazushi with suspicion.

"I understand. In that case, I will accompany you."

At Kazushi's nonchalant and casual declaration, Godou whirled around to look at him.

Miyo also never would have thought Kazushi, of all people, would make an offer like this, and the shock took her breath away for a brief second.

"Huh? You, wait—why?"

"Because I am the best fit for the job. You're too thickheaded, aren't you, Godou?"

Kazushi looked as nonchalant as ever, and Miyo really couldn't determine if this was all a joke or not.

But everyone there, her included, could feel a touch of gravity in his words and sensed that he was likely speaking sincerely.

"Are you really sure about this?"

She hadn't meant to, but Miyo's phrasing of the question sounded condescending, like she was making sure he was prepared to put his life on the line.

However, Kazushi just nodded, not seeming to take her question with any particular weight.

"Of course. I would love to avoid any trouble, if I can. What else am I supposed to do, though? Without Kudou around, we're nothing but a disorderly mob."

A disorderly mob... Miyo parroted the words back to herself in a whisper.

Considering the hardship Godou had just explained to them moments before, she couldn't help agreeing with Kazushi's assessment. Perhaps Gift-users were like a pride of wild lions who always needed someone stronger than themselves to serve.

Of course, Miyo didn't mean to suggest that Godou didn't have the qualifications to lead such a group, either.

"Thank you very much. The truth is, I thought about asking for your help from the start, Mr. Tatsuishi."

Miyo bowed politely to Kazushi.

While most people had largely forsaken the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, Godou and the others didn't have complete freedom to act since they were part of the military.

But a civilian like Kazushi wasn't in any position where he would be held liable for his actions, nor would he be getting anyone else involved by intervening, either.

He truly was the most suitable person to ask for help.

"Oh, well. That settles it, doesn't it?"

Godou cast a look that spoke volumes at Kazushi, who snapped open his fan with a smug smile.

To Miyo, it seemed Godou's expression conveyed his complicated feelings of frustration at being unable to go save Kiyoka himself, his concern for Kazushi, and his apprehensions for the future.

Outside the now silent room, they heard people's voices from afar.

Were they the voices of the unit members, preparing for battle? Or were they the voices of the citizenry, calling for the end of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit?

After the mood in the roomed lifted a bit, Kiyo sighed.

"Godou."

"...Yes?"

There was a sullen timbre in Godou's reply.

"The rest is in your hands."

"Got it."

At Kiyo's words, Godou quickly straightened up and gave a reverent bow. His visage had already transformed into that of a leader commanding a military force.

But then he let out a depressed sigh without skipping a beat.

"...Well, I can't really say anything else when you tell me that, now can I?"

Godou replied with a slight wince, as if to say he had plenty on his shoulders as it was. The sight put Miyo at ease and prompted a slight nod from Kiyo.

From there, they worked out their plan going forward then settled everything

they needed to discuss.

The first thing next morning, Miyo, Kiyo, and Kazushi would secretly slip inside the military headquarters, where Usui was lurking and Kiyoka was being held.

They had tossed around the idea of having Godou and the rest of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit—together with the Gift-users gathered together by Tadakiyo—launch an attack first as a feint, but they ultimately dismissed it. If the fighting grew fierce, it would only make Miyo's group, who couldn't pass themselves off as members of the military, stick out even more, undermining their infiltration attempt.

Therefore, they settled on having Miyo's group slip inside headquarters first. Once they reached Kiyoka's location, Godou's troops would create a disturbance for them.

With a large force of Gift-users breaking into the military headquarters, Usui would have to send his own soldiers to shore up his defenses, leaving the inner areas short-staffed, which would allow Miyo's group to confront the man himself. That was what they concluded, at least.

If Arata shows up, then...

Miyo's thoughts turned to her cousin, who normally wouldn't be out of place with them right now.

He was the unknown element in Usui's forces. When it came time for the Giftuser and artificial Gift-user forces to clash head on, would he be there on the front lines or stay back at Usui's side?

Godou and Kazushi seemed to be thinking it could go either way, however...

I have no doubt that Arata will show up for me.

Miyo was convinced. Still, it was always a good idea to prepare for unlikely circumstances, and she didn't plan to push the matter.

She simply wished to stop her cousin. Miyo's feelings started and ended there.

"With all that settled, we'll keep on preparing on our end, so I think it would be best for you three to leave here for the time being. We'll probably be safe for the rest of the day, but we don't know when the military will start surveilling us again."

Miyo agreed with Godou's warning.

After going to all the trouble of working out a plan where they acted independently, it would be a huge problem if Miyo's group got trapped in the station.

Additionally, Miyo was concerned about how it would look for an unwed woman like her to spend a night in a station filled with men.

"Oh, great. I can come along, too, right? This place is so filthy that I was almost at my limit."

Godou scowled at Kazushi's overexaggerated exuberance.

"Oh, yes, I'm sooo sorry this place was dirty. Though in your case, I guess you're unhappy anywhere without a beautiful woman for you to ogle at."

"See, you get it."

The two of them really did quarrel at all hours of the day.

This time, though, Miyo felt relieved to see them acting like usual. The only things missing from the scene were Kiyoka and Arata...

Miyo was going to succeed, at all costs. This time, it was her turn to help everyone out.

No matter how little power I may have, I'm going to do everything I can.

Godou and Kazushi's arguments grew distant as images of a warm, everyday life played out in the back of her mind.



That evening, as the sun began to set and dusk closed in, Miyo and Kiyo left the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station and returned to the Usuba estate with Kazushi in tow.

Yoshirou refrained from remarking on Miyo and Kiyo's unexpected guest and gave them a warm reception.

"Huh, I always wondered what the Usubas' home would be like, but it's actually pretty normal, isn't it?"

After learning from Miyo that they would be staying overnight at the Usuba estate, Kazushi had spent the entire trip there in a state of excitement. As soon as they arrived, he looked around at his surroundings and gave his appraisal.

Miyo couldn't help but find it strange to see Kazushi, a longtime acquaintance of hers, standing in the Usuba home.

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"Miyo."
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"Yes...?"

After finishing a simple dinner together, Kazushi went off to a guest room on the first floor. Just as Miyo headed with Kiyo to their usual room, Yoshirou stopped her.

"Where did you go today?"

"Oh. I paid a visit to Kiyoka's mother and father then went to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station."

Feeling Yoshirou's concern for her, Miyo answered honestly.

Tomorrow, everything would finally come to a head. If things went poorly, Miyo could very well lose her life—the final destination of the tangled, twisted, and murky fate she had followed was almost like the border between life and death.

She felt intensely grateful for having a place to return to this evening, the last night before their final battle.

It would have been awkward to go back to the Kudou main estate, and Kiyoka's house would have felt far too lonely.

"Really? So tomorrow's the day."

Yoshirou gave her a look that showed he understood the situation, to which Miyo nodded. When she did, a feeble smile came to her grandfather's weathered face.

"I haven't felt like this since the day I sent Sumi off to be married."

Miyo's breath caught in her throat.

It was agonizing to see someone off without being able to do anything for them. The image of Kiyoka being led away after being arrested on baseless charges flashed into her mind.

She had never been more cognizant of her own helplessness, cowardice, and regret than she was in that moment.

Yet even this pain and impatience were things she never would have felt back when she had almost nothing to hold dear.

"Thank you very much for your concern, Grandfather."

"Miyo..."

"I'll be back, no matter what. You're going to be on the list of invitees for our wedding in the spring, so make sure to attend, okay?"

Miyo was living without knowing what tomorrow would bring for her. It was as if she were back to her time in the Saimori household.

However, there was one thing that was decisively different.

She had hope for the future. Now she could boldly proclaim that her frame of mind was completely different from how it had been in the past, when she'd spent almost every day hoping to be taken to the afterlife.

No longer did she believe she was better off dead. She would continue to go on living.

But I still need Kiyoka.

Miyo tried to give Yoshirou the brightest smile she could muster.

"Right, right... I'm looking forward to it."

Leaving Yoshirou, Miyo went into her second-floor room and closed the door without making a sound. Instantly, all her exhaustion rushed to the surface, and losing her strength, she leaned on the door and collapsed to the floor.

"Hagah..."

Kiyo, who had accompanied her without speaking up at all, looked into her drooping eyes.

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"Are you okay?"
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"Yes. I'm fine."

Despite her reply, her hands and feet were both trembling.

In truth, she was more anxious than she could bear. When she thought about the next day, she got so agonizingly worried wondering if everything would go well, or if everyone would make it out all right, that she thought her chest might burst.

She needed to put on a brave face, or she would lose the ability to take the next step forward.

"You know, you really are good at putting on a strong front."

"Huh?" Miyo raised her head.

Kiyo's manner of speech always sounded just like Kiyoka's own, but these words truly sounded as if they had come from her fiancé.

That couldn't possibly be true. Kiyo was a familiar modeled after Kiyoka's appearance, not actually the man himself.

Seeing Miyo freeze with surprise, Kiyo gazed at her with kind eyes.

"Don't be so scared. I swear that I'll protect you, no matter what happens."

Kiyo brought his forehead against hers. Though he had no body temperature and should have felt cold, she felt a slight warmth from him.

It's so comforting...

Kiyo the familiar neither breathed nor had a heartbeat. Yet pressed up against him, she felt her paralyzed heart and body slowly begin to relax.

"Thank you, Kiyo."

Her trembling had completely subsided. When she let out a puff of breath, though it may have just been her imagination, her body felt like it had gotten a little bit warmer.

"Rest easy. I'd be willing to sing you a lullaby, if it would help."

"...A lullaby."

That might not have been a bad idea. She thought back to how Hana, the servant who used to look after her when she was little, would sing for her. The prospect of Kiyo doing the same warmed her heart.

Letting down her hair and changing into her nightwear, Miyo lay down in bed.

Despite how anxiety-stricken she had been, she was now completely enveloped in nighttime drowsiness.

"Kiyo, you will sing me a lullaby, right?"

"Yes...if you insist."

After Miyo pleaded to Kiyo, feeling as if she were a child again, the familiar nodded and began to quietly sing.

His voice was beautifully high-pitched and clear, like that of an angel.

The relaxed melody would have her drifting to sleep in no time—or so she thought.

Hmm...?

Perhaps it was just her imagination. She had thought she'd be able to relax a bit more and fall asleep while listening, yet there was something in the song that was grabbing her attention.

In contrast with his beautiful voice, Kiyo's intonation was vaguely discomforting.

Is he singing off-key?

The tune Kiyo sang was unfamiliar to Miyo, but she could at least tell that it probably wasn't in the right pitch.

However, when she slightly opened her eyes and peeked at Kiyo's face, she saw that he was stoic and didn't seem to be particularly concerned about the mistake.

...Tee-hee.

Apparently, familiars weren't good singers. The new discovery soothed her, and she closed her eyes again.

Listening to the lullaby didn't calm her completely. Nevertheless, before she

knew it, a decidedly positive feeling took hold of her, calming her mind.

As she went along with the slightly off-key tune, her consciousness gradually began to fade.

Putting on a bold front was Miyo's specialty. Tomorrow, and tomorrow alone, she would give everything—more than she ever had before—to put up the bravest front possible.

Not to smother her anxiety, but to give herself the strength to move forward.

Miyo drifted off, gently pressing down on the protective charm at her bosom.

₩ CHAPTER 3 **₩**

Beyond the Closed Dream

Her white breath was terribly thick.

The morning was even chillier than usual when Miyo's group left the Usuba home and stealthily made their way toward the military headquarters—so cold that it felt like their feet would freeze to the ground with every step.

The sun had not yet risen, and their surroundings were covered in a faint twilight.

Beneath the light indigo sky—which bordered on night and day, holding neither moon nor sun—Miyo, Kiyo, and Kazushi walked along as if they were out for a simple stroll. Yet when they finally arrived at the military headquarters, the looks on their faces were tense.

How many times had she been here by now?

None of Miyo's visits had left her with a particularly good impression of the place, and at this point, it felt downright unlucky.

Unlike the unnerving quiet of her last visit here, most of the city was still asleep. She didn't sense any military personnel along the almost empty streets, either.

At this hour, when it was almost dawn, it was easy for the lookout's focus to start waning.

While the main gate to the headquarters was normally never unwatched, Miyo had seen in her dreams that this morning, right at this moment, the military main gate would be completely unguarded.

"Let's go."

Miyo looked straight ahead, urging Kiyo and Kazushi on.

This moment was exactly what she had been hoping for. The three began walking, finding that the gate that had been so heavily guarded just a few days earlier was completely deserted and wide open.

With no one there to ask them a single question, they waltzed into the military headquarters.

"I never would have expected the security to be so lax. It's laughable," Kazushi said with exasperation as he turned back to the gate they'd just passed through. Miyo shook her head with a bit of a smile on her face.

"I don't believe it's always like this. Everyone just happened to be gone at this exact time today."

"Still, they need to review their security protocol."

Kiyo groaned, and his expression turned solemn.

Miyo, and naturally Kiyo, already knew this, but Usui was to blame for the lax security.

Usui must not have entrusted any work to the members of the military who he thought might oppose him. That meant the military simply lacked the manpower it usually had.

Even if Usui was disposed of, this conundrum would likely persist.

Those who sided with him wouldn't be able to be reassigned to the same positions they had once held. A change in leadership would result in a continuation of the military's present situation.

Keeping her voice low, Miyo followed the future she had seen and continued along the unpaved gravel that covered the grounds of the headquarters.

There was a station for each unit, along with a barracks and a hospital. In a slightly separate area, there was also an enormous training ground and carport. The gas lamps dotting the grounds were lit, but none of the buildings had any lights on inside.

Their first destination was the prison where Kiyoka was being held. From there, they would make their way to central command, where Usui was most likely hiding out. "It's almost as though you know the way," Kazushi commented, watching Miyo push ahead assuredly.

"I do know the way."

Miyo was simply walking the exact path she had seen in her dream. She had been able to come this far because the layout of the headquarters was mostly unchanged from her vision.

At last, her group came to an area where the gaps in the buildings began to narrow. Even then, the prison stood out conspicuously among the other structures.

The jail at the military headquarters hadn't been built to hold many people. Unlike a penitentiary, it was more often used as a type of temporary holding cell.

Despite this, the building was surrounded by a tall, difficult-to-scale fence, and its walls were made from brick and pocked by iron-barred windows. It gave the impression of being tightly fortified.

A two-story administrative building loomed over the entrance to the prison. The inside was obstructed by a storehouse, so it was impossible to see anything in there.

Every one of the military's facilities left a hard and cold impression, but this building was significantly more imposing.

Miyo gulped loudly.

She didn't just need to break into this building; she also needed to infiltrate the lowest layer of its depths to access a prison cell specially made to hold powerful Gift-users like Kiyoka.

Though she knew what lay ahead, the task would be far from easy.

"We'll likely run into a number of military personnel from here. When we do __"

"I'll be sure to take them out before they can let anyone else know we're here."

Kazushi smiled, as if already knowing exactly what she wanted to say, and

Kiyo nodded silently.

Thank goodness they're both so dependable.

Things wouldn't have played out like this if she had been on her own.

Slightly relaxing her taut nerves, Miyo replied to both of them with a nod of her own.

Of course, the door to the administrative building's front entrance wasn't unlocked like the front gate. Fortunately, its windows lacked bars, so the three went around the side and snuck in through one in the back.

The lock on this window should be open.

Miyo tried to place her hands on it, but the window was slightly too high for her and surrounded by tall weeds, so it was just barely out of her reach.

As she silently struggled to stretch her hand out farther, Kazushi extended his arm out from behind her to open the heavy window without any trouble.

Turning around, she locked eyes with the aloof, easygoing man.

He didn't wait for Miyo to say anything—he just hopped right up into the window, his *haori* fluttering behind him, before he jumped down so effortlessly, it looked like a feat of acrobatics.

Miyo didn't really feel this about herself, but the sight made her realize once again how impressive a Gift-user's physical abilities were.

Kazushi put his fan into his breast pocket before extending a hand to Miyo.

"...Thank you very much."

Thanking him in the quietest whisper she could muster, to the point where she didn't even know if he'd heard it, Miyo grabbed his hand and managed to get herself inside.

Bringing up their rear, Kiyo lightly jumped up through the window then landed inside the room without making a sound.

"Is this an archive or something?"

Kazushi cocked his head while he quietly closed the window.

The room they had snuck into was lined with wooden shelves containing many books and documents. Between this and the characteristic dustiness in the air, Miyo figured it served as a storage room, or as an archive, like Kazushi had said.

It didn't seem to see many visitors, so it was the ideal place to sneak in through.

"...They're far too negligent about locking up," Kiyo muttered, furrowing his brow.

Given the lack of foot traffic, it was likely that someone had forgotten to lock the windows without anyone else ever noticing—the height of carelessness, considering the importance of this facility.

Although this moment of inattentiveness had provided Miyo and the others with the perfect opportunity to stage a breakin, the soldiers would need to be more cautious in the future.



Kazushi unlocked the door of the archive from the inside then cracked it open to check their surroundings. Fortunately, the administrative building hallway was illuminated only by the lamps that came on at night and was devoid of any signs of people. The damp clamminess of the air was rather unpleasant, however.

Kazushi turned around and nodded to Miyo and Kiyo, solemnly watching for his signal.

They nodded back, and Kazushi stealthily opened the door to prevent it from creaking then exited into the hall.

This is quite some tension, isn't it?

He hadn't even felt this nervous the first time he'd faced off with a Grotesquerie. Right now, he felt like the anxiety in the air would pierce his skin and send shivers of excitement running down his spine.

Kazushi looked at Miyo after she began walking ahead of them to lead the way.

Her back was dignified, straightened to the sky. Her footsteps concealed a clean elegance, betraying no hints of agitation.

And though her body was a tiny, delicate thing, he felt a bold majesty emanating from it, like that of a princess strolling through the corridors of the Imperial Palace. He didn't sense an iota of uncertainty or doubt in her.

Kazushi took the lead to scout for foes as they approached a bend in the corridor. Once he had confirmed that it was deserted, they continued on anew.

Just then, they heard the sound of a door opening behind them.

The door artlessly opened with a loud creak, but before the man responsible came into view, Kazushi silently rushed over, got behind him, and wrapped his hands around his neck.

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"Hngh...!"
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The late-middle-aged soldier didn't even get a chance to see their faces before he let out a short groan, losing consciousness and collapsing to the ground.

Kazushi hadn't killed him. There was nothing to be gained from needless bloodshed.

"Whew."

After looking inside the room to make sure there wasn't anyone else there, Kazushi let out a sigh as he stepped over the soldier sprawled out on the floor to return to Miyo and Kiyo's side.

"Well done."

"But of course. I'm tasked to be your escort today, after all."

Even though he wasn't part of the military, Kazushi was no stranger to getting his hands dirty.

His Gift wasn't very strong, and his skills with it were mediocre at best.

However, he couldn't afford to be incompetent when he was going to inherit the family name one day, so he'd trained in techniques outside his Gift to fulfill his duties. His forte, dispelling arts, was one such example, and he'd studied a general degree of martial arts as well.

His younger brother seemed to believe Kazushi was only ever gallivanting about town, but despite his frivolity, he had trained hard in between his periods of leisure.

"...Right. Thank you very much."

Miyo thanked him with a slightly strained smile, looking down on the collapsed soldier with pity. She was still as dignified and noble as ever.

That's clearly the face of someone who is stifling her distaste for violence.

Kazushi took out the fan in his breast pocket and snapped it over his mouth as he glanced at her.

"We should get a move on... It won't be that long until a colleague grows suspicious of this man's absence and follows after us."

After giving a frightfully specific prediction of the future, Miyo turned around, the sleeves of her *hakama* fluttering.

Her expression had turned feeble for only a moment, when Kazushi had taken the soldier down. He could no longer see any vestiges of her past self as she marched on ahead.

While Miyo was certainly putting on a brave front, that didn't tell the whole story.

She continued to guide them through the bowels of the facility. Eventually, they reached the border between the administrative building and the row of cells where criminals were imprisoned.

The connecting corridor served as a barrier; to enter into it, they would need to pass through an iron lattice. Of course, without the key, it would be impossible to slip past the bars, which extended from floor to ceiling.

Kazushi took out the keys he had stolen from the incapacitated soldier and unlocked the lattice.

As far as he could sense, there weren't any arts or traps that would activate with the movement of the door.

Looks like we're all set to keep going.

As soon as Kazushi opened the door, Miyo bowed slightly and began to walk down the hallways without the slightest bit of apprehension. This whole time, she hadn't voiced a single complaint, shown any signs of anxiety, or made the slightest shiver.

She really has changed, hasn't she? Kazushi felt the thought in his chest.

Back then—before the Tatsuishi family was reduced to a single member—Kazushi had lived close to the Saimoris. In his youth, the two families had enjoyed a friendly relationship.

Kazushi hadn't interacted much with the Saimori sisters; he was a bit older than them both, and he spent most of his time going out on the town or training hard as the family heir. Still, he would get a glimpse of how they lived every now and then. Even as a relative stranger, he could tell that one of the girls was clearly out of place among her family. That was the Miyo Saimori who Kazushi had known.

Her face had always been haggard, plastered with gloom and dismay, and she'd kept her head down, avoiding direct eye contact. It was as if she had only ever been allowed to look at the ground.

She had been the dark to her animated younger sister's light. Save for Kouji, no one made any attempt to get close with Miyo; she merely existed in silence, like a shadow on the wall.

Miyo had been completely lacking in charm. She had possessed not a single quality that drew the eye, as though she were the antithesis of splendor and radiance.

But what had become of her?

While her clothes were the same as those a well-to-do student girl might wear, from her appearance down to the slightest gesture, she was now the perfect example of a sophisticated, high-born young noblewoman.

Though she still lacked any eye-catching qualities, to Kazushi, she was far more beautiful than any woman he had ever met.

With each step she took, the murky, fetid air began to clear, and the slight fragrance of dew-soaked wildflowers seemed to waft through the dreary and bleak space.

No one would look at her and think she was an outcast anymore.

"Is something wrong?" Miyo asked Kazushi, turning around. He shook his head.

"Nothing. Best we hurry, right?" He brushed off her question.

They passed over the connecting corridor and snuck into the cellblock that housed the prisoners.

As Kazushi followed Miyo, who was advancing forward as if she were strolling through her own home, his mind turned to his foolish, yet so easily ruffled, younger brother, off on a far-flung journey.

You're a thoughtless pushover, Kouji, but I'll give you this—you have quite a good eye for women.

Unfortunately, his brother had ultimately lost to someone with the same good eye, not to mention nigh-almighty powers—namely, Kiyoka. There wasn't anything he could have done.

A smirk came to Kazushi's lips, and Kiyo glared at him in disgust. Ignoring the familiar, Kazushi fluttered his *haori* in the slowly expanding darkness.



They threw open the door at the end of the cellblock, revealing a staircase leading into a pitch-black hole. A faintly sour and earthen stench carried on the cold air wafting up from underground, prickling Miyo's nose.

The hole was also fitted with a padlocked iron lattice, and the steps immediately in front of them were steep and narrow.

It was very hard to imagine anyone being down there.

I saw this in my dream, but it's much more distressing in person.

Pressing her hand to her chest, Miyo strained to keep her impatience in check.

Regardless of how frantic she felt, she needed to act carefully. As she admonished herself, Kazushi used the keys he had to open the padlock.

Kiyo lit the hand lantern that he'd taken from the archives and passed it to her.

"So you knew we'd need light, then?"

She nodded to Kazushi's comment. Miyo's dream had informed her of everything—the best time to sneak into the military headquarters, the route they would take, the window they would use to sneak into the prison, the moment they would bump into a soldier, and the items they would need to go underground.

However, she also knew that this future wasn't set in stone. It was still possible that a far more terrible situation than what she had seen in her dream was waiting up ahead.

When the thought crossed her mind, she felt herself losing heart, despite her vow not to falter or waver.

...Please be all right, Kiyoka.

Praying hard, Miyo took a deep breath and began descending the perilous and slippery stairs, guided by the light of the lantern.

The steps were narrow, so she would lose her footing if she didn't focus.

All her anxieties jumbled together, a lump formed in her throat, and her breathing became labored. Her limbs grew sluggish.

I'm scared.

What if she hadn't made it in time? What if the dream she saw was nothing more than her desires, and a far crueler reality lay in store?

She spiraled as soon as her thoughts started heading in a bad direction.

Even as her legs threatened to seize with fear, Miyo continued taking one step after another, descending into the dark, frigid basement.

Then she felt a gravelly sensation under her foot, different from the iron stairs; she had arrived at the lowest level of the prison.

She held the lantern aloft to illuminate her surroundings, getting a glimpse of an underground environment that was far more terrible than she had seen in her dream.

The walls were bare and earthen, left exactly as they had been dug. If not for the light, she wouldn't have even been able to see her hands in front of her face. The cold, damp air was many times harsher than it was outdoors, freezing the insides of one's mouth and nose.

Even though Miyo was wearing clothes, she felt like her body heat was rapidly being stolen from her.

People weren't meant to survive down here.

Sweat beaded on her forehead, and she felt a terrible premonition, bordering on despair, form in her chest.

Miyo made sure she heard Kiyo and Kazushi's faint footsteps as they alighted from the stairs, and they lined up back-to-back to continue down the underground trench passage, so narrow it was questionable if two people could even pass by each other.

There didn't appear to be many cells.

The left side of the passage was entirely dirt, and the right side consisted of a handful of holding cells that were spaced far apart from each other. None of them held any prisoners, and their dirt walls were crumbling in spots.

"Can we stop for a moment?"

Suddenly, Kazushi spoke up behind Miyo.

They came to a halt, and he directed her to shine the light into the cell beside them. Inside was a wooden pedestal resembling an altar with a thin tree branch erected on it, across which was stretched a rope affixed with zigzagging paper streamers.

Kazushi easily removed part of the cell's corroded iron lattice and approached the altar.

"Just as I thought. This structure is blocking the usage of Gifts or arts," Kazushi remarked, looking at the altar. Just then, Miyo gasped and looked at Kiyo. He

was a familiar, the product of arts. Would he be okay down here while this altar was blocking them?

"While I can't say he'll be totally fine, you have to keep in mind that the altar just prevents arts from being used down here. Since Kiyo has already been created, there shouldn't be any problem," Kazushi answered, anticipating Miyo's fears. Kiyo nodded in agreement with Kazushi's assessment.

"In any case, give me a moment to smash this thing, okay?"

Kazushi turned back to the altar, smacked his fan once against the palm of his free hand, and lightly touched it to the surface of the altar.

The change was self-evident.

The altar crumbled as if it were rotten. Though the underground passage looked as foreboding as ever, the stifling air became markedly lighter.

"Amazing..."

An impressive feat from the dispelling arts specialist. Kazushi turned to Miyo after she'd praised him for his brilliant display, giving her a mischievous wink.

From afar, she could hear the sound of water drops.

Exiting back out into the passageway, Miyo listened to the rhythmic drips and innocently continued forward.

The line of holding cells had ended a while back. Still, there wasn't a sign of Kiyoka anywhere, with the passageway, now dirt-walled on either side, being the only thing continuing deeper.

Is Kiyoka really down here?

Miyo gradually became more anxious, and her confidence began to wane.

The farther and farther they went along, the colder and darker it became. Miyo's doubts threatened to gnaw her to the bones.

"Wait."

Just as he had before, Kazushi asked them to stop.

"I sense someone nearby."

Miyo didn't wait for him to finish and vigorously dashed onward—it could only mean one thing.

Rocking the lantern raised in her hands, she rushed forward, even as she threatened to stumble over the uneven dirt ground.

There was the possibility that danger was waiting for her. Even then, she couldn't bear to stay still any longer, and she was breaking into a run before she knew it.

In the dark space ahead of her, barely visible even in the light of the lantern, there came a *crack*, like something hard had broken.

The moment Miyo saw his silhouette send the iron bars flying with a single kick to break out of his cell, her heart swelled, and the outpouring of emotions brought her to tears.

"Kiyoka...!"

Tumbling out of her trembling lips was a terribly awkward and shaky sob.

But she didn't care about something so trivial. Miyo leapt out of her run and wrapped both her arms around her fiancé's lean figure, chilled cold as ice.

"Miyo."

When she heard his hoarse, slightly shocked voice, a feeling of relief welled up inside her chest. It felt as though the rays of the sun had pierced through the black clouds of her anxiety.

She hadn't been too late. Her dream had become reality.

Her lantern let out a loud clack as it fell to the ground.

The light within disappeared right at the same moment, but Kiyoka must have used his fire powers, for flames immediately appeared in the unused torches lining the underground passage walls.

"Kiyoka, I..."

She was relieved, but this wasn't the end of their struggle. Still, there were feelings Miyo needed to express to him immediately, no matter what.

She had sworn that she would never again carry regrets.

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"Kiyoka."
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"Yes."

Kiyoka patiently waited for Miyo to swallow the hot breath filling her throat and speak.

He was kind. He had accepted every part of Miyo from the moment they'd met, enveloping her with warmth.

She didn't want to lose this at any cost and had been seized with fear by the new emotions that had risen up inside her.

However, she had made a mistake.

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

The first thing she managed to voice was an apology.

Kiyoka twitched slightly in her embrace. Miyo simply continued to speak.

"Back then, I already knew my answer, but I was unable to say it."

She looked into the face of her fiancé, the person she cared for more than anyone else.

His refined, fair-skinned features hadn't changed at all, but there was a slightly pallid shadow cast to his complexion compared to when she'd seen him last. That was only natural, given he'd been locked away in this dismal place for several days.

Kiyoka had allowed himself to be arrested solely for the sake of Miyo and the others.

Yet even though she'd awakened to her feelings, Miyo had been too seized by fear and anxiety to return Kiyoka's statement of affection. She had simply stood there watching it all, frozen in her sorrow.

That was a big mistake. After all, my heart was already set.

How could she possibly go on without loving the person who was more precious to her than any other?

"I love you dearly, Kiyoka."

After Miyo gave her declaration with a smile, Kiyoka's crystalline, radiant eyes widened. Then his brow softened with relief.

"As do I."

He wrapped her in a tight embrace, throwing his arms around her back. At long last, she had conveyed her feelings.

Miyo was certain that her hesitation had saddened and frustrated Kiyoka. Not only that, but if any one thing had gone wrong and she had been too late, then their parting may have turned into an eternal one.

But despite it all...she had gotten here.

Miyo had properly returned Kiyoka's love.

"Kiyoka, please stay at my side. Forever and ever... Don't you ever part from me again."

"I'll be right here with you until death do us part. For all eternity."

Miyo didn't want to feel the vexing, tormenting sadness of being away from him, of being unable to do anything, ever again.

She basked in the warmth of Kiyoka's body, which was gradually regaining its heat like melting ice, and surrendered herself to the sounds of their hearts beating as one.

The person she cherished and adored was right there with her. Alive.

They each pulled back from their embrace.

Feeling a tinge of loneliness at the departing warmth, she turned around and locked eyes with Kazushi as he fidgeted with his fan.

"Ah, finished with the emotional reunion?"

"...Y-yes..."

Both of her cheeks grew hot at his aloof comment.

Why did this sort of situation always have to happen when there were other people watching? Her face felt ready to catch fire.

Conversely, Kiyoka was unperturbed by Kazushi's ribbing.

"Kudou, you were never much of a talker to begin with, but it seems like this time must've been really hard on you."

Miyo turned back around with a start to Kiyoka, silently breathing roughly.

Upon closer inspection, he was in awful shape.

His hair, typically tied up in a neat ponytail, was undone and disheveled, and there were signs that he had been hit in the face. On top of this, he was severely underdressed for the bitter cold of the underground passage. His shirt was dirtied, and there were numerous wounds and bruises visible through its tattered gaps.

Also, whether from his hand bindings chafing against them, or because Kiyoka had torn them himself, he had deep lesions on both wrists, which were dripping with blood.

"Kiyoka..."

Miyo was at a loss for words, but Kiyoka patted her on the head just like always.

"Don't give me that look. This isn't anything to worry about."

If Miyo had moved more quickly and efficiently from the start, she might've been able to save him earlier. Then maybe he could have escaped with fewer injuries.

"I'm so grateful that you came to save me. Thank you, Miyo."

"Of course..."

Miyo desperately held back tears.

Hearing his words of appreciation face-to-face made her so happy and relieved that she worried she would lose her determination. However, the crucial moment for Miyo was yet to come.

"Still, I'm really quite impressed you survived down here, Kudou."

Kazushi voiced his admiration, approaching Kiyoka's cell and looking inside.

"These hand restraints have arts cast on them to prevent any other Gifts or arts, too. I'm sure with your strength, it wouldn't be impossible to break them,

but it definitely would've been hard on you. This rigid security really speaks to Usui's seriousness," Kazushi muttered with a hint of disgust as he picked up the torn restraints.

Miyo realized anew just how imperiled Kiyoka's life had been, and she felt herself go pale.

"The arts on those restraints aren't very powerful. The ones you destroyed on the way here were a much bigger problem. You worked hard, too, didn't you?"

Kiyoka put his hand on Kiyo's shoulder as the familiar stood stock still.

Kiyo nodded once silently then disappeared without making a sound, leaving nothing but a single human-shaped scrap of paper behind.

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"...Thank you, Kiyo."
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Miyo quietly expressed her gratitude to the familiar.

For these past few days, Kiyo had always been at Miyo's side supporting her. If he hadn't been with her, she could have gotten captured by Usui or lost hope along the way, preventing her from speaking with Kiyoka.

She might not have been able to unlock the full power of her Gift without him.

Miyo couldn't help feeling a sense of loss at the abrupt parting; she had grown accustomed to having the familiar at her side.

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"Kiyoka, can I see Kiyo again someday...?"

"........"

There was no answer.

"Kiyoka?"

"........"
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Finding it strange that she hadn't received an answer, she looked up to find Kiyoka wearing an indescribable expression, as if he had just taken a bite of strange-tasting food.

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"...Someday maybe."
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His voice was awfully heavy. Perhaps something was preventing him from making Kiyo again?

When she shifted her gaze slightly, she saw that Kazushi had a knowing grin on his face. Kiyoka also seemed to notice it, whereupon he twisted his face into a scowl.

"Good work, Tatsuishi. You can go home now."

A dangerous gleam flashed briefly in Kazushi's eyes when he heard Kiyoka's acerbic and curt response.

"Oh, come now, I wouldn't be so cruel if I were you. I know what was really going on with Kiyo."

Before Miyo could ask what he meant, Kazushi exposed the shocking truth in an amused tone.

"This wasn't always the case, but you took control of your little familiar's movements every now and then, didn't you? On top of that, I imagine you linked your sense of sight and hearing with the familiar for quite a while, too."

"What ...?"

"Tatsuishi."

At first, Miyo didn't really understand what Kazushi was getting at.

Kiyoka had been controlling Kiyo. She did know that it was possible to remotely operate familiars you made—this principle was a fundamental component of familiar creation.

She also knew that you could tap into the eyes and ears of a familiar to see and hear everything that was going on in their location. This was another basic of familiar usage.

So when she took all that information into account, what did it mean?

It meant that Kiyoka had controlled Kiyo, experienced the same things as Kiyo through the familiar's senses...

Oh no.

When she remembered what exactly she had done with Kiyo, she froze in

place.

Holding his hand wasn't an issue. However, deciding on a nickname for him, inviting him to bathe together with her, sleeping in the same bed. She couldn't explain any of that away.

"……"

She had been completely salacious.

I-I never harbored any such intentions in the slightest.

To say she was embarrassed was an understatement. Miyo felt both her cheeks flush crimson as steam practically burst from her head.

"That's why I told you about not doing anything you would regret later," Kiyoka said, completely exasperated.

Miyo was at a loss for words.

She had found Kiyo's warning so adorable that she failed to consider it any further or take it seriously. In other words, she had only herself to blame.

Miyo crouched down and covered her cheeks with her hands.

"I-I'm sorry. Um, I really didn't notice. I'm sorry."

She felt as though each word of her faltering, insufficient apology was falling down to the ground and bouncing right back at her. That only made it even harder for her to face Kiyoka.

"Miyo."

He stooped down, taking a knee and staring into her eyes.

"Look at me."

"I-I can't..."

Right now, her shame far outweighed her desire to obey Kiyoka. How could she even go on living after disgracing herself like this?

The gentlewoman ideal in Miyo's mind was rapidly fading into the distance.

"Having you treat me like a small child was rather novel and not entirely unpleasant, but..."

Kiyoka admitted this in a completely serious tone, without any hint of shame or amusement, which prompted Miyo to timidly lift her teary-eyed face.

Then he continued in a whisper:

"If possible, I'd like you to refer to me one day as affectionately as you did my familiar."

Her heart thumped faintly.

Miyo didn't know what this emotion was called. But she knew that, one day, she would fulfill his request. She nodded meekly, and Kiyoka smiled back in delight.



Since Kiyoka was wounded and needed to preserve his stamina, Kazushi sent out a familiar in his stead.

It was headed for the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, under Godou's command. The familiar would inform them of Kiyoka's rescue so that they could start things as planned.

Godou's group, already on standby, would attack the military headquarters, forcing a majority of the Gifted Communion's forces to fight back. Miyo's group would use this opening to head straight for Usui.

Additionally, Miyo had also gotten word that Tadakiyo had managed to gather a number of nonmilitary Gift-users last night. His group would be able to provide reinforcements for Godou that afternoon.

I'm sure that there are far more Gift-users who reject the Gifted Communion's way of thinking than they're expecting.

From what Tadakiyo had told her, the replies from the Gift-user families he contacted were split.

Most Gift-users thought it was unrealistic to create a society that they led by brandishing their supernatural abilities, though they noted that the imperial family was an exception.

The ones backing Usui were the Giftless people attracted by the allure of

supernatural powers along with a limited number of natural Gift-users like Houjou.

"Now, it's about time we head for the real target. We won't have to sneak around in the shadows anymore, right?"

Kiyoka nodded at Kazushi's question.

"Not a problem."

Before long, a dull rumbling in the earth reached them all the way down in the underground passage. An attack from a Gift. It was the sign that Godou's men had arrived.

With the path ahead illuminated by Kiyoka's Gift, the trio quickly escaped from the underground passage. Kiyoka was at the front, Miyo was in the middle, and Kazushi was bringing up the rear.

They ascended the steep staircase and exited out into the cellblock, the light from the long-risen sun burning their eyes.

It's so bright.

Through blurred eyes, Miyo caught a faint human silhouette in front of her.

Kiyoka wasn't in the best of shape physically, and he'd spent several days in the dark underground, but that didn't stop him from incapacitating the person in front of her without a moment's notice.

"Let's go."

"...He's almost inhuman, seriously."

Miyo could practically hear Kazushi smile as he murmured from behind her.

She'd seen Kazushi exercise his skills a few moments earlier, so she knew he was plenty capable, yet it seemed that even he found Kiyoka extraordinary.

The harrowing path they had taken on the way in was also faster on the way out.

The feint from Godou's group must have worked, as they didn't encounter many soldiers on their way. Kiyoka and Kazushi knocked out the few troops they encountered before they could put up a fight.

They exited the cellblock, crossed through the connecting corridor, and rushed through the administrative building hallway. All they had to do now was break through the front entrance of the prison and head to central command, where Usui awaited.

Just how long would it take for them to get there?

But to little surprise, their plan hit a snag.

"That's far enough. You've really done it now, haven't you?"

Someone blocked their path just as it seemed that they would be able to exit through the front entrance of the administrative building.

A man was standing on the crimson rug of the corridor; Miyo's group had expected they would run into him at some point.

"Arata."

Arata Usuba wordlessly kept back a cadre of his soldiers, who looked ready to charge at a moment's notice, as he slowly approached the three of them.

Miyo took a step forward to call out to him, and her cousin was all smiles, as if nothing had changed between them.

"...I didn't really think you'd make it this far, Miyo."

Though he seemed to be grinning at first glance, his eyes held a piercing gleam, and there was a clear bite to his tone.

He was genuinely terrifying.

While Miyo and Arata didn't always see eye to eye on things, she had never felt fearful of him before. That was because he had never once tried to harm her.

But was that still true?

Now it seemed like if things broke down between them, he might very well slit her throat on the spot.

Her dream had shown her that she would meet Arata here, so she wasn't surprised by his appearance. But the dream had seemed unreal, and it had failed to convey the bloodlust that was now hanging in the air.

"Arata...why are you doing this?"

"Isn't it obvious? From the very beginning, I've longed for a future where the Usuba family is treated fairly. The Gifted Communion's ideas—Naoshi Usui's ideas—encompass that wish," Arata stated eloquently. His expression remained the same, as if he had already thought through what he needed to say.

No matter how much Miyo tried to persuade him, there was no way Arata would change his position.

Though she knew this full well, she couldn't help but shake her head.

"No... Arata, please, just stop this. This isn't the right way to go about this. So __"

"You have no idea. You know nothing about the feelings that have pushed me this far."

Arata dispassionately dismissed Miyo's pleas.

The sense of belonging she felt for the Usuba family was certainly nothing compared to Arata's. If someone asked her to risk her life for the Usubas, her answer would be no.

Nevertheless, she thought of Arata and Yoshirou as family. They had taught her what it meant to be a family after she'd lost her childhood home, along with the Saimoris. They were dear to her, and she didn't want to lose them.

These feelings of hers were genuine, and because of that, they gave her far more motivation to carry out her mission than a sense of obligation to the Usuba family ever could.

"...All you're doing is bringing sadness."

It was because she held Arata so dear that she wanted him back on their side. She didn't want him to be complicit in Usui's schemes, knowing the people they would harm and the chaos they would bring.

Arata's brow didn't so much as twitch at her pleas.

"Even so, I want to change the Usuba family."

She knew that neither of them would give any ground. Just as Miyo wouldn't

change her argument, so, too, would Arata refuse to change his stance.

They were at a complete impasse.

But still, I absolutely have to stop him.

Arata slowly shook his head then took out his pistol and aimed its barrel at them.

"If you won't come to our side, Miyo, then my orders are to force you to obey us by any means necessary."

Kiyoka and Kazushi stepped out in front of her, shielding her from the gun. Arata was going to try and dispose of the two of them, then deliver Miyo to Usui. His objective was clear.

"Miyo."

Hearing Kiyoka's worry for her, Miyo felt an urge to lower her eyes. Kazushi gave her a tranquil look at the same moment.

There wasn't anything else she could say.

I wasn't able to get him to listen.

This had been her best opportunity to persuade Arata, and she'd failed.

From outside the prison, a man wearing a *hakama* and round spectacles passed through the front entrance and came up behind Arata.

Naoshi Usui. Either this had all been arranged beforehand, or he had heard the commotion and headed over.

A faint smile was pasted on his chiseled features. The impression he gave was the same as ever—that of a predator licking its lips, getting ready to pounce on its prey.

Miyo gulped unconsciously.

"Welcome to my fortress. I've been waiting for you," Usui said, daring to refer to the military headquarters as though it were his castle. He was pleased for some reason, welcoming the three of them with theatrical grandiosity.

A cold sweat ran down her back. She felt like she was suffocating.

"Spare me the hackneyed theatrics. Is the emperor safe?" Kiyoka asked Usui, the murderous intent behind his words so strong that Miyo could feel it in full from behind.

They had no idea whether the emperor was safe. Though the man had repeatedly made decisions unbefitting the ruler of a nation, Kiyoka was compelled to ask about him as a member of the military.

"The emperor?"

For an instant, Usui let flash of hatred show on his face before he raised up his hands and gave a signal as if nothing had happened.

Something heavy hit the floor with a thud.

A gaunt old man had been thrown in front of them.

Usui's subordinate, whose black-hooded cloak signified that he was a member of the Gifted Communion, had tossed the seemingly unconscious emperor to the floor.

This was no way to treat someone, and certainly not the noblest person in the whole Empire.

Miyo grew disgusted, feeling Usui's hatred from every move he made.

"Rest assured, he isn't dead. That said, after making him suffer over, and over, and over again, I was getting ready to kill him."

Usui sneered.

"The value of this nation's ruler, something he was ready to ruin the Usuba to protect, is all but lost. I wonder how this senile fool will feel when he sees his country taken from him and turned upside down?"

Usui resembled a young boy excitedly playing with a new toy as he innocently added, "I wonder if that would surpass the physical pain I've inflicted on him?"

But then, his lips twisted into a smirk of delight, and he kicked the old man on the floor.

"Everything is his fault to begin with, you know. Unforgivable, unforgivable, unforgivable, absolutely unforgivable. This bastard killed Sumi."

Usui seemed to grow more unhinged with each word he spoke. But eventually, he plastered a gentle smile on his face once more.

"Well, you get the idea."

A shiver ran down Miyo's spine. Did this mean that Usui had repeatedly subjected the emperor to this type of treatment for the duration of his capture?

"Don't think you'll avoid execution for this."

At Kiyoka's bitter words, Usui simply shrugged.

"I doubt it'll come to that. Once the Usubas stand at the top of the Empire, there won't be any issues at all. It's common to execute the tyrannical despotic monarch during a revolution. Only this old fool's head will be rolling."

Showing pure contempt for the word "execution," Usui brazenly aired his thoughts. It was clear he had no sense of guilt whatsoever.

Is he saying this revenge of his is only natural?

Loathing the emperor, loathing the current state of the country, loathing his lack of power. With all this hate serving as his motive to live, perhaps Miyo had been mistaken, and he was long past the point of being reasoned with.

Not even flinching in the face of Usui's abnormality, Kiyoka glowered back with a stare of his own, as sharp as a well-honed blade, and took a step forward.

"We're going to capture you and make sure you answer for your crimes even if that form of yours right now is just an illusion."

It dawned on Miyo that the Usui standing before her may have been an illusion fashioned from his Gift.

"Come now, I'm no trick. I wouldn't do something so rude. After all, I'm a sincere man," Usui said, smiling at Miyo. "I wouldn't act in bad faith toward you, Miyo. If it would make you happy, I'll gladly show myself. As proof, let me ask you this: I've always met with you in person, haven't I?"

Miyo thought back on what he'd said and realized that he'd always appeared before her in person—with the exception of their meetings in dreams, of course.

Nevertheless, that, too, could all be part of his scheme, and there was no proof at all that he was currently here in the flesh.

But Miyo knew. She knew that he wasn't an illusion.

"……"

Kiyoka turned back to Miyo to confirm the authenticity of Usui's claims. She replied with a nod.

"Now then."

Usui cleared his throat as if he was about to launch into a public speech and began to speak.

"First, let me praise you for coming here exactly as I intended, Miyo."

Kiyoka, Kazushi, and Arata kept their lips firmly pursed, without letting their guard down in the slightest. The scene was tense.

Usui was the only person here who had been perfectly composed from the start.

"But that's all the more reason that I ask you this: While it may not be the political authority that I seek, isn't it true that you've been relying on a higher power? The Usubas' abilities."

"...That's right."

"You wanted the Usubas' power in order to save Kiyoka Kudou. How is that any different from me? How is that different from how I want strength to change my destiny, or from how people want to artificially obtain a Gift of their own? What separates you from those you disavow?"

Miyo was at a loss for an answer.

Her Dream Sight hadn't shown what she and Usui would talk about here. Was that perhaps because Miyo herself needed to come up with the answers?

How was she supposed to reply? As Usui said, Miyo had also investigated Dream Sight out of a desire for power.

As a result, she had become a capable enough wielder of her inherited ability to save Kiyoka and get this far.

From that angle, it was no different from what Usui had done.

"Do you really have any right to denounce us?"

When he asked her once more, she felt a disquieting throb in her heart.

She had to answer him quickly, or her silence would be taken as acceptance. Nevertheless, the more panicked she grew, the faster her thoughts spun in circles, and she couldn't draw out the proper answer.

Then someone grabbed her fist, as if scooping it up into the air.

It was Kiyoka.

Looking back at her with a slight sidelong glance, he gently wrapped his hand around hers.

"Kiyoka."

As soon as she said his name and confirmed the warmth in her hands, the restlessness in her chest and her disordered emotions rapidly disappeared.

Encouragement through sharing a slight touch—there was nothing more to it, and yet it reassured her more than anything.

Miyo inhaled and exhaled, pressing down on her heart with her free hand. Then she stared straight at Usui.

"I will never use this power to harm people. That's how we're different."

Hearing her reply, Usui blinked for a moment before bursting into laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha! What, that's your answer? You haven't refuted anything. Why—"

Holding his stomach, Usui howled with laughter, twisting his lips into a terrifying grimace. It was like his smile had been painted completely black.

"You're trying to harm me right now, aren't you? Not only that, but how many soldiers did you knock out on your way to save that fiancé of yours? Don't think you can excuse everything by claiming you didn't do any of it yourself."

She couldn't let her heart falter.

The instant that she let herself be convinced, Usui would overwhelm her completely. If he had been a large fish with his mouth wide open, then Miyo

would have been just like a minnow floating in front of him, simply waiting to be swallowed whole.

She shook her head resolutely.

"Even then, I am still different from you. I will never try to wrap up the lives of others in this power or use it to try to steal anything, either. I will use it for myself."

"You mean to say that it was *wrong* of me to show those without power a path forward through artificial Gifts?"

Usui arched a brow and ostentatiously cocked his head.

"...I don't believe one bad apple spoils the bunch. But so many people have been hurt."

That had been the case during her visit to the Kudou villa.

The Gifted Communion's experiments had put the lives of completely unrelated villagers at risk.

The same was true with Kaoruko, too. Usui had blackmailed her into doing things she didn't believe in, forcing her to betray her comrades. How much agony had she endured because of him?

It was wonderful to extend a hand to people who were suffering.

However, was it really okay to harm many more others in the process? Was that really the correct thing to do?

"I very much disagree that bringing sorrow for many people is the right way of accomplishing that."

As if to explain herself, Miyo forced the burning Gift inside her to surface.

When she closed her eyes, the corridor of the administrative building she had been standing in vanished, replaced by a different landscape.

It was the dream world. A world where no one would ever be hurt if she so wished.

Please.

The power of Dream Sight spread, completely replacing the area around her.

It swallowed everyone in the vicinity, pulling them into a world of light.

When she opened up her eyes, everyone was standing in place exactly like Miyo had imagined.

Kiyoka, Usui, and Arata didn't seem particularly surprised, while Kazushi looked around with curiosity, nodding to himself.

"Here again, is it? How uninspired," Usui said, making no attempt to hide his weary displeasure.

The freshly verdant branches of cherry trees blew in the pleasantly warm breeze, letting out a clear rustling melody.

Right now, Miyo and the others stood in a place she had visited many times before—the Usuba estate from days gone by.

But Sumi, who had been there previously, was nowhere to be found.

That was because this world didn't exist within Usui's memories; Miyo had crafted it herself.

She had taken them there to ensure Usui couldn't do as he liked, including making use of his powerful Gift.

And...

Please, let this go well.

She glanced at Arata, who was still aiming the barrel of his gun at her. She couldn't read his expression.

"You can do all this, but my will remains firm. If you dislike me that much, then you can take control of society and make a world for yourself like this, where no one will ever be hurt," Usui explained calmly.

Kiyoka objected to Usui's unrealistic convictions.

"Those ideas of yours are behind the times. Gift-users are growing weaker and fewer, year after year. As long as the Grotesqueries we're meant to subdue decline in number, our duties will eventually come to an end as well. When the time comes, what Gift-users need to do isn't control society but change their ways of life to ensure they can persist in a world without having access to their

abilities."

If the number of Grotesqueries waned, then so would the number of Giftusers, and Gift-users waning meant the number of Usuba Gift-users would also decline. Gradually, people would lose their belief in Gifts and Gift-users, until eventually those concepts would be nothing more than fantasy.

Usui and the Gifted Communion were trying to make the existence of Gifts and Grotesqueries widely known among the people. But for all their efforts, just how many people actually believed everything they'd been told was real?

The masses might have been interested in the eccentric Gifted Communion's ideas for the time being, using them to hurl their everyday resentment and stress at the military and government, but like any other distraction, they would be forgotten after a brief period of popularity.

The supernatural and the unobservable were already becoming more and more unfamiliar to people.

"I don't think everyone will accept this right away, of course. But over many years, the Gifted Communion and I will create a nation of Gifts. If Gift-users are on the decline, then I just have to artificially inflate their numbers."

"How self-righteous... I know that Grotesqueries are an indispensable part of creating artificial Gift-users. If their numbers dwindle, then you can't create more Gift-users. It's all the same."

Kiyoka and Usui locked their fierce gazes at each other.

"That's exactly why we'll spend many years convincing people of the existence of Grotesqueries. Once that is accomplished, we'll be able to increase the number of supernatural creatures once more. It won't be a problem at all. Ultimately, you and your ilk are just scared. You fear radical change. Or perhaps you just blindly accept the imperial family as your absolute rulers."

"How is that any different from your petulant insistence that you stand at the very top?"

Miyo took a deep breath and quietly questioned Usui.

Usui's ideas were childish self-indulgence.

Since things hadn't gone as he had wished, he wanted to create a convenient world that would bend to his will. His claims were nothing more than the retroactive sophistry to justify this.

"You say that we're cowards, but you're simply self-centered and egotistical," Miyo said.

"Even so, if it means the masses who, right now at this moment, suffer misfortune and unhappiness will be saved, then I will surely be thanked for it."

The stare from Usui's murky eyes seemed to imply that Miyo should understand their feelings just as well.

"I believe I already told you that I don't wish for such a thing."

"That's not true; you already have. You wanted power; you hated how helpless you were and sought new power for yourself. That's why you went to the Usuba estate and awakened to an even stronger version of Dream Sight. Am I wrong?"

She couldn't take it anymore—for the first time in her life, Miyo felt truly irritated and annoyed by someone.

No matter what she said, Usui would still connect it back to his own claims. Their conversation was going in circles and not making any progress.

She had wished for power. She had wanted to change the situation, wanted to rescue Kiyoka.

However, this was decisively different from Usui's way of thinking.

"Stop trying to lump me in with you!"

Before she knew it, a shout louder than any she had made in her life came flying out of her throat.

A small light pink flower petal suddenly flew in front of her, bringing with it a faint cherry blossom fragrance.

She knew that her mother was watching over her. Miyo hurled her words at Usui, feeling as if she was denouncing him in her mother's stead.

"You're just trying to steal positions from the powerful because you want

power for yourself. But the power I wanted was entirely my own. It's not the same!"

At first, she had thought that she didn't need Dream Sight at this point in her life.

However, this ability was unquestionably part of her, and it belonged to her and her alone. Whether she felt she needed it or not, she couldn't give it away or let someone else have it, and that was all the more reason she could use it when it was necessary.

Usui seemed dumbfounded by Miyo's sudden fury, and his expression turned foolish.

Was it Miyo in his eyes or someone else?

Finally, his body shaking, Usui showed his bright red anger.

"Enough! Stop disavowing me like this with the same face as Sumi!"

Giving in to his rage, Usui violently removed his glasses and threw them on the ground. Then he stomped on them, tearing at the hair on his head.

"I play nice, give you a chance to talk, and you give me nothing but vapid, lofty platitudes! You haven't taken from *anyone*? Don't make me laugh, Miyo. You destroyed the family you despised, stole their tranquility for your own, and even claimed a position in the Kudou family by getting engaged to the heir, didn't you?! It's the exact same as what I did! I took down that old geezer because I despised him, too. I seized my happiness for myself! What's wrong with that?!"

His angry shout resounded across the tranquil Usuba garden of the past.

"You're doing it, and everyone else does it, too! To secure their own fortunes, they'll expel people, sometimes from their own families, kick them about, and take their position for themselves. Gaining happiness for yourself always brings misfortune to another. It's inevitable!"

Usui's sudden change threatened to overpower Miyo.

It was difficult to create a world where everyone would be able to find happiness. She had heard somewhere that all people were equal, but society couldn't live up to those ideals.

Each and every person lived their life interacting with others, both harming and being harmed.

A society where each and every person was satisfied was a fantasy. This was something even Miyo was fully aware of herself.

"I'm acting to make everything how I want it. Everyone does the same thing without a second thought—it's natural human behavior! What's wrong with wanting power? You can't possibly understand my feelings, now that you've forgotten all about your days of hardship and have gotten spoiled by Kudou's power and influence. That's why you can disavow me with that indifferent look of yours; you just don't get it."

Miyo listened to Usui's rage-wrapped sorrow, fully accepting it all.

Usui's shoulders heaved with each breath, and a hoarse wheeze echoed from his throat.

She was sure that this wasn't the full extent of the pent-up resentment he had held all these years. The emotions were simply too great for his body to keep up with.

Miyo stopped sympathizing with Usui.

Up until now, she had a felt a pang of guilt or pity for him. However, she now knew that if she maintained these feelings, then her words would never reach him.

"...You may be right."

She reaffirmed the feeling of Kiyoka's hand in hers. She shifted her eyes, and Kiyoka looked back at her.

When Kiyoka had been torn away from her and she had been forced to face her own foolishness, and when she sensed a terrible foreboding that the beloved daily life she had would never return again, she had tasted despair.

It felt as if she were torn in half, as if one of her wings had been plucked from her.

The despair that Usui felt, having dedicated everything to Sumi, was probably

far stronger and much deeper.

"Even then."

Miyo glanced over at Arata, who was still brandishing his pistol with a stern look on his face.

"Arata was trying to change the Usubas to prevent the sort of tragedy that befell you and Mother from ever happening again."

Arata showed a small hint of surprise.

"Unbeknownst to anyone, unable to seek help from anyone else, and manipulated as others saw fit...Arata was trying, just like you, to change this existence the Usubas were forced to endure."

And Takaihito had allowed this. The Usubas, who had once been the shadow of Gift-user society, were beginning to change with his generation.

While the transformation may have been gradual, Arata had begun to present himself under the name *Usuba*, not *Tsuruki*, and the rules that bound them were beginning to become less absolute.

Although they may have suffered unfairly, they were no longer forced to silently accept it.

This method of reform was modest and required patience. Unlike Usui's plan, it couldn't reverse the Usubas' situation all at once.

More than anything else, however, Miyo felt it was a noble ambition.

"I agree that everyone struggles to try to live a better life. And as a result, it is difficult for everyone to be happy... In my case, the Saimori family was destroyed in exchange for the happiness I feel."

Thinking of the past, she cast her eyes down.

It would soon be a year since she had left the Saimoris. Even now she would sometimes think about what she would have done differently back then.

What could she have done to be able to escape that situation on her own?

What could she have done to allow her father, stepmother, and little sister to live their idea of a happy life in the capital?

What could she have done to settle things without Kouji getting hurt and leaving for the old capital?

The answers never came. At the time, she'd been tired of living yet lacked the courage to die, and her family saw that version of her as an embarrassment.

Unless Miyo lost her life in an unforeseen accident of some kind, she was guaranteed to get wrapped up in some dispute with her family in the future.

"Still, even if I lamented how powerless I was... But turning aggressive, hating someone, going far enough to harm them, that isn't the right answer. All anyone can do is live the best they can, doing whatever's possible with the power they're given."

If Miyo had never met Kiyoka and hadn't been saved from her family, she would've empathized with Usui's claims.

In which case, what would she say if the version of herself who had suffered in the Saimori estate showed up now?

"All I did was put up with everything and never once tried to change something myself. Even then, I lived every day the best I could, frantic and desperate. Eventually, Kiyoka was kind enough to notice this."

Meeting Kiyoka was the best thing to have ever happened to her.

She had no qualms about saying that everything was thanks to him.

Conversely, if she had truly given up on life, let despair claim her, and decided that she could live only by hurting herself and others...

Then she likely would have never met Kiyoka. And if she had, he wouldn't have accepted her.

"If you strive as much as you're able to in the moment, without stealing from or harming others, then a chance to change the situation for the better, however small it may be, will come. Whether you grab that chance or let it slip by comes down to how hard you've strived to live your life. Striving to live, exhausting all the strength you have, that is what will eventually bring you your reward."

Exerting yourself, living the best you could—these were things you could

accomplish only by your own power. Only through committing yourself fully to something would you be able to grab your chance at fortune when the time finally came.

Miyo confronted the past version of herself head-on.

The agonizing days you lived were absolutely not in vain. They led to a future where you were rewarded.

That was what she wanted to convey.

If she could address her past self, that's what she would say, so that she could encourage her to do more than pine for death.

If she had been able to hear those words back then, how might they have saved her?

"Your ideas distort that path, Usui. Giving Gifts to misfortunate people for the sake of revenge, and creating misfortune anew... You're simply being defiant, insisting that because making yourself happy will inevitably cause someone else harm, then harming others is the only way forward."

It was unacceptable for Usui to force the Empire's citizens to go along with his plan.

Moreover, his insistence that he wanted to give Gifts to the weak was nothing but a front. Inwardly, Usui simply wished to reshape everything according to his whims. How awful.

People's lives weren't toys for the self-indulgent to play with.

"...Have you had your fill of your self-aggrandizing false kindness, then?"

Usui's voice as he swayed unnaturally, hanging his head down, was terribly low.

He continued advancing with uncertain, wavering steps toward Miyo. Kiyoka braced himself to stop Usui, but Miyo lightly touched her fiancé's arm to hold him back.

"I won't allow it. I'm not going to take it! Why does anyone and everyone reject me, try to get rid of me? Am I really so awful? Is everything all my fault? Do you think those lofty platitudes can save anyone?"

Mumbling as though delirious, Usui brought his hand to Miyo's neck.

When his fingertips closed in, just about close enough to touch Miyo's skin, she scowled.

She raised up her right hand. Then, without hesitation, she brought it down.

A *smack* echoed, and Usui stopped moving, his cheek swelling as his eyes went wide with astonishment.

Pain slowly spread from her palms to her fingertips. Miyo's slap was inadequate—it hadn't been very strong, and Usui likely hadn't felt much of an impact.

Still, for the first time in her life, she had slapped someone... The pain sank into her heart.

"Wh-what ...?"

Usui's voice escaped him, still stiff and stupefied.

Miyo's strike hadn't done much damage to Usui. However, the idea of Miyo raising her hand against him was so beyond Usui that it left him flabbergasted.

"Enough, that's enough."

Without really knowing why, tears came to her eyes.

"I'm not rejecting you. Nor do I want you to go away."

She just wanted him to realize that a purer, simpler wish lay in his heart.

It wasn't to overthrow a nation, create a Gift-user country, or anything like that. She knew that it must have been something that he'd shared with Miyo and the others.

"Try to remember what it is that you truly, genuinely wanted to do."

A voice seemed to echo on the wind: resonant, yet fleeting enough to mistake it for a trick of the ears.

"You can't just keep looking at me, Naoshi; you need to do what you want to do for yourself. It's your life, you know—if you don't think of yourself, then someday, when I'm gone, you'll be left broken."

In her dream, she glimpsed a fragment of the past. She recalled young Sumi Usuba's cheerful tone.

It felt like her heart was filled with her mother's kindness and warmth. At some point, her words and the words of her mother's overlapped with each other.

Mother...

She had likely said these words out of concern for Usui's future, dependent on Sumi as he was. Usui had lowered his head and gone completely still; surely he was recalling the same thing himself.

He digested the meaning of each word and reflected on himself. Only silence spread across the tranquil garden, verdant with warm sunlight shining down.

How much time had they spent like that?

When Usui glanced at Miyo, his eyes murky with darkness, he took one step, then two steps backward, and turned around.

"...I've had enough of this."

The ambitious spirit he'd had at the beginning of their encounter seemed to have left him, and he was now wreathed in sorrow. It was as though he'd used up all his vitality and been reduced to cinders.

Usui's feelings for Sumi had propelled him forward for so many years. Miyo wanted to believe that making Usui remember her admonition from all those years ago would spur a change in him.

"Standing around here like this is a total waste of time. I don't need a daughter who doesn't understand me. This high-handed nonsense is an empty, sickening fantasy, imposed on the misaligned by the fortunate with their heads in the clouds. It sends a shiver down my spine."

A hateful parting shot. Miyo had hoped that something might have gotten through to Usui, but in the end, had Miyo's and Sumi's words not resonated with him at all?

Usui took out a short sword from his breast pocket and thrust skyward. The ostensibly empty air then made cracking sounds, like something hard was

cracking open.

"Indeed."

Arata coldly voiced his agreement and finally lowered his pistol.

He gave Miyo an icy glance then turned his pistol barrel up over his head and fired. The *bang* shook the dream world.

The two men were trying to wake themselves up.

Although Miyo had unleashed Dream Sight, the dream world was by no means all-powerful.

If someone tried with enough persistence to attack and destroy the world she had woven, it would collapse.

If she had used her Gift while touching her target, the dream world would've likely been much stronger, but given the situation, this had been impossible.

However, this wasn't what disturbed Miyo.

That look in Arata's eyes...

Fissures ran through the scenery of the dream one after another like cracks through glass. The flashing sense of déjà vu scared her most of all.

No, no, I can't let this happen.

Suddenly, Miyo turned to Kiyoka and Kazushi and shouted:

"Stop them...! Please stop those two!"

They didn't ask why. Without saying a word, Kiyoka and Kazushi simply dashed toward Usui and Arata.

At almost that exact moment, the dream world fell apart.

"Arata!"

Miyo called out her cousin's name, extending her hand and breaking into a run.

Arata had certainly heard her, yet he flinched for only a second, without even turning back around.

His back still facing her, he dissolved amid the fragments of the dream world,

falling away like flower petals or snowflakes.

When Miyo came to, her Gift had dissipated, and she was back in the real world.

The slightly worn-out deep crimson carpet. The fading colors of the walls and ceiling. The emperor, completely motionless on the ground, and the soldiers, unable to hide their bewilderment.

Confusion spread through the administrative building corridor as nearly everyone froze, unsure of what they were supposed to do.

Usui stood with his back to Arata and the front entrance of the building, blocking Miyo's way. The distance between them seemed so close yet so far away.

Everything seemed to come to a stop for the briefest of moments.

Before Miyo could fully return to her senses, Kiyoka and Kazushi woke up and rushed toward Usui and Arata, this time in reality. But Arata was already conscious, and he brandished his pistol even faster than the two men could make their move.

He pulled the trigger without the slightest bit of hesitation.

A gunshot went off; it sounded like a large balloon had popped. A bullet zoomed from Arata's pistol. Miyo was certain she had witnessed the moment with her own two eyes.

A deathly silence fell over the previously cacophonous hallway.

After a beat, there was a shrill scream. It had come from Miyo herself.

With a dull thud, Usui fell backward to the floor.

"Gah."

A short gasp escaped the shooter's lips.

"Arata...!"

He tipped over and fell to his knees, and Kiyoka rushed over to catch him as he lurched forward.

Though Miyo could feel all the blood drain from her, she fought against her

trembling legs and managed to head over to where the two men were.

A short sword was plunged into Arata's side, and fresh blood was already oozing from the wound, staining his clothes.

"Arata."

"...Miyo, I'm sorry for deceiving you."

Miyo's vision blurred with tears as she watched Arata try to form his usual smile, despite the sweat beading on his pallid face.

"Call a medic! Message the military hospital!"

Kiyoka, carrying Arata in his arms, shouted at the soldiers moving about in confusion. Then, he asked:

"Tatsuishi, what about Usui?"

Kazushi shook his head.

"Dead. Probably killed instantly. What a fool."

Usui had collapsed face up. His forehead had been shot clean through. Arata had been aiming at Usui, not anyone in Miyo's group.

Upon noticing that Arata had taken aim, Usui had plunged his short sword into his side, but Arata hadn't flinched in the slightest and had gone through with the shot.

Miyo couldn't bring herself to do anything beyond clutching her cousin's cold hand and crying.

The vivid red creeping along and seeping into the crimson rug was faintly warm, the temperature of life. They couldn't stop it from pouring out of Arata's body.

"Don't take out the knife—it's keeping him from bleeding out..."

People succumbed rapidly to blood loss. Hearing Kiyoka's groan, Arata gave a feeble reply.

"Commander Kudou, you don't need to save me."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Unable to stifle his emotions, Kiyoka delivered a retort tinged with muffled sternness.

Why had things gone this way? Miyo had tried to stop him again and again, yet he'd snubbed her attempts to restrain him until, finally, it had come to this.

"Arata...why?"

She wasn't looking for him to give any sort of answer. Arata took Miyo's question, which slipped out between her tears, with a soft smile.

"Please, forgive me."

How could she possibly forgive him? A life lost could never be regained. All her emotions, her anger, sadness, and fear, churned in her breast. She couldn't get any more words out.

"Don't cry, Miyo."

This was the final murmur before he closed his eyes.



Going back slightly in time.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was waging a fierce battle on the grounds of the military headquarters.

They needed to pin down the military headquarters' fighting force at all costs. Thus, they couldn't give their foes the leeway to let things devolve into a noholds-barred Gift battle.

Just as flashy pillars of flame would burst out around them, the melted snow at their feet and water from other Gift-users would turn the ground to slush. At times, the slush would teem with electricity, while at other times, it would freeze over.

This alone was enough to erase the fighting strength of any opposing soldiers without Gifts of their own.

However, the problem lay with the artificial Gift-users.

In addition to the peacekeeping squad and Gifted Communion members Usui

had released from military custody, their numbers seemed to have further increased as well.

Godou's gut estimated that there were about eighty of them.

Conversely, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit numbered only thirty people when everyone was mobilized. While it may have been an elite group, their numbers deficit put them at a disadvantage, even though artificial Gifts were of poor quality.

And on top of that, they also had to deal with Gift-resistant Grotesqueries that had troubled them before.

The malformed creatures surged in great numbers, as if all hell had truly broken loose, slipping in among the human soldiers and attacking them.

Gaaah, jeez! Crap!

Godou grew irritated as he lifted both human and Grotesquerie alike high up into the air with telekinesis before slamming them back to the ground over and over again. Holding back enough not to outright kill them, of course.

A few hours had passed, give or take, since this all started.

The so-called "visible" and "Gift-resistant" Grotesqueries were numerous and vexing, but they weren't much of a threat in themselves.

All of their enemies this time around had corporeal bodies.

Unlike before, they didn't need to expend energy thinking through whether they were facing off against a normal Grotesquerie that couldn't be seen without Spirit-Sight, or one with a corporeal form, or worry about this barrier or that barrier. Instead, they could simply handle both human and Grotesquerie as corporeal entities and dispose of them all with their Gifts.

Nevertheless, the difference in numbers between their forces was absurd.

"Y'know, if we hadn't been stuck inside the station letting all this rage build up, they might've pushed us back almost immediately."

The numbers gap was hopeless, but the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was actually holding out pretty well.

As the unit members clashed swords and Gifts with their foes, their eyes shone with a terrifying degree of fighting spirit...or more accurately, irritation and aggression, the likes of which Godou had never seen before.

This was totally just a way to vent their frustrations.

As Godou sighed, far off in the distance yet another fire pillar rose up into the sky together with a violent, bestial roar.

"Woowee, look at them go."

There were several Gift-users among the unit members who could manipulate fire, but the hot-blooded group looked to really be in top form.

"Don't just sit back and watch—get to work."

Squad leader Mukadeyama spoke calmly even as he used his superhuman strength to pick up an enemy combatant in each arm and hurl them away. The whole while, he continued to send foes flying with kicks, alternating between his left and his right legs.

His physical enhancement Gift was quite strong, and Godou guessed that the soldiers he fought against, now rolling on the ground, had broken a few ribs.

"I'm totally working! See, look at how hard I'm working here! I deserve more praise!"

Despite all his quips, he was soundly trouncing his foes left and right, regardless of whether they were artificial Gift-users in the black Gifted Communion coat or soldiers in military garb.

It was now almost noon; their battle had dragged on from the early morning.

Finally, the reinforcements—Gift-users not belonging to the military who Tadakiyo Kudou had contacted and gathered—arrived.

"Looks like you're doing well here, then."

Looking like a rotund turkey, wearing several layers of warm, cotton-lined clothes with an extra overcoat on top of it all, Tadakiyo nimbly approached Godou.

"It's good to see you again!"

Godou straightened his posture and greeted him with a vigorous bow. Several of the nearby Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit members copied Godou.

There weren't any Gift-users who didn't know of Tadakiyo Kudou.

While he had been sickly from birth because his Gift was far too powerful for his body, the man possessed an ability worthy of a thousand.

He was especially proficient with wielding supernatural electricity, which had earned him the nickname *Purple Lightning*.

"Did we make it in time?"

"Yes! Of course, sir!"

Tadakiyo softly smiled at Godou's polite and formal reply.

"You're as energetic as ever, Yoshito. At ease, at ease."

Tadakiyo's tone was that of a laid-back retiree, but his fighting was downright nasty. He reaped the consciousness from his enemies by sending an electric shock through the slush on the ground before they could take stock of what was happening.

There were heaps of bodies left behind where Tadakiyo passed.

Okay, that's terrifying... I respect the man, but this is seriously scary... He's waaaay too used to anti-personnel combat...

Godou's lips began to twitch in the face of Tadakiyo's unbelievable display of skill.

While it didn't have the same easily recognizable flashiness and destructive power of Kiyoka's electric attacks, the old man's more closely resembled the work of an assassin, which only made it even more terrifying.

The reinforcements numbered little more than twenty, which was an impressive amount given the dwindling number of Gift-users.

When combined with the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, they numbered over fifty strong. On top of that, there was a world of difference between Godou's troops and the artificial Gift-users when it came to their proficiency with their powers, so they were finally able to gain a bit of breathing room.

Little by little, Godou's troops chipped away at the military headquarters' forces until only a few were standing. They could feel in the air that the battle was ending.

"When's the commander going to show up...? I do know he's safe from the message that other guy delivered us."

A familiar from the infuriating head of the Tatsuishi family had flown their way to inform them that Kiyoka's rescue was going smoothly. That was why Godou and the others had charged into the military headquarters in the first place.

Kiyoka must have opted to face off against Usui and Usuba.

Those two were unquestionably powerful foes, even to a Gift-user able to wield their powers with as much skill as Kiyoka. There was no guarantee that he was still safe.

I really don't care what the hell happens to that other guy, but...I hope the commander and Miyo are safe.

It was right as this thought came to Godou.

"And who is 'that other guy' supposed to be referring to?"

Godou heard an aloof, braggadocious voice come from the direction of the prison.

"...You."

An all-too-familiar man came into view—his hair was loose and tousled, his gaudy *haori* was fluttering behind him, and he was spinning a fan in his hand.

He must have made it out of a life-or-death situation because his appearance was a bit more disheveled than usual, and exhaustion lined his face. Nevertheless, as Kazushi Tatsuishi stood there with such a look of unruffled composure, it made Godou question if he was really standing in the middle of a battlefield.

Initially, Godou felt a swell of relief to see that Kazushi was okay, but this was soon replaced by annoyance over the fact that another pain in the ass had showed up.

"Openly talking about me behind my back? Why, I'm appalled."

"Excuse me? I didn't say anything behind your back, okay?"

"Wait, really?" Kazushi laughed, clearly lacking his usual sharp wit.

Godou heaved a sigh to try and calm himself down. As he did, Kazushi greeted Tadakiyo.

"Hello, my name is Kazushi Tatsuishi. It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Mr. Tadakiyo Kudou."

"How very nice of you to say."

Tadakiyo cheerfully replied to Kazushi's reverential bow.

Just listening to this back-and-forth, Kazushi seemed well mannered, even graceful, but unfortunately given what Godou knew about the man, he couldn't shake the creepy feeling he got from it all.

"So what happened with Usui? The commander? Miyo?"

"Hmm," Kazushi replied to Godou's question with uncharacteristic ambiguity. "Someone ended up in a bit of a predicament, so Miyo went along with him."

"A predicament? Who? The commander?"

"You won't have to wait long to discover what happened to Kudou. Look."

With a howl, a cold winter gust of wind blew between those who were still crossing swords.

In that moment, the snow-dampened ground completely froze, and everything—from a single droplet falling from the roof of a half-collapsed building to the individual water particles in mist soaking the garden plants—turned to ice, as if the temperature in the area had dropped below freezing.

The scale of the Gift that spread across the entirety of the military headquarters grounds was incomparable to that of any other Gift-user.

The brave battle that Godou and his troops had been fighting was made to look as if it were nothing but mere child's play.

There was no mistaking it. There was only one person in the Empire with this level of mastery.

"Commander..."

Several military personnel emerged not from the direction of the prison, where Kazushi had appeared from, but from the front entrance of central command.

One of them was Kiyoka, wearing a military jacket draped over his shoulders, covering his bloodstained shirt. There were also prominent members of high command who had been detained by Usui, such as the army general.

"All men, stop fighting at once! Drop your weapons!"

The general's voice boomed, echoing across the grounds of the military headquarters. Both enemy and ally alike lowered their raised fists, sheathed their swords, and put down their guns.

Next, a squadron came rushing in from the main entrance that connected the military headquarters to the outside world. Leading them was Major General Ookaito.

This was likely the fighting force stationed on the government's side of things. That must have meant that Ookaito's side had claimed victory in their fight against the high-ranking officials cooperating with Usui within the government and their troops.

No matter where Godou looked, no one on Usui's side seemed to be still going strong.

"Fight! It's not over! We can still pull through! Fight!"

The only one shouting and screaming was the Gift-user who'd joined Usui's side, Houjou. However, there was no longer anyone to follow his orders.

By now, he was practically the only member of the Gifted Communion's forces who was still standing.

Usui's forces ended up being as powerful as a bubble, Godou thought suddenly.

The technology Usui had developed had been magnificent. Between the Giftresistant Grotesqueries and the artificial Gift-users, he had created advancements that the military would never be able to replicate. The fact that he'd won over the major players in the government, too, was worthy of admiration in a certain light.

With the path he took, overthrowing the government certainly hadn't been a complete impossibility.

However.

There were some things a few decades of technological cheap trickery could never hope to accomplish.

If that was all that was needed to make it collapse, the imperial line would have come to an end a long, long time ago, and it would be unreasonable that they had continuously reigned for over two thousand years.

This was what the weight of history meant.

It's over, then...

Looking up at the sky, Godou saw that sun was already on a downward trajectory.

The snow that had piled up on the tree leaves and rooftops was blown off in the breeze, radiantly reflecting the sunlight as it fluttered to the ground.

Here marked the end of Usui's schemes to involve all the Empire's citizens in his rebellion and all the strife that had accompanied it.

₩ CHAPTER 4

The First...

From beyond the window, the songbirds' airy warbling tickled her ears.

The few remaining lumps of snow melted and fell from the branches of the shaded garden trees. Somewhere along the line, the sunlight filtering in had begun to shift from its winter frailness to the warmth of springtime.

The sterilized smell filling the hospital room flowed out from the window, thrown open temporarily to air out the room, mingling with the fragrance of the springtime sunlight.

Sitting in a chair beside the bed, Miyo cleanly peeled the skin off the vivid tangerine in her hands, even removing all the white fibrous pith, before breaking off the slices to be easier to eat and setting them on a plate.

"Here you go."

She passed the plate to the man sitting up in the bed, who happily took the fruit from her.

"Thank you, Miyo."

"Not at all."

The man, Arata Usuba, placed the half-read newspaper beside his pillow, picked up the tangerine slices, and brought them up to his mouth. He still seemed to be taking extra care of the section of his stomach where he had been wounded, but his complexion had improved.

It had been about a month since everything happened.

Although the names *Usui* and *Gifted Communion* were still popping up in newspaper articles, and attention was still focused on every single move the military or the government was making as they worked to deal with the

aftermath, the incident was gradually winding down, like the ebbing of the tide.

Daily life had returned to normal with unexpected ease.

That was true even in the military hospital, which had been an utter mess a month ago, packed to the gills with soldiers wounded from the fighting. At this point, things had quieted down, and not many patients were left.

While many people had been hurt in the conflict, Miyo heard that there were very few deaths or life-threatening injuries.

Arata was one of the few to have sustained a grievous wound.

He'd taken a deep stab to the stomach, the kind that would kill under normal circumstances.

Fortunately, Arata had the sturdy body of a Gift-user, and because Unan immediately treated him with his healing Gift, he managed to escape death.

Although he certainly wouldn't be back to 100 percent for some time, things could have been much worse.

"I almost can't believe it...," Arata mumbled to himself.

Feeling the same way, Miyo casually gazed at the scenery outside.

Those days she'd spent struck by so much despair and gloom, struggling to figure out what she was supposed to do, seemed as if they had never happened at all.

Naoshi Usui was dead.

The Gifted Communion had been sustained almost entirely by his Gift and his animosity, and it immediately collapsed in the wake of his passing. For a time, they had boasted of so much power and influence, yet ultimately, they vanished in an instant.

Nevertheless, it was, in part, a natural course of events.

The only thing propping up the Gifted Communion had been Usui's emotions, his enthusiastic negativity.

Usui ruled aloof as their Founder, Hojou didn't have much power of his own, and Arata hadn't actually been working on behalf of the Gifted Communion in

the first place.

The people who had been bestowed with artificial Gifts believed that they would dominate mankind with their newfound powers, yet the battle against Godou's unit forced them to realize that their superficial abilities couldn't touch those of a true Gift-user. This revelation, along with the passing of their leader, caused many of them to lose heart.

The same was true for the important figures in the government and the military who Usui had brought over to his side.

Essentially, they'd never had any faith in his message to begin with and were just trying to satisfy their desires and gain an advantage in his new Empire. Once Usui was actually out of the picture, none of them could possibly take over control.

Usui was the core of everything, and as the sole and irreplaceable foundation for the Gifted Communion, there was no path left for them once he was dead.

The remnants and collaborators—including Houjou, the Minister of Education, his secretary—were all arrested without exception and were currently awaiting sentencing.

"But everything worked out," Miyo said quietly, her true feelings escaping her lips.

She had thought things were over on countless occasions. But now that it had all passed, everything had settled in an unexpectedly felicitous way.

"That's true. Commander Kudou isn't facing any punishment, either, right?"

"Yes... They determined that the crimes he was charged with were fabricated by the rebels."

Apparently, the government been on the verge of total paralysis.

Both the politicians and the bureaucrats had been split between Usui's faction and the imperial family's faction, and they took up arms using any troops their authority could muster. They had been squaring off, trying to charge the other side with crimes and apprehend them.

The imperial family's faction, led by Ookaito and others, wrested control in

this squabble, taking the government out of deadlock. Naturally, they dismissed all the charges that Usui's factions had brought against Kiyoka.

I'm glad he was shown to be innocent all along, but...

The accusations against Kiyoka were dropped so easily that Miyo had actually begun to wonder if things could really just be wiped away like that.

"I can tell from the look on your face that you're not totally satisfied."

Arata immediately saw through Miyo's inner worries. It was the same with Kiyoka, but Miyo wondered if she was easy enough to read that Arata could pick up on her emotions just by the look on her face.

"That's not quite true. Um, may I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Were you supporting the Gifted Communion with the intention of shooting Usui from the very beginning?"

Miyo knew her question was inconsiderate, but she couldn't help asking it.

Although she had been coming to visit Arata in the hospital like this for days on end now, given the terrible state of his injuries, she hadn't felt it very appropriate to have a long conversation. This was the first time she had been able to settle down and talk with him since everything concluded.

"Well..." Arata nodded, not seeming to mind at all, and stared off into the distance. "Usui invited me to join him. That's when I thought to myself, Ah, he hasn't actually managed to break free at all."

Arata smiled at Miyo, who cocked her head in confusion.

"Usui cut ties with the Usubas and fled after they married Sumi off. He should've felt an urge to rebel against them. Yet instead, he conspired to kill the emperor, wishing to install you and him—the Usubas—at the top. In other words, he believed that the Usuba Gift-users were the strongest in the Empire. Even after separating from the Usuba family, he hadn't been able to break free from their way of thinking."

"... Are you saying that he was soft on his own family?"

"That's pretty much it. This isn't just limited to Usui, but since the Usubas live in a unique closed-off environment, everyone more or less has that type of mentality."

Miyo felt that Arata had a point when he put it like that.

Usui had never stopped trying to win her over with offers of the Empire and the world, no matter how many times she refused him.

The only people who knew the solitude of Usubas—and the family's true power— were the Usubas themselves.

Arata was trying to say that Usui was driven by an unconscious belief that anyone related to the Usubas would obviously understand his thinking and agree with him.

"He must have earnestly believed that I would come over to his side if he invited me. I bet it never even crossed his mind that I would only pretend to ally myself with his cause while waiting for a chance to kill him. Either that, or he saw himself in me."

Given that Usui had spent several years scheming to overthrow the government, Miyo had assumed the man would have been far more meticulous and cautious.

Arata looked down at the plate where the tangerine rested.

"I get where he was coming from. Everyone born into a family related to the Usubas finds their treatment unreasonable. We often direct our discontent at our lots in life at the world outside the Usubas, coming to believe that we can only trust, or mutually understand, our own family members. Usui's thoughts sounded quite appealing on their face. I can understand why one might want to stray his way and why he thought anyone connected to the Usubas would drift toward him."

From the beginning right up to the very end, Usui's world revolved around Sumi and Sumi alone. He wanted to make everything bend to his will for her sake.

As long as he fixated on his relationship with Sumi, Usui could never hope to uncouple himself from the Usubas' values. On top of all this, Usui was a

powerful Usuba Gift-user in his own right, so he had even less reason to.

Regardless, Usui restrained from using his Gift on Miyo and ushered Arata into his ranks because he was a member of the Usuba family.

He was a very pure person...

This type of immaturity was an intrinsic part of Usui's mentality.

"And so, with all that in mind, I took advantage of Usui's naïveté and joined the Gifted Communion. If he found me out, I figured I'd deal with it somehow when the time came. I made sure to inform Prince Takaihito that Usui had invited me to join him, at the very least."

"What?"

Takaihito had known that Arata had been asked to join the Gifted Communion?

"He simply told me that it was up to me whether I accepted the invitation or not."

Arata shrugged. Even though there was absolutely nothing to laugh at, Miyo found this so comical that she broke into a faint smile.

"By the way, can I ask you something?"

"Yes...?"

Arata slowly began to speak, fixing a probing stare on Miyo.

"When you used the power of Dream Sight to lock Usui and me away in a dream, were you trying to protect us?"

Miyo gazed back into Arata's eyes with a start.

He was absolutely right. In truth, Miyo had wanted to go down a path where no one had to die and where Usui could atone for his crimes. It was for that reason she never stopped trying to get through to him.

However, the fate that Dream Sight had showed her was cruel, with Arata shooting Usui and being attacked simultaneously, eventually dying himself. That was the future she had seen.

"You said those things to me during the confrontation in the administrative

building not to stop me from aiding the Gifted Communion, but to try and prevent me from shooting Usui, right?"

More accurately, she had been trying to do both of those things.

Arata had identified her goals. Miyo had succeeded in getting her intentions across to him. Yet it felt a bit embarrassing to hear him say this directly to her face.

"Y-yes...that's right."

Miyo hadn't wanted anyone to die or get hurt, so she'd tried locking Usui and Arata in the dream world, free of violence or harm. She'd wanted to believe that this would change something about the future.

Ultimately, while she had been able to avert Arata's death, she hadn't been able to change Usui's fate.

It really taught me that no matter how strong the power of Dream Sight may be, it's difficult to use well.

Knowing the future was one thing, but what was she supposed to do to try and change it? How much of the future was she allowed to reveal to others? Peering into what lay ahead wasn't enough to give her all the answers.

Now she understood just how incredible Takaihito was for seeing the same future and skillfully making use of it. Miyo was still very inexperienced and hadn't given everything enough consideration.

"I'm sorry for ignoring your words of warning."

Arata lowered his head, prompting Miyo to wave her hands in a fluster.

"Not at all. I made plenty of mistakes as well..."

"I'm not trying to make excuses, but the truth is that I only realized what you meant after it was all over."

Arata frowned regretfully. Unfortunately, she hadn't conveyed her intentions at the critical moment.

"When I was reflecting on everything, it occurred to me that you never once asked me why I had taken Usui's side."

Arata was right—Miyo had been too focused on the exchange of blows between Arata and Usui that she'd seen in her vision to question him.

"It appears you've fully awakened your Dream Sight powers, then."

In Arata's slightly sad comment, Miyo sensed a complex array of emotions stemming from his experiences as a member of the Usuba family.

"Yes...but, if possible, I would prefer to never have to use them again."

Normally, one would take full advantage of a power they had worked hard to awaken.

Miyo had no intention of neglecting her Gift training, of course, but even then, she'd had enough of the strife she'd just gone through.

Every time she had the tip of a sword directed at her, every time she had a gun barrel pointed her way, it felt as if icy hands were gripping her heart, and she shrank back, unable to move.

Whenever she recalled how Usui had died—having a hole blown into his forehead—she felt disgusted, and tears welled in her eyes.

Using a Gift meant throwing oneself into battle.

Miyo had gained too many things that were precious, her very sense of self included, to comply with that philosophy.

"Like that man said...I am a foolish woman, fully dependent on Kiyoka and satisfied with my tiny bit of happiness. But I think that I'm okay with that."

The happiness she had so longed for was in her grasp. Wasn't that more than enough?

Even if the Gift of Dream Sight could possibly save many more people, Miyo felt like she didn't have the personal capacity to do so now that she'd read the memoirs of the Usubas' past.

It was quite evident to her that she wasn't clever enough to dedicate herself to saving people while maintaining her own happiness.

"You don't need to give any of Usui's words a second thought."

Arata told her this to encourage her, but Miyo silently denied it.

His words wouldn't sway her. She simply thought that Usui's analysis had, in fact, gotten to the heart of the matter.

"This may be selfish of me, but I'd like to live my life to the fullest rather than use my Gift for myself or others."

Miyo was probably a failure as a Dream Sight Medium. She would leave spectacular accomplishments to Kiyoka and other Gift-users like him.

Usui was gone, the Usubas were beginning to change, and Arata was safe and sound. There was no longer anything that Miyo needed to get involved with.

Thus, she wanted to live a life filled to the brim with bliss for her and those she cared about, without being caught up in having or not having Gifts and their worth. That was how she wanted to live.

This was what she wished for the present and the future.

The hospital room went quiet as Miyo and Arata hit a lull in the conversation. Just then, they heard two people talking out in the hallway.

"If you ever change your mind, you should let me know as soon as possible. Immediately, got it?"

"That day's never coming, so please find someone else for the job soon."

It was Ookaito, pressing his subordinate for an answer, and Kiyoka, giving his superior an exasperated reply.

Miyo and Kiyoka had come to the military headquarters together, but they had gone their separate ways, as Miyo needed to visit the hospital, and Kiyoka had business at central command.

It appeared Ookaito was the person he needed to speak with.

From what she had heard, the military was suffering a severe personnel shortage because of Usui, and central command was requesting Kiyoka to fill one of the holes.

This may have been related to what Ookaito was discussing with him.

"Are you done?" Kiyoka asked from the open hospital doorway, lightly dressed in a casual *kimono* with his hair untied and dangling down. Miyo looked

between her cousin and her fiancée and nodded.

"...You're not going to peel any more tangerines for me, Miyo?" Arata murmured with a note of mischievous dissatisfaction. Kiyoka promptly approached his bed and smacked Arata's hand.

"Ow!" her cousin groaned, glaring spitefully at Kiyoka. "You realize I'm a patient, yes? Honestly, Commander Kudou, that hot-blooded temper of yours is quite a problem."

"I'm conceding enough to you already by letting Miyo visit you every day."

His tone was extremely bitter.

Kiyoka wasn't particularly happy about the frequency with which Miyo saw Arata. He would always see her off with a reluctant, "You're going today, too?"

Perhaps his irritation stemmed from the fact that his injuries weren't quite bad enough to warrant being confined to bed rest.

Kiyoka is acting a bit needier than before.

When the thought crossed her mind, her normally stiff, beautiful, and valiant fiancé suddenly seemed adorable.

Miyo broke into a smile as she stood up from her chair.

"I'm sorry, Arata. I have to go now."

Taking her purse in hand, she drew close to Kiyoka. Finally, Miyo turned back to her cousin and bowed slightly.

"Kiyoka and I are going on a date after this... I'll be sure to stop by again."

"Until next time, then."

Arata waved goodbye, and Miyo turned to leave the hospital room with Kiyoka.



After Miyo and Kiyoka left the hospital, the first stop on their date was the kimono shop, Suzushima's.

The storied business stood on one of the imperial capital's most prominent

high streets, which was flanked by major storefronts. They stopped in front of it to find that there were already people inside.

"Welcome, Mr. Kudou."

"I appreciate this."

The proprietress of Suzushima's, Keiko, greeted Miyo and Kiyoka with a smile right as they entered. Then they heard a pair of bickering voices come from farther inside the shop.

"I'm telling you, why can't she just wear an evening dress at the banquet?! A white kimono, a colorful wedding kimono, and an evening dress. What's wrong with that?"

"Wedding kimonos are so old-fashioned! She should wear a white kimono for the ceremony then change into a dress for the rest."

"She can't participate in a tea ceremony in a dress."

"Then there should be a Western-style garden party instead of a tea ceremony. This is all being held at Imperial Hotel anyway, so they'll surely have the space for it."

"Are you planning to have the guests faint?! Almost all the arrangements have already been made anyway. You're asking for the impossible, okay?!"

Miyo and Kiyoka exchanged glances when they heard what the verbal tussle was about.

Hazuki and Fuyu were arguing with each other about wedding clothes.

Miyo hadn't been informed of this until recently, but Kiyoka had asked Fuyu and Hazuki to move forward with planning the wedding a while ago.

Normally, Miyo and Kiyoka should have taken the initiative on the preparations since they were the ones getting married, but they really didn't have the spare energy for it. Fortunately, Kiyoka had seen this situation coming.

Although two families usually made the arrangements together, and it was normal to reflect their preferences more over those of the marrying couple, both Fuyu and Hazuki had agreed to Kiyoka's request.

As a result, the venue had been pinned down, the invitations were already sent, and even the ceremony arrangements had all been decided on.

Miyo had been a bit shocked by the two women's amazing efficiency, but she was grateful for it all.

"Hello, Mother, Sis, and Yurie. Forgive us for being late."

At Keiko's direction, Miyo and Kiyoka entered the reception room reserved exclusively for Suzushima's biggest patrons. Hazuki's expression instantly grew cheerful when she saw them while Fuyu crossly turned her head to the side.

Yurie looked on both with a charmed and slightly stern smile.

"We were waiting for you, Miyo."

"The audacity of making the mother of your fiancé wait."

"Be quiet, Mother. Okay then, today we're double-checking your outfits for the ceremony."

Cleanly cutting down Fuyu's nastiness, Hazuki stood up and waved Miyo over.

"Okay then, Miyo. Come over here."

At Hazuki's urging, Miyo turned to the clothes rack, laying eyes on her bridal outfits for the first time.

First was a white kimono. Embroidered with silver thread on the pure white silk bridal robe was a gorgeous and elegant pattern of auspicious Chinese phoenixes and large peonies.

The luster of the needlework and silk sparkled and glittered in the light.

It was so very beautiful that Miyo's cheeks flushed.

"It's stunning..."

"Isn't it? This was what Mother wore when she was married to Father, and I actually wore it myself... Are you okay with that?"

Miyo was at a loss for words and could manage only to shake her head.

The outfit Sumi wore when she was married to the Saimoris, unfortunately, didn't exist anymore.

Miyo hadn't inherited any of her mother's belongings, and just a year earlier, she had completely given up on ever having the chance to wear such a magnificent piece of clothing.

Moreover, she couldn't have been any happier to have the dress Fuyu and Hazuki had worn passed down to her like this.

"My, my, my, it's too early to start crying yet."

Miyo couldn't help being moved to tears. Hazuki noticed this and smiled hastily.

"How utterly disgraceful to start sniveling over a simple piece of clothing, I swear."

"Missus."

Yurie immediately reprimanded Fuyu for her usual verbal abuse. Fuyu went silent without making any attempt to hide her reluctance; it appeared her harsh treatment didn't extend to Yurie.

"Your hair is so long that I wonder if we'll be able to tie it up into the *shimada*-style coiffure with just your real hair on your wedding day. Or perhaps a wig would be more comfortable...? What do you think, Kiyoka?"

"...I don't know. I'm stepping out for a bit."

Kiyoka looked uncomfortable in the reception room surrounded by women, and he departed with a frown to exit into the shop proper.

"He's so hopeless, I swear."

Hazuki widened her eyes in exasperation, but Keiko immediately returned to the topic while ignoring Kiyoka's actions.

"I can prepare a wig for her."

"Hmmm. Why don't we do that, then? Mother is jabbering nonstop about evening dress this and dress that, so a wig will make it much easier to style your hair when you change into the Western outfit. What do you think, Miyo?"

"Th-that's fine. Thank you."

"Okay, this is next." Hazuki urged her along, and Miyo shifted her gaze to the

next clothing rack.

Next was a colorful wedding kimono she would change into later in the ceremony.

This kimono was of similarly brilliant craftsmanship. Hemmed in gold threads along a glamorously colored fabric, which slowly grew deeper in color from a light pink to scarlet descending from the shoulders to the sleeves, were two brilliant white cranes, flying through a patterned background of running water and fully blooming cherry blossoms.

With a bright shade of light pink, the pattern was elegantly brought together with gold thread, lacking any frivolity while still managing to be brilliantly beautiful.

"It's very, very pretty."

"We asked Suzushima's to make this, and they tailored this cute kimono with you in mind. I'm glad you like it."

From there, Keiko explained to Miyo the necessary items for the ceremony.

A white under-robe. A long under-kimono. A bridal silk hood, a decorative under-collar and *obi* belt, *tabi* socks, Japanese-style sandals, as well as smaller items like her ceremonial dagger and squared purse—Miyo was told they had all been made brand new.

She felt like it was a bit of a waste to prepare all this for just a single wedding ceremony, but she nevertheless expressed her gratitude toward Keiko, realizing this was one occasion where she wasn't supposed to show any reservation.

"I think this should be all we needed to check. Apparently, Mother ordered your dress for the banquet from a Western-focused store, but I'm sure they'll need to fit you, so we'll save that for next time."

Hazuki cast a sidelong glance at Fuyu, whose lips were bent in a surly pout, and gave a small sigh.

"Thank you very much. I've left you to handle absolutely everything..."

"It's fine, it's fine. Miyo can do the same thing for the next generation of children, okay?"

Miyo blinked.

By the next generation, that would mean Miyo's own daughter or an incoming bride. It was still difficult for her to even imagine such a far-off future.

Seeing Miyo at a loss for an answer, Hazuki lowered her voice and smiled wryly.

"Mother would never say it, but I mean, just look at how insistent she's being about everything. I'm sure that, deep inside, she's really looking forward to this. You don't need to be so concerned about causing us any trouble, okay?"

To this, Miyo firmly nodded back.

It was impossible to say Fuyu had a kind personality, even in flattery, but Miyo strongly believed she wasn't completely incapable of showing consideration for others.

She understood very well what Hazuki was saying.

This dynamic, along with everything else, was a part of the family she was marrying into. And Miyo thought the Kudous were a family filled with warmth and kindness.

"Um, I'm getting a bit excited for the ceremony myself."

Miyo gazed once more around the reception room, brimming with brilliant colors, and put words to the warmth that was in her heart.

While looking at the different outfits and items was somewhat overwhelming, it also made her realize that this was really happening. There was only a short time left until she would join the Kudou family.

She was nervous, and she did feel some degree of reluctance and loneliness at the prospect of no longer being Miyo Saimori. Even then, she was genuinely delighted to become a member of the Kudou family.

"What, only a bit?"

Miyo refuted Hazuki's impish smile in a fluster.

"N-no! Very excited, really!"

"Really? I'm glad. Isn't that good to hear, Kiyoka?"

"...Yes."

Kiyoka had returned to the reception room at some point, and deep wrinkles formed on his brow at his older sister's teasing.

Nevertheless, Miyo could sense that he was faintly relieved. That, too, made her happy.

She understood that Kiyoka was looking forward to the ceremony and to the day of their marriage.

"Oh, that's right, did you look over the arrangements and the list of guests for me?"

"Yeah. There didn't seem to be any problems."

At Kiyoka's reply to her question, Hazuki continued.

"Yes, but if you have any requests, be sure to tell me. I'll do what I can if it's something that we can still work out in time."

Miyo recalled when Kiyoka had shown her the list of invited guests.

As to be expected for the wedding of the head of the prestigious Kudou family, all sorts of names trailed down the page, from familial acquaintances to people he'd formed relationships with as a Gift-user and as a military officer.

With the exception of the Usubas and the members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, Miyo knew almost none of them.

When at last she had finished looking over the list, she felt a truly tiny bit of relief.

The name *Saimori* was nowhere to be found.

It was shameful that not a single member of her family could come to her wedding, but at the same time, part of her felt relieved that she wouldn't have to see them on the big day.

She was disgusted with herself for still being such a coward.

This was the correct choice, though, right?

In all honesty, she had her doubts, even now. Miyo didn't possess the courage, however, to request that the names of her father, stepmother, and

stepsister be added to the list.

Kiyoka placed a hand on Miyo's shoulder in her moment of indecision.

"As long as the ceremony doesn't have any problems, that's enough for me."

"Oh heavens! Young Master, it's quite unbecoming for a man to make such insensitive remarks!"

"Yurie's absolutely right!" Hazuki chimed in, agreeing with Yurie's comment. Fuyu, too, shot Kiyoka a look of exasperation, her face saying a thousand words.

It was a rare moment when all the women's opinions were aligned.

However, if Miyo was being honest, she shared the same feelings as Kiyoka. She was looking forward to the ceremony Hazuki and the others had put so much care into preparing, and it made her happy that they were working so hard. But the truth was that no matter how the ceremony ended up, being able to wed Kiyoka was more than plenty for her.

Being able to live together with Kiyoka was itself Miyo's happiness.

Miyo softly smiled at Kiyoka as he sullenly went quiet.

"My, my, they've really grown to be a true husband and wife, wouldn't you say, missus?"

"...I don't care."

When Yurie looked at the two of them together and brought up the subject, Fuyu averted her eyes with a look of displeasure just like Kiyoka.

Although she wasn't supposed to laugh in front of her customers, Keiko couldn't suppress a giggle after listening to that entire back-and-forth.

Once the conversation broke off for a moment, Hazuki lightly clapped her hands together.

"Okay then. Let's leave things here for now. This is the first time in a while you two have had a day to relax, isn't it?"

She was right. Their date had only just begun, and although they hadn't decided on where they would go from here, Miyo was ready to let her hair down with Kiyoka.

"Make sure you get your rest, okay? If you don't..."

Suddenly, Hazuki's expression turned serious as she made an unbelievably threatening remark.

"There'll be a whole bunch of guests on the day of the ceremony, and I'm sure journalists will be there to report on the event, so you're going to be exhausted. You need to mentally prepare yourself while you can."

"What?"

Not just guests, but reporters, too? Apparently, the weddings of prestigious families were reported in the papers. A cold shiver ran down Miyo's spine.

"Miyo."

"Oh, yes. Sis, Mother, Yurie. Miss Keiko as well, thank you so much for today."

As she unconsciously felt herself grow timid at the last moment, Miyo departed Suzushima's together with Kiyoka.

The wedding preparations weren't over. There were still a number of things that needed to be worked out, but the pair was practically chased out of the shop.

As warm sunlight mixed with wintry air, the people seemed to sense the rousing of spring, imparting the streets of the imperial capital with a slightly cheerful atmosphere.

While springtime wouldn't arrive for a while, the sunlight had long since melted the snow and dried out the roads, and it was now making the world anticipate the upcoming budding of the bare trees alongside the roads.

Nevertheless, the blowing wind was still cold.

"Haah. Sorry for everything being so hectic."

"Not at all," Miyo replied to the apology Kiyoka gave as they walked.

The fun and uplifting mood from previous moments had cooled, and now there was a stillness between the two of them, like the night after a festival.

Miyo knew that Kiyoka meant many things with his choice of the word "hectic."

First, he was referring to how he and Miyo had frequently missed each other as of late, as his involvement with cleaning up from Usui's failed coup often took him out of the house.

But he was also referring to the wedding ceremony.

Because Kiyoka had asked Fuyu, Hazuki, and Yurie for help, they would be able to hold the ceremony during the spring, just as he had promised Miyo. But without any time left in the winter to settle down and prepare, she couldn't deny feeling anxious and restless.

Miyo was also a member of the Usubas and someone Usui had targeted. For the past month, she hadn't been able to ignore the various requests to cooperate in government investigations and to answer questions from the authorities.

In the end, Miyo and Kiyoka were both so busy that today had been the first time they were able to have a full day to themselves since Usui's death, and normally, this would be no time to think about a wedding.

"Don't be."

Repeating the sentiment once again, Miyo then gently touched Kiyoka's hand.

"It's because we've been so busy that right now, being here with you...um, makes me so happy."

He was glad she tried saying it, but she grew bashful midway through and ultimately tapered off at the end.

She felt self-conscious, ashamed of being in such high spirits. She hung her head, thinking that her terribly loud heartbeats and reddening cheeks were pathetic.

Kiyoka gave no reply.

When she timidly upturned her gaze at him, curious as to why, she was astonished.

Her fiancé, who was always cool, composed, and rarely ever agitated, wore the same faintly pink shade on his cheeks that Miyo did.

The man she knew was embarrassed.

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"Wh-what're you..."
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"Y-yes, I'm sorry..."

When she thought about the fact that Kiyoka already knew her heartfelt feelings for him, standing there with him felt almost too much for her to bear, even though they were simply talking to each other side by side.

Ah, this is all because I said something unnecessary...

She regretted carelessly getting ahead of herself a few seconds ago and letting her feelings out.

After causing this slight awkwardness, the two walked along with no particular destination in mind until they stopped at a confectionary café.

Miyo and Kiyoka had stopped by this shop on their very first outing together, after paying a visit to Suzushima's.

This brings back so many memories.

The day in spring of last year, when Kiyoka invited her to go out together with him. The day his kindness had touched her, and she had hoped to herself she could stay at his side forever.

Passing through shop curtain just like that day, Miyo seated herself opposite Kiyoka inside the bustling confectionery café interior.

"Anmitsu again?"

Miyo ordered an *anmitsu*, as if replicating the past while she thought back to last year, while Kiyoka again didn't order any type of sweet treat and just asked for tea.

"Yes. Honestly, last year when I had it...I didn't really taste it."

Miyo, feeling a bit nervous, confessed the truth.

She remembered the day very well. Just sitting across from her proposed marriage partner like this, who she had only just met, had been enough to put her on edge. Yet to make things even more trying, Kiyoka's beautiful features were capable of captivating anyone—man or woman, young or old—and they had drawn sharp and terrifying gazes from the other women around Miyo.

Kiyoka's furrowed brow suggested that he didn't recognize what she was getting at.

"... Everyone's stares made me feel uneasy back then."

She assumed that Kiyoka, having received constant attention from a young age, no longer gave a second thought to the eyes of the unacquainted masses he passed by on the street.

But Miyo had scarcely left the house she grew up in, so the glances made her feel out of place and awfully uncomfortable.

"Stares?"

"Yes. So I wanted to get a good taste this time."

Back then, she hadn't even imagined that she would ever be able to return to this place with Kiyoka again.

She had no Gift, not even Spirit-Sight. Therefore, she believed her life was worthless.

Miyo had been filled with such feelings of inferiority, she had been convinced that when the truth was made clear, she would be chased out as an unsuitable fiancée.

Even if she could go back in time to tell herself that she would not be chased out and she would be able to spend time with Kiyoka with such peace of mind, Miyo knew that she wouldn't have believed it.

"Well, there are still stares today."

Particularly from the male customers.

But Miyo was so fully immersed in her recollections of the past that she missed what Kiyoka had murmured.

"What?"

"...Forget it."

Shortly after that, the *anmitsu* was brought over to their table. It was delicious.

The jam, with a texture that was slightly lumpy from the red beans it was

made of, had an elegant sweetness to it. It absolutely delighted Miyo when paired with the white rice flour dumplings. Then the taste of the agar jelly tied the flavors together neatly.

She hadn't known that anmistu was this good.

"It's very tasty."

When Miyo let out a dreamy burst of admiration with her spoon still in hand, a beautiful smile slowly spread over Kiyoka's face.

"Glad to hear it."

"Yes. Tee-hee."

While some things were still the same as they were last year, ultimately more had changed than not. For some reason, Miyo found this so amusing that she couldn't hold back her laughter.

"...You really never smile."

Kiyoka had told her that back then while wearing a wonderfully sullen look of his own.

Miyo was sure that neither her expression nor Kiyoka's right now had the slightest shade of last year's on them. From then until now, the distance between them had shifted drastically.

It was all thanks to Kiyoka being patient and persevering in his relations with Miyo. This happiness was far more than she deserved.

"What are you laughing about?"

"It's nothing."

The way Kiyoka looked at her with suspicion was funny somehow. Miyo covered her mouth and laughed once more.

When his teacup and her glass bowl filled with *anmitsu* were emptied, they settled their bill and left the confectionery café, beginning their walk anew.

It feels nice and toasty.

The afternoon sun was high in the sky, and the warm open air made it feel even more like spring. With it getting this warm, it seemed like plants would start blossoming any day now.

"Kiyoka."

"What?"

Miyo told Kiyoka the next place that she wanted to visit.

Kiyoka seemed curious about why she would want to go there, but he granted her request without any objection.

The shrine they had visited together at New Year's was, of course, in a much different state than before, and there were only a few scattered patrons coming to pay their respects.

The stone pavement approach to the shrine was awfully quiet.

There wasn't a single remnant of the tumultuous and strangely barbarous atmosphere from before. The place now was extremely serene, as if the Gifted Communion or their peacekeeper squads had never existed to begin with.

Society at large would slowly forget that the Gifted Communion had ever existed, or that it had caused a major incident.

Even though the event they precipitated would stay with Miyo for the rest of her life.

In that sense, we really are taking it easy, aren't we...?

Miyo strained her ears as she walked, listening to the faint sound of the wind and feeling the spring sunshine.

Perhaps as a result of their recently hectic lives, their silent walk to the shrine felt very comfortable. Neither of them was particularly loquacious talker, but it seems like their emotions were being conveyed to each other without saying a word.

"I told you that the Kudou family was originally in charge of Shinto services in the old imperial capital, right?"

"Yes."

Kiyoka suddenly murmured as he gazed toward the main shrine building.

"The truth is, it's bit of a headache, but...the people comprising what you

could call the main family line of the Kudous live in the old capital even now. They've been watching over shrines and Shinto rituals for many generations."

"Does that mean the Kudou family isn't the main family?"

"No, our familial split happened a long time ago. Several centuries have passed since then, and each side has maintained an unbroken line. At this point, neither side is going to assert themselves as the main family or a branch family."

Miyo couldn't conceal her surprise at this unexpected revelation.

While their split several centuries back may have made the two families essentially strangers, it shocked Miyo that the prestigious Kudous, who had produced many powerful Gift-users and were well known to anyone who had dealings with supernatural powers, had originally been a branch family.

"That said," Kiyoka continued, "up until the last generation, weddings have been held in that old capital shrine."

"Does that mean we'll do the same?"

If that was the custom, then they couldn't ignore it. At the moment, the ceremony was going to be held in the imperial capital, but then...did that mean they would hold another ceremony in the old capital as well?

Kiyoka shook his head at Miyo's question.

"For the time being, we don't have the time or energy to spare on visiting the old capital and holding the ceremony there, so we can postpone it for now. Though we can't get away with doing nothing, either. At some point, we'll need to visit or hold a tea ceremony of some kind. Just keep that in mind."

"I see, so that's the situation... I understand."

Although the topic of visits and tea ceremonies was put aside for the time being, Miyo's mind drifted to thoughts about what the old capital was like

She only had a vague impression of it, and she imagined that it had a refined and unique character, but she was looking forward to seeing it for herself.

Her chest filled with excitement simply from picturing the sights she would see with Kiyoka and the experiences they would share together. Not only that...

That was where Kouji currently was.

How exactly her childhood friend was living his life right now had long been on Miyo's mind, since she'd received neither letters from him nor the slightest hearsay about his current situation.

Even if she couldn't actually see him, perhaps she would at least be able to get an update about how he was doing.

Before anything, we need to get through the wedding, though...

The visit to the old capital was still a bit of a ways ahead.

As their conversation finished, the two passed under the big *torii* gate and set foot onto the shrine grounds. Standing side by side in front of the main shrine, they offered their coins and prayed with two bows and three claps of their hands.

As she brought her hands together and closed her eyes, many emotions passed through Miyo's mind.

On her New Year's shrine visit, she had cast her inner doubts to the gods—how was she supposed to confront her feelings? Was she allowed to give a name to her feelings of love?

But after thinking it over and racking her brain, she had finally been able to organize her thoughts and feelings.

There were still plenty of things she needed to mull over, and her worries were never ending. Nevertheless, she could talk? safely with Kiyoka about the future once more because she had managed to find her answer.

Thank you very much.

Since there were far fewer visitors today than there had been at New Year's, she could keep her hands together in prayer for a long time without troubling anyone.

Miyo prayed motionlessly, and after gazing into her heart for a few minutes, she gave a brief bow, uttered a short thank-you in her mind, and ended her prayer.

"Visiting a shrine when there's nothing going on isn't too bad," Kiyoka said, turning away from the shrine after giving his final respectful bow, prompting Miyo to nod.

"It's very calming. Can we come by again?"

"Sure. Now, where to next, then?"

After sharing a small laugh together, they simply departed the shrine without any set destination in mind.

They took in the winter breeze and the warmth of spring on their aimless walk.

Boarding the occasional streetcar to continue their stroll, Miyo and Kiyoka eventually arrived at a bustling business district that was slightly different from the capital's central area.

Informal candy shops and variety stores lined the road in disarray, almost like street stalls.

Hawking voices echoed from every which way, and countless colorful banners were displayed outside the shops. The people passing to and fro were equally varied, and the air was different from the downtown area in the center of the capital, where the atmosphere was faintly formal and stiff.

"Oh, how about there?"

"Where...?"

When Miyo questioned Kiyoka, who appeared to have come up with an idea of some kind, he pointed at a building visible far in the distance.

Far off in the hazy early spring sky, Miyo could make out a tall tower that seemed to reach straight up to the sky between the buildings lining the road.

Miyo had caught sight of it from afar many times; however, she had never gotten close to it before.

"It's what they call the 'Twelve-Storied Tower.'"

Supposedly, getting to the top was quite an endeavor, but the view was truly stunning and gave a sweeping look over the entire imperial capital.

Miyo had never climbed up somewhere so high in her life before. This was also the first she'd heard of an average citizen being allowed to enter such a tall building.

She wondered how it would feel to gaze down at the capital from above.

After hearing she could look out over the city, she couldn't contain her desire to see it for herself.

"I'd love to visit."

She advanced through the crowd toward the tower, gently grabbing Kiyoka's hand from his indigo *haori* coat fluttering in the snow-melting breeze.

The Twelve-Storied Tower was so tall that she had to crane her neck to look up at it. When she considered that she was about to climb up, her body unconsciously tensed up a little.

The high-rise building, twelve stories tall as the name implied, was built out of brick until the upper stories, which were made of wood.

Paying the entrance fee and stepping inside, Miyo discovered that it was different from the Western-style tower Miyo had pictured in her mind; each floor had its own shops and kiosks, and there was a sprinkling of customers here and there.

On the whole, however, there was far less foot traffic than she had imagined.

Since the elevator wasn't operating, they were forced to climb up the stairs to the top floor just as Miyo had mentally prepared herself to do.

...There probably aren't many customers because climbing up the stairs is too much trouble, Miyo thought as she tried to ignore the fatigue building in her thighs.

Kiyoka was moving very slowly ahead of her, climbing the stairs while turning back to check on Miyo from time to time. Unsurprisingly, his steps didn't betray the slightest bit of fatigue.

Right as Miyo began to grow worried about how much farther the stairs would continue, the view of the top floor opened up in front of her all at once. Just then, a cold wind caressed her cheeks.

"Wow..."

There wasn't anyone else in the top-floor observation room. They could clearly see outside the small room through the large windows furnished on all sides.

It was surrounded by a fence about Kiyoka's height to prevent anyone from falling. And beyond that...

The imperial capital's cityscape stretched out far off into the horizon. The heads of the people going along the streets below were no bigger than a grain of rice, and Miyo found it quite intriguing to watch them squirm about over the terrain.

The wintry breeze that blew against her was a bit chilly, but the panorama in front of her was so utterly captivating that she didn't mind.

"It's so high up, isn't it?"

When she looked back at Kiyoka, seemingly uninterested in the view himself as he stood one step behind her without looking down, he squinted.

"It sure is."

"I didn't know the imperial capital was so vast..."

Miyo pressed down on her hair, flowing in the wind, as she voiced her heartfelt impression.

Miyo had lived her twenty years of life here in the imperial capital, yet the world she had known was so very small. Although she had experienced a great many things in the past year, she hadn't ever gotten a bird's-eye view of her home.

The imperial capital she saw in panorama was vast, and the Empire's whole territory was even more immense.

"It almost makes me feel like nothing really matters at all."

Each individual was really so very tiny, no different from a fly struggling in a spider's web. That was how the view began to make her feel.

"Like it's all futile?"

"No," Miyo replied to Kiyoka's question, which was spoken forlornly. "Not futile. It's simply...I may have had things all wrong."

Buffeted by the cold wind, she felt like her own state of mind was changing by the minute. Different from when she had confronted Usui and different even from when she had spoken with Arata earlier that day.

There were times when she disclosed her feelings to another or the times when she experienced new things like she was now.

On those occasions, her muddied, secluded heart was washed clean and reborn anew, giving her new realizations.

"You had things wrong?"

Smiling at Kiyoka's questioning look, Miyo returned her gaze to the boundless view.

"Yes. It's hard to explain... Ever since my Dream Sight powers grew stronger, I've let myself feel like I've had this burden placed on me."

"…"

"But I did think I wanted to shoulder it. That was why, to live with a normal idea of happiness, I felt like I needed to make efforts to abandon it, with the considerable amount of resolve that would require."

With her Gift of Dream Sight, Miyo had seen many things.

The past, the future, the present—it felt like she was meant to shoulder all those incoherent fragments, even though she had made her reluctant choice to view them only to save Kiyoka.

But that's far too much weight for me.

This was what she had meant when she told Arata she was ready to abandon using her Gift. It would require a considerable amount of resolve to do.

"But that's not right."

Listening to Kiyoka's response, Miyo nodded.

"Yes. Just now the thought came to me... Perhaps there aren't even that many things I'm meant to shoulder on my own in the first place."

She just needed to live like she normally did. No matter how great a power she possessed, in a world that held such a great number of people, the influence of a single individual was no doubt very small.

It was presumptuous to think about achieving something magnificent with her Gift or to really make the most use of it. So, too, were the efforts to throw away such a power.

Kiyoka took a step forward and stood beside Miyo. He wrapped his hand around her shoulder and slowly brought her in close.

"You should live how you want to live. That's how it's been from the very start, hasn't it?"

"...Yes."

To keep warm, she leaned her head against his arm and cuddled in close. She could hear Kiyoka's heartbeat; for some reason, it brought her to the verge of tears.

"Because the woman who does that is the person who everyone's come to care for."

The "everyone" he was talking about encompassed so many people that she had met after leaving the Saimori house.

She'd obtained a blessed, almost miraculous reality which would have been hard to even imagine a year ago.

Miyo felt truly relieved that she had been able to protect the warmth and everyday life that she wished to hold dear for the rest of her days.

"Is it the same for you, Kiyoka?"

"Yeah. Me too, Miyo."

She was relieved to hear his honest reply, since she wouldn't have been able to go on without hearing it for herself. Kiyoka calling her by her name once was enough to make her happy forever.

After meeting Kiyoka, she was able to feel fondness for her own name for the first time in her life. She could finally believe that it was okay for her to be herself and to go on living exactly as she was. She had been given courage.

Miyo was unable to hold it all back, and a single teardrop tumbled from the edge of her eye.

"Actually, I've been thinking about taking some of the load off myself," Kiyoka abruptly declared, and Miyo placed her own hand atop the one he had on her shoulder.

"I've spoken with the major general, too. Eventually, once the crisis in the military gets sorted out, and everything settles down, I'm going to leave."

"What?!" Miyo looked up at her fiancé in surprise. His sights were aimed straight out ahead, as if he was gazing out into the far-off future.

"Why ...?"

Miyo had only ever known Kiyoka the military officer. Nor did she know of anyone who the military relied on more than him. That was especially clear to her now that she had seen how Godou had reacted after Kiyoka's capture.

Gift-users had a duty to fight against Grotesqueries, even if they didn't belong to the military.

She had vaguely surmised that there must have been a compelling personal reason for him to join the military anyway, and she hadn't ever considered he would talk about leaving.

"I wasn't cut out to be in the military to begin with."

"But you've been working there for such a long time."

It seemed to Miyo like all his efforts would go to waste.

Kiyoka held a high position within the military. Although he was a mere commander of a platoon, Ookaito still wanted to promote him to a higher position, he had accumulated quite a list of accomplishments, and he was widely known within the armed forces as well.

If he left, that would all come to nothing.

"I don't mind. At first, I wasn't even thinking about joining the military anyway."

Kiyoka slowly looked down at Miyo's face below him.

Godou had once told her before that Kiyoka had felt responsible for the death of Godou's father in the line of duty, changed his career path, and joined the military instead.

In which case, perhaps he had reached some sort of inner peace with himself.

From here on, she wanted to hear so many things from Kiyoka. The bygone dreams he saw when he was young, what he thought, what he felt.

"...Or maybe you're thinking that if I'm not a military man, I wouldn't be suitable for you anymore?"

"No, I don't think that at all. If you feel like that's what you want to do, I'll support you completely."

"Support me, huh?"

"Yes, I'll support you."

When Miyo summoned all her strength to stare back into Kiyoka's eyes, he suddenly turned away from her and burst into laughter.

"Why are you laughing?"

"There's not anything I'd need your support with, really. Though I'll gratefully accept the offer either way."

Suddenly, he unexpectedly drew away from her.

Miyo hurried after Kiyoka, turning around toward the viewing deck exit ahead of her.

They descended the twelve floors, leisurely looking around each story as they went, and when the two exited from the first-floor entrance, they found that the sun had begun to set, and the sky was changing to a light indigo.

"Let's head home."

"Okay."

Tightly gripping each other's hands once more, they advanced down the narrow streets of the business district. Then they hailed a streetcar on the main road. As they rocked back and forth, familiar landscapes slowly began to come back into view.

Streets they had walked down countless times, shops they often visited, and the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. It was fun visiting unknown places, but Miyo ultimately felt comforted by seeing the parts of the city she knew.

The gas lamps lining the street began to light up here and there.

Once the sun had set, the temperature dropped, and it grew chilly once more. Miyo's breath came out in white wisps, and she rewrapped her scarf around herself.

In stark contrast with the time when she'd visited alongside Kiyo the familiar, the area around the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station was silent, with no signs of anyone passing by.

They went inside the station and got into Kiyoka's automobile, which was parked there as usual.

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"Miyo."
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Starting the engine and gripping the handle, Kiyoka waited a few more moments after setting off in the car before gently calling her name.

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"Yes?"

".....Were you able to relax a bit?"
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Kiyoka, in an unusual move, chewed on his words at first, going to say something before deciding against it, which had Miyo cocking her head as she agreed.

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"Yes. I had fun."
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"That's good."

Just what had he wanted to ask her?

Miyo's questions were finally answered when they arrived back at the house.

For Miyo, Kiyoka's house outside the center of the capital, which came into view once they continued down the dark country road, had already become her home, a place she could feel at peace. They arrived back at the place where she'd first met Kiyoka, to the home filled with so many insignificant, yet precious, memories.

Kiyoka got out of the car and placed a hand on the front door, illuminated by lamplight, only to come to a stop.

"Kiyoka?"

"This isn't really the best place for this, but...if I did this inside, um, it'd probably get a bit awkward."

With this preamble, he ruffled through his breast pocket, taking something out and handing it to Miyo.

When Miyo got a better look at what was in her hand, her eyes widened.

It was a lovely hairpin. It was made of metal and was emblazoned with a modest silk crepe decoration of a vermilion cherry blossom. A perfect choice for the upcoming season.

It was so lovely that her heart fluttered just looking at it.

"It's beautiful... Is this for me?" Miyo asked, trying to stop herself from getting too excited, and Kiyoka nodded.

"Well, it caught my eye in Suzushima's...," he stammered, finding it difficult to finally say that he thought it would look good on her. Had he secretly been wracked with anxiety all day about when he was going to give it to her?

Seeing her fiancé like this, she couldn't help but compare him to Kiyo, the familiar modeled after his younger self. While she understood these weren't feelings she should hold for an older man, especially the fiancé she was meant to revere, she found it very heartwarming.

He was a gentle, clumsy, unexpectedly needy, and occasionally adorable man.

Miyo was happy to have such a person for a fiancé.

"Kiyoka."

"What?"

Miyo returned the hairpin to Kiyoka, who was wearing a sullen look to hide his bashfulness, and turned her back to him.

"Can you place it in my hair?"

"...Sure."

Kiyoka's eyes softened, as if breathing a tiny sigh of relief, and he gently placed the hairpin in Miyo's hair with the familiar touch she expected.

The feeling of her fiancé touching her hair made her a bit ticklish, and her hands and feet fidgeted from the sensation. Then Miyo turned back around to Kiyoka and asked him how she looked.

"Is it cute?"

"Yeah. It looks as lovely as I thought it would."

Kiyoka's honest praise sank into her chest. Though it was unladylike of her, she couldn't stop herself from grinning.

He had said she looked "cute" when she'd first worn a one-piece dress, and perhaps someone else would get angry at him for always giving the same sort of comment.

However, Kiyoka was normally clumsy with his words.

To hear even a simple "lovely" come from him made Miyo happier than she could handle.

"Thank you very much, Kiyoka. I'll be sure to wear it every day from now on."

"It doesn't have to be every day."

"No. I'll wear it every chance I get during the springtime. Why, it's already a new favorite of mine."

After saying this, Miyo remembered that she had prepared her own item as well.

Every day. Kiyoka had indeed used the braided cord Miyo first gifted him every day since.

However, when he had been captured and wounded, his braid had been cut and ultimately lost somewhere.

"Here, this is for you."

Miyo took out the newly woven cord she had hidden in her purse and stood on her toes slightly to tie Kiyoka's hair with it.

"Light indigo this time, huh?"

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"Do you not like it?"
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"Of course I like it. Thank you."

Kiyoka smiled with a slight sigh and closed his eyes. His long eyelashes, casting shadows as his eyes closed, were beautiful.

It wasn't that Miyo didn't think it was a bit silly that they were both exchanging hair ornament gifts with each other, but this, too, connected back to a precious memory of hers from when she first came to this house.

The night after their first date together, she had received a hair comb and reciprocated with a braided cord.

So she was sure this was simply what their relationship was like.

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"Miyo."
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"Yes?"

His arm wrapped around her waist and gently pulled her close. Miyo let herself be snuggled in close and buried her face in Kiyoka's chest.

"When I was in that cell, the longing I felt for the ordinary days I spent with you in this house was unbearable."

His hoarse voice sounded slightly frailer than his usual firm and resolved tone.

"I had thought that being separated from each other for only a little while wouldn't be any trouble at all. But it seems that I can no longer be without you."

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"Kiyoka..."
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Miyo heard a throbbing, yet subdued, pulse and wondered to which of them it belonged.

She smelled Kiyoka's scent, one she had long grown accustomed to.

Just as Miyo couldn't live without Kiyoka, he, too, needed Miyo. She was sure that Kiyoka didn't yet understand exactly how much joy these words gave her.

Nor the weight of her feelings, ready to burst from her chest.

I've fallen in love with Kiyoka.

She wasn't scared anymore. Nor would she hesitate.

As long as it was for Kiyoka, she would become as selfish and willful as she wanted.

Even if these feelings hurt others, or left herself hurt, Miyo had decided that she would wholly and readily accept them all and love him.

"You're the most important part of my life, Miyo. Please, I want you to marry me."

Unlike the first time when he'd expressed this sentiment, and his words had poured forth like stardust, these words of his slowly melted away and sank into her like snowflakes—a soft, kind, yet definitive expression of love.

This time, Miyo could readily accept them.

"Yes, it would be my pleasure... I love you, darling."

Miyo gently wrapped her own arms around his back.

Twilight had passed, and the darkness of night enshrouded and concealed the world around them, with the entryway light their only illumination. Nevertheless, no matter whatever darkness there may be, Miyo felt that as long as they had each other's body warmth, then there was nothing to fear.

If Miyo was the most important part of Kiyoka's life, then Kiyoka was absolutely everything to her. It was Kiyoka who had shaped Miyo into the person she was today and who had brought life to her heart again.

If they were ever separated, neither would be able to go on.

I love you, Miyo declared once more in her heart.

Eternally and together.

She wished to externally etch in her heart all of their previous happy times as well as each and every moment she shared with Kiyoka from here on out.

© EPILOGUE **9**

The dawn was coming markedly earlier, and the shivering cold was leaving. From the ground at one's feet, green was sprouting up in turn among the dead winter grass.

Above the garden, the pale clouded sky was slightly hazy, and the mistenveloped sunlight had a slightly spring-like quality.

Once again, the season of flowers in full bloom was on the horizon.

Miyo carried the laundry basket in her hands as she left the washing area out back and dried the clothes on the clothesline in the garden.

The laundry on the line fluttered in the tranquil breeze.

"Phew."

There were clear skies again today, so the laundry was going to dry properly. Looking at all the clothes hung up on the line, Miyo sighed.

Nowadays with spring fully in the air, the ceremony was fast approaching, and both Miyo and Kiyoka's daily lives were busy once again. Visiting the venue, or trying on their outfits, and much more.

Although they were busy, when she considered it was all for their future together, it didn't especially bother her.

However, given that a wedding celebration was going to be held for Kiyoka Kudou, one of the central figures involved in the recent attempted government overthrow as well as the head of one of the Empire's prominent noble families, it had already turned into a popular topic of conversation among the people.

This brought even more nerves, and Miyo didn't have any time to let down her guard.

Things that made her happy, things she held dear... Although she was always

busy, inwardly Miyo was living a more fulfilling life than she ever had before.

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"Miyo."
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"Kiyoka."

Hearing her name called from the veranda, she turned around to see a slender standing figure. Perhaps he had finished his morning training and had already washed up and gotten changed.

Putting on sandals to step down into the garden, Kiyoka stood casually next to Miyo and looked up at the sky.

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"Kiyoka, take a look."
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"What is it?"

Miyo lightly tapped his arm and guided his gaze down to the ground with her finger.

Among the grasses beginning to lushly sprout up, dandelion buds slightly poked out. Though they may have been nothing more than weeds, she couldn't help being excited.

They both crouched down to gaze at the buds which signalled that springtime was right around the corner.

"Dandelions. Spring's almost here."

"You're right."

There wasn't anything special about these commonplace days within the changing season.

Nevertheless, calmly facing the coming springtime like this made her happier than anything else.

"This is only if you want to, but..."

Kiyoka began, slightly hesitant as he stood back up. Miyo stood up with him and wondered why he was so stiff.

Then finally, he proposed something to her she would never have imagined.

"Why don't we plant a cherry blossom tree here in this garden? To, um,

celebrate our marriage."

A cherry tree, here in the garden.

The instant he said it, the image of a magnificent tree proudly blossoming light pink appeared in the back of Miyo's mind.

Generally, it was said to be an ill omen to plant a cherry tree in a home garden.

On top of this, a garden cherry tree would remind Miyo about the ill fate of her deceased mother. Just the thought sent complicated feelings ebbing and flowing inside her chest. On the other hand, she still held a pure desire within her to see the beautiful cherry blossoms blooming in their garden.

"Yes...I think that's a wonderful idea."

Kiyoka smiled as Miyo answered, absentminded and still in disbelief.

"Really? Let's do it, then."

If they planted a sapling now, when would it end up blossoming?

Each time spring arrived, her foremost excitement would be to see the cherry tree in bloom together with Kiyoka. Leisurely drinking a cup of tea as they gazed at the blossoms sounded quite enjoyable.

The tree had yet to even be planted, and her expectations continued to swell.

When Miyo regained her senses, her cheeks had flushed, and she was pulling on the sleeve of Kiyoka's kimono.

"Thank you very much."

She was happy that she would get to see the cherry blossoms, but planting a cherry tree in the garden held a special meaning to Miyo. The fact that Kiyoka knew this made her the happiest of all.

Miyo loved this man so much, she thought to herself that a mere bad omen or two could simply be brushed off and sent packing.

Their spring was just up ahead.

AFTERWORD №

I once again apologize for the wait. We haven't seen each other in a long time.

It is I, Akumi Agitogi. After a three-and-a-half-year whirlwind of being called by my pen name, I don't care if you call me Agitogi, Akumi, or anything else, for that matter.

So many of you have accompanied me on this story's journey, and here we are, at Volume 6. The long Usui Arc (name pending) has finally come to its conclusion, and with it, I have a very important announcement to make:

The next volume will (tentatively) be the happy volume you've all been waiting for!

Whew, that took a while, didn't it? After the story of the first two volumes, I was all set to write a follow-up sequel that went over this major life event, yet for some reason it just ended up being trouble after trouble...and then more trouble. Even I was scratching my head, wondering where exactly these gloomy and heavy developments all came from, but I'm relieved to see I'll finally be able to salvage the title of this series.

For the Usui Arc, there were a lot of things that I found out along the way, and I felt so deeply moved while I wrote, learning all sorts of new things about myself and the story's characters.

They say that when a story is well formed, the characters will really act on their own, but in my case, it felt like the story was propelling me along as well.

Ever since I started writing this tale, I have been fortunate enough to have many valuable experiences.

In what I could call a culmination of these experiences, a live-action movie adaptation of *My Happy Marriage* has been announced. Yes, unbelievably both

an anime and a live-action adaptation. This is probably all a dream.

As I was feeling overjoyed about the anime adaptation, talk about the liveaction movie suddenly flew in, and while it was an extremely hectic, headspinning chaos that didn't even leave me time to write, I'm already so very excited to see it!

First, this novel written by a total amateur got a book release, then a manga adaptation, a stage reading, an anime, and now a movie—the world of *My Happy Marriage* is spreading out in so many different ways... Seriously, it has to all be a dream, right?

Of course, I fully intend on striving forward to ensure all of you can enjoy this novel series *as* a novel, so I hope you'll continue to read it.

Additionally, the manga adaptation from Rito Kousaka-sensei that's serialized in Square Enix's Gangan Online is finally getting into the Volume 2 storyline, and each page is so very exciting, I can't recommend it enough. Read it and you'll be squirming in blissful agony—I guarantee it!

Once again, this volume wouldn't have been possible without the support of so many people. This always seems to happen, but I've laid a great physical and mental burden on my editors, together with their busy workload. I'm sorry, and thank you for everything you do.

Next, to Tsukiho Tsukioka-sensei, who handles the cover illustrations. Your illustrations are truly always wonderful, leaving me jumping for joy, and this volume is really so beautiful... I absolutely love how the space between them has gradually been getting closer; it's perfect. Thank you.

Finally, to all of you with this book in your hands. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for staying on this journey this far. It's thanks to all of you that I have managed to continue this series. I hope you enjoyed this volume, as it's the least I can do to repay you for all your support.

Until next time.

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